



Pierre Brocheux, Daniel Hémery. *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858-1954.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. xv + 490 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-24539-6.

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Unraveling the Ambiguities of Colonial Indochina

Indochine: La colonisation ambiguë, 1858-1954 (*Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization*) is one of the most important and authoritative studies of colonial Indochina to have appeared in any language, and it is now available to an English-language audience. Authored by Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery, two of the foremost historians of colonial Vietnam, the book (first published in French in 1995) is one of only a small number of academic monographs to look at colonial Indochina as a single entity and one of the very few to combine political, economic, and social perspectives. Like most studies of Indochina, the book devotes the bulk of its discussion to Vietnam, but there is enough information on Cambodia and Laos—some of it added to the English translation based on recent scholarship—to make the study reasonably “Indochina-wide.” Although the strong emphasis on quantitative data means that the text is more liberally sprinkled with numbers than some readers might want in a book that is not strictly speaking an economic history, the facts and figures are well integrated into a broader narrative of the colonial era from start to finish.

Brocheux and Hémery in their preface lay down several principal objectives for the book. First, they “have chosen to approach Indochina as a historical construct ... rooted ... within the tensions and dynamics of the social and anthropological space of the peninsula.” Second, as noted above, they “approach Indochina through its multiple dimensions—political and military,

economic, social, and cultural—and various temporalities,” including both the period of colonial rule and “the brief, violent ruptures of decolonization.” Finally, they attempt to transcend the dichotomy between a “colonial” historiographical perspective, which treats French rule as “fundamentally civilizing, even if faulty,” and an anticolonial and national one, which portrays it as “purely dominating, repressive, and exploitative” (pp. xiv-xv).

The authors are arguably the most successful in achieving the last of these three objectives, no mean feat considering the ideological divide among French academics working on Indochina. The book is an articulate critique of colonial rule in Indochina, yet it is not polemical, and it does not essentialize or oversimplify the complexities of the colonial system. When it comes to the various strains of Vietnamese nationalism, the authors do tend to focus more on the Left of the political spectrum than on the Right. Although this is to some extent understandable given their own particular research interests and ideological proclivities and the historical reality that the Left was ultimately triumphant in Vietnam, a more balanced treatment would have been welcome. Similarly, despite the presence of a chapter entitled “Cultural Transformations,” much of the text is devoted to political and economic developments, with comparatively little attention to the cultural dilemmas that plagued the indigenous elites. Cambodia and Laos are given particularly short shrift in this respect, but to

be fair, much of the important work done on the interaction among nationalism, Buddhism, and colonialism in Cambodia has appeared since the book was written. Thus although the book's approach is perhaps sufficiently "multi-dimensional" to fulfill the second of the authors' stated objectives, it leaves the reader somewhat unsatisfied where cultural and intellectual developments are concerned.

The relative lack of careful attention to noneconomic developments in Cambodia and Laos means that the first of the three stated objectives, to look at "Indochina" as a "historical construct" within its broader "social and anthropological space," is not pursued as completely as the reader might wish. The book provides a thorough overview of policy developments in Indochina within the broader framework of French colonialism, but there is not much attention to the specific issues involved in attempting to construct "Indochina" or an "Indochinese identity." The complexities and contradictions of this agenda—notably the promotion of Vietnamese immigration into the areas traditionally most wary of Vietnamese influence—and the interplay between anti-Vietnamese and anti-French elements in Cambodian and Lao nationalism are matters that deserve more attention than they receive in most studies of "Indochina," including this one. The authors argue that "a number of Vietnamese ended up, at least for several decades, also thinking of themselves as 'Indochinese,'" but they do not thoroughly examine the implications of that claim (p. 378).

That said, however, Brocheux and Hémery do succeed admirably in their determination to show the many

ways in which French colonization of Indochina was "ambiguous." They articulate these ambiguities quite clearly and accurately in their preface: "the appropriation by the colonized of the innovations imposed by colonization,... the reversibility of modes of domination as soon as circumstances permitted them, and ... the subtle investment in these modes on the part of subjugated societies who redirected and deflected them" (p. xv). They pay particular attention to the extremely ambiguous nature of "modernity" and "modernization" as a product of colonial rule. None of these, of course, are unique to the particular colonial experience of Indochina, but the authors do provide a solid and articulate overview of the ways in which these issues played out in this particular context.

Although it is certainly valuable to have an English edition of this important book, it is unfortunate that the translation itself is mediocre to say the least. It reads as if it had been done by a translation program that stuck as closely as possible to the original French syntax and automatically chose French cognates in English whether or not they were the best equivalents. There is a good reason why deceptively similar cognates are called "*faux amis*" (false friends), and the text is riddled with them from start to finish. In a few cases the translations are quite simply wrong (such as "high commissioners" for "*hauts fonctionnaires*," meaning high-ranking civil servants, or "genius" for "*général*" in a context where it means "spirit" in the sense of a supernatural entity). Academic French is admittedly a difficult challenge, but if it is going to be translated, then the final product should not be a literal translation that sounds as if it had been written by a native French speaker.

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