

The French in Vietnam

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Preliminary remarks

The *New York Times* reported on Saturday, ran the report on Saturday of last week, the Filipino government reported having killed some 10,000 Filipinos that they called Muslim rebels, also called Maoists. And there is, as you know, a full-scale rebellion in the Philippines. So watch your government closely.

Lecture

Astonishing and a little bit staggering, you see: within a half-dozen years after the Second World War had created such very large options in European countries like France. Within a scant six years after those large options had been created, they rather narrowed to the vanishing point. Because, you see, as I've tried to tell you, American policymakers did their job very well. They did their job astonishingly well. They knew how to deploy their economic resources. They knew how to give large amounts of economic aid and follow it up with military assistance. And, in the final analysis, they were able to do what didn't seem to be possible in 1945. By 1950, after all, they had accomplished two things that were really quite remarkable. First of all, they had insured the recovery of what was a very fragile West European capitalism. And in the second place, they had insured the restoration of a conservative, bourgeois, traditional social order. All of that, after all, had not been anticipated in 1945.

And I ask you to try to think in your imagination of what it must have been like for those people who made the French resistance and looked at 1945 as the beginning of a new age. Of those, really, millions of workers who crowded into the General Confederation of Labor or crowded into the Communist Party and thought that there would be some kind of a dramatically new society, not only in France but also, in Western Europe in general. What it must have seemed like in 1950 when they observed what the political scene was and saw that the old ruling class, which had been collaborationist at Vichy, which was now under the protection of the Americans, was waving that banner of anti-communism and had gone to the very center of the stage.

And, you see, all of that raises in our minds certain very large questions, very large questions that really go to the heart of our understanding about the contemporary world. About the impact of that conservative restoration, in the first place, upon the liberation struggles of the third world. In the second place, about the evolution and the structure of European neo-capitalism. In the third

place, the question about the installation of American economic power at the very center of that European neo-capitalism. And, in the final analysis, the challenge that that European capitalism would finally launch against that dominion of American capitalism. Something, after all, that takes us very much into the contemporary moment of our own lives.

And so we want to talk about Vietnam. And we want to talk in general about Vietnam, but rather specifically about that war that the French launched in 1946 and that would last for eight years. A war which represented, after all, that kind of radical, and determined, and armed refusal on the part of the French policymakers in power at the time, buttressed by their American patrons, subsidized by the US, the refusal of those French policymakers to accommodate to, to recognize, to deal in any way with the historic struggle of the Vietnamese people for self-determination, for independence, and finally for social liberation.

And note my terminology well: I said the historical struggle of the Vietnamese people. And, that, it strikes me, is a crucial term and a crucial word. It is upon the word "historic" that we really concentrate our attention. Because unless we recognize that the Vietnamese people, organized in their society, had an unbroken history of more than two thousand years. Unless we recognize that that colonial power of France was not inserted into that long Vietnamese history until very late in that development, only a hundred years before the war broke out in 1946, and that there had been in that long history constant resistance. First, to the Chinese dominion over Vietnam and, then, to the French colonial rule that was imposed in the middle of the nineteenth century. Unless we recognize something about that longevity and about that resistance, we cannot really understand the tragedy of that effort of the French, in 1946, to deny the liberation of the Vietnamese people. And we cannot even begin to come to grips with the incredible vanity, a vanity that is without precedent in modern history, of American aggression in Vietnam. To take up the cudgels of that imperialism in a country that Americans never knew, never had any association with, and had no particular interest in. And so, it is about history that we really have to talk in order to understand.

And let's go back in that history at least a hundred years. Let's go back to that moment that the French insert Western colonial rule in Vietnam, or what they ultimately call Indochina. And it begins in the 1860s. And beginning in the 1860s, it is a function of the French Second Empire, a function of the period of Napoleon III and the Second Empire that he established. Which, if you know something about that nineteenth-century French history, means that it represents a period of industrial and commercial expansion on the part of France. A period in that Second Empire which was full of adventure, full of entrepreneurship, which really was a period of economic expansion that was greater than any since the end of the first Napoleonic period. And you have, consequently, a period when imperialism, when expansion becomes, certainly, a function of the very economic development of that society.

Now, the installation of the French in Indochina was a function of military expeditions, military expeditions largely under the aegis of the French Navy. And they were those French admirals of Napoleon III who not only penetrated into the Indochinese peninsula but, ultimately, conquered that area and established themselves as the first resident ministers, as the first governor-generals, of that particular territory. But to say that it is a military expedition doesn't really tell you the purpose.

The purpose, basically, was commercial. The French had a very real commercial design in moving into Southeast Asia. In the large, it was a desire to penetrate China through the south. In other words, to explore those rivers of Vietnam, to explore the Mekong River and the Red River, and to see whether they might not be proper river routes into the soft underbelly of China. Where, consequently, the French would be able to find that boundless market. But it was commercial in a very much more concrete sense. And, that is, it was the desire for the one riches that you found in Indochina and in Vietnam. It was that desire to control the export trade in rice. It was that desire, after all, to get the lands on which rice was produced and to establish those export companies in Saigon which could export that Vietnamese rice into other parts of Asia.

And, you must note that, when the French installed themselves in Cochinchina, which is what we call South Vietnam today, when they first installed themselves in the south part of Vietnam, one of the first things that they did was to destroy the old pre-colonial prohibitions that had been established by the Vietnamese emperors against the export of rice. That rice — if there had been a surplus in Cochinchina, which was the very big rice-producing area — was reserved for export into the center part of Indochina, which we call Annam, or into the northern part of Vietnam, which we call Tonkin. And those areas were not such affluent rice-producing sectors. And the rice was kept, in other words, for the indigenous Vietnamese people. So that, in 1860, when the French arrived there was only 57,000 tons of rice exported from Vietnam. Ten years later, because the French simply open up the export trade, it had risen to 229,000 tons. And, if you go all the way down to 1938, right before the Second World War, the French are exporting out of Indochina a billion and a half tons of rice, which they are sending off into Japan or into China, into the great markets for rice in that Asiatic area. So the desire for the trade route, the desire to control the export trade in rice, these were the great Desiderata on the part of the French in this commercial imperialism.

And how did they build that colony? It came very slowly. And, note that slowness, because it tells you something about resistance. It took forty years for the French to pacify their colony in Southeast Asia. They began in 1858, in general, and there is not real pacification until 1898. And it goes in fits and starts, in territorial bits, because always there is resistance and the need, really, to make a certain stabilization. So you begin in Cochinchina. And the war in Cochinchina goes on between 1860 and 1867. And it's in 1867 that the French proclaim a colony in Cochinchina, not a protectorate. They cannot trust any of the indigenous officials. They must impose direct

rule and make that area a colony. At much the same time, they established a protectorate over Cambodia. And then came the drive into the center and into the north of what we call Vietnam. In other words, into the two states of Annam, which is central Vietnam, and the state of Tonkin, which is northern Vietnam. And that aggression took a long while. And it's not until 1883 that the French proclaim a protectorate over those two other states of Vietnam. But that protectorate is not accepted, and you have then a fifteen-year war.

A war that doesn't end until Paul Doumer, D-O-U-M-E-R, who becomes a very powerful governor-general out in Southeast Asia for the French, who is a Radical politician, a journalist from the city of Auvergne. Somebody who goes into the French government and into French ministries and goes out to Indochina as one of these really strong armed governor-generals. And it is Doumer who finally pacifies the central and northern states of Vietnam. And, then, disbands the protectorate and establishes a colony. At much the same time, a protectorate was established over Laos. So that by 1889, what we call the five states of Indochina are all of them unified into an artificial colony which the French call French Indochina. That is composed of three directly ruled colonies, what we would call Vietnam today, the three states of Cochinchina, of Annam, and of Tonkin, and of two protectorates, the protectorate over Cambodia and the protectorate over Laos.

And what we really want to know is what this imperialism means. We want to know it not only for Vietnam, we want to know it in general. What is imperialism about? And why is there an imperative of rebellion that comes out of the imperialistic nexus and the imperialistic relationship? And, perhaps, we can get at it in terms of the French position in Vietnam or in Indochina in two ways. First of all, by talking about what I would call the power nexus. In other words, the impositions of power, of sheer power, by an advanced industrial society upon a much weaker under-mechanized, underdeveloped society. And, second, get at it by the whole pattern of disintegration and of contradiction. In other words, the impact of the colonial economy upon the traditional social structure of Vietnam and of Indochina. In other words, the disaggregation socially and the contradictions developing in a society that lead, finally, to rebellion. And, so, let's approach the problem from those two points of view.

And when I talk about the power nexus, what I'm talking about are a number of things. I'm talking about political power in the first place. In other words, what kind of political structure is imposed. I'm talking about taxation. In other words, what kind of resources are ripped from the indigenous population and how. I'm talking about monoculture. In other words, the reduction of the economy of the indigenous country to the needs of the imperialist country. I'm talking, fourthly, about de-industrialization. In other words, about the failure either to provide an industrial base and the systematic destruction of what had been the artisan crafts of that area. And, I'm talking, in the fifth place, about superimposed illiteracy, about the destruction of a traditional educational system. All of that adds up to a definition of power.

And when you talk about politics, remember that the Vietnamese people, in the period before the colonial imposition of the French, did participate in local politics. In other words, did participate in their village deliberations and in their village councils, but that they had no participation in national politics — that that is, after all, the function of the emperor and the function of a very special class of mandarins who occupied political position. So when the French come, in no way are they interested in providing organs of deliberation. In no way will they ever provide a dialogue.

When Doumer arrives in 1897 as the governor-General, he discovers that the French until then have established only one political agency, which is called the Colonial Council of Cochinchina. And that Colonial Council rather shocked even Doumer. And he writes of it this way: "Of the scarcely 2,000 French citizens in Cochinchina, 1,500 lived off the state budget and not a few of the remaining 500 were connected with the bureaucracy in other ways. Thus, out of a population of 3 million, 2,000 had the so-called right to vote, and of these, three-fourths were government employees. We called this universal suffrage. A majority of these paid agents then elected a representative of Cochinchina to the Chamber of Deputies in Paris and the legislative assembly of the colony, the Colonial Council, totally elected by this small body of this body of men." In other words, you are talking about no dialogue with the native population in any way, shape, or form.

Doumer felt he had to reform this. But the only reform he made was to establish what was called the Superior Council for Indochina, which was a council that encompassed the five states of Indochina, and that had no representation by the Indochinese people at all. That was representative of the high administrators, of the military, and in general, of the business interests among the *colons* who had already settled in that particular part of Southeast Asia. So, we are not talking about subjects, is the point. We are talking about objects. And the objectification factor is obviously crucial to any understanding you have of that colonial nexus.

But what is closer to the reality is taxation, because the people must pay. They must pay for the administration. They must pay the salaries of these bureaucrats. They must pay for the infrastructure, for the making of the roads, and the railroads, and the canals. And so, taxation is important. And you can say, off hand, two things about French taxation in Indochina. First of all, that the poor pay very much more than the rich. That all Indochinese were subject to a head tax, but that head tax was the same for all so that if a Vietnamese peasant saw only 50 piastres a year, he paid the same amount as somebody who saw 5,000 piastres a year. And the second fact is that all Vietnamese pay, but the French almost never pay. So that in 1907, in Tonkin, in that northern most state of Vietnam, there were 5 million francs collected in head taxes from the Vietnamese and 9,000 francs collected from the French who, after all, controlled whatever business enterprise there was in that particular area.

But you see, it's a lot more than that: it really is to get the blood out of the stone. Because, you see, when Doumer got there, he found that all of his predecessors had taxed willy-nilly over all kinds of products, all of this indirect taxation. He found a tax on cinnamon. He found a tax on stamps. He found a tax woodcutting. And Doumer, good Radical politician that he was, strong man that he was, decided that you had to make a nice equilateral, isosceles universe out of the tax system. And, consequently, he reformed it. By which we mean that in the separate states, in the five parts of Indochina, all local expenses would be paid for by the indirect taxes. In other words, by those taxes that already existed. But for the central administration, in other words, that administration over all of Indochina that had to pay the bureaucracy, that had to pay for the infrastructure, that here it would be more. That they would use all of the tariff service. In other words, all of the tariffs that came in. The custom service, obviously, would be used to finance the French administration. And then, the famous three monopolies, the state monopolies over opium, alcohol, and salt.

And one French administrator looked at it very well. He said, "You see, you tax opium, you tax alcohol, and you tax salt, and you are taxing a vice, a habit, and a necessity." And that's very neat, after all, because what else does any human being have but a vice, a habit, and necessity. And, consequently, to do that is really to go across the board. And what was done by these monopolies was to say that the production and the distribution of those particular products should now be the function of the state. Although it really wasn't the state, because the French administration gave it out to French companies in order to have those particular monopoly rights. And I tell you that the consequences are terrific.

The consequences are terrific if you think in terms of the raising of the prices of those commodities. In ten years, between 1897 and 1907, the price either increased five- or sixfold of each of those three products. And consider, in the second place, what that meant in terms of the destruction of petty peasant entrepreneurship in Vietnam. A terribly important part of the whole imperialistic leveling of the economy of Vietnam, because what it meant was that the little private distillers, in other words, those villages that had alcohol distilleries and survived on that basis, or those peasants who had dug for salt in the marshes or who had little saline works, that all of those people now had that function ripped away from them by the monopolization of the productivity in the hands of these particular French monopolies. Or think, in the third place, of what the high price of something like salt meant to certain kinds of very petty entrepreneurs.

There is a very touching and moving book by a French man called Louis Roubaud who went to Vietnam in 1930, and wrote, after a year's stay there, a marvelous book called *Việt-Nam, la tragédie indochinoise*. And a very sensitive guy he was. And he talks about the fishermen and how the fisherman, for example, have really to give up because of the lack of salt. Listen to this, "If the fisherman lacks salt, all he can do is throw away his fish, which is generally quick to spoil. It is not rare to see a fisherman, with tears in his eyes, abandon the product of a whole

day's work and the shore because he had failed to save enough money to purchase, at its exorbitant price, the condiment he needs which he can see in abundance only a few hundred meters from his junk in the forbidden marsh zone." In other words, he can't go into the marsh and dig out the salt, he must pay the high price. He can't, he throws away what he can't preserve. And the same thing happened with those who were the pork merchants, those who were those little, petty entrepreneurs who needed that kind of salt.

Or think of it in terms of the tremendous profit that the French monopolists then made. And so you get, for example, founded in 1904, what in translation is called the French Company of Indochinese Distillers. And that French Company of Indochinese Distillers has the monopoly over alcohol. And that company is founded in 1904 with a capital of 3 million francs, and reports a profit the first year of 2.5 million francs. And by 1927, it reports profits of 28 million francs. And the leading shareholder, of course, is the Banque de l'Indochine, the Bank of Indochina, the great entrepreneur in that particular economy.

And the peasants knew that they were being exploited. And in 1908, and it's remarkable to note, that in March and April of 1908, in a country in which a Vietnamese did not really answer a Frenchman — note it well, that there were riots all over Vietnam. And riots against the taxes by peasants who went into the tax centers, and the administrative centers, and made their protests. And they were repressed in blood. But they did sabotage. And they had all kinds of clandestine stills. And they had all kinds of saline salt mines. And, consequently, they resisted in their own way.

Or consider the third factor of this nexus. And we talk about monoculture. And you know what monoculture means for a colonized area. You know that it is the desire on the part of the colonizing country to produce one major product, which product can go into the export market. It is really the deformation of the economy. It is the failure to permit proper development of the economy. And you get that not only in Vietnam, you get that, really, in almost every colonial situation. And so with the French, for a long period of time, it was rice. Rice was the product. That's what they wanted. And on that they can make their money. Now, the French have justified themselves in terms of the rice economy of Vietnam in these terms. They have said, and you can find it in one book after another by French apologists for the regime in Indochina, they have said that they expanded and extended the amount of rice cultivation enormously, much more than the Indochinese could have done by themselves. And so you get the figures that, between 1900 and 1937, in those four decades, that the amount of rice in export increased by 547%. That the amount of territory, or arable land, that was in rice cultivation increased four-fold. And, consequently, the assumption is that the Vietnamese population must have lived much better, that they were producing much more, that they had much more to eat.

But, you see, the devastating figures are not these. You don't say anything about the Vietnamese people unless you tell how much stays at home, not how much goes into the export trade. You tell nothing about the condition of the Vietnamese unless you tell how much increase of productivity there was, not how much increase of land there was devoted to rich cultivation. And so, the figures for 1900 to '37 are devastating when you think that in that period, the amount of rice produced increased only 45%, and that the population of Vietnam increased 80%, and that the per-capita consumption of rice by the Vietnamese declined 30% in those four decades. And that is devastating that you take the money from the Vietnamese and that they eat much worse. And that you put all of that rice into the export trade. And all of that, note it well, is the colonial condition.

And if you ask ...

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... increased the amount of rice so very little, the answer is perfectly clear. That a lot of the land that was added to rice cultivation simply lay fallow; it was land taken over by *colons* that was never worked. And, secondly, that the productivity per acre, in other words the yield per acre, was never increased by the French. And they didn't increase it for two reasons. One, that it was very much easier simply to extend their holding. In other words, to take land at the expense of the poor peasant. But something even more devastating than that, that it was very much better to have low productive yields in order to keep the peasantry in a clientage position. That in order to pay for their taxes, they had to sell more than they possibly could afford to do, and that meant that they were constantly in debt. If you increase the productivity, they might regain a certain independence.

And with that monoculture comes de-industrialization. And here we come to something that is terribly important in the whole history of colonialism. And this is not just Vietnamese, this deals with China, this deals with India, this is African, this is Latin American. And we mean two things. We mean, in the first place, that the very position of the advanced, Western country in an underdeveloped area destroys the native crafts. And the native crafts have been part of a traditional economic equilibrium. You know perfectly well from your knowledge of India, for example, that what is called the overpopulation problem of India is a problem, or a function, of the destruction of native crafts. That you have too many people trying to live off the land at that time that British textiles, for example, thoroughly destroy what had been the artisan crafts of India. And we know perfectly well, from [Clair Lee] Chennault and other authorities on Han China, that it's when the crafts of China really were destroyed that you begin to get a volatility in the villages. That the Chinese villagers no longer have any kind of hard ground on which to stand. And, consequently, begin to become much more insurrectionary than they would have otherwise.

Well, it happens, you see, in Vietnam also. And it happens for three reasons. First of all, because the native crafts can't compete with Western goods. And so you get, for example, the textiles of north Vietnam, around the area of Phát Diệm, in the north, that really disappear when you begin to export into Vietnam all of those French textiles. In the second place, it is because the markets, the traditional foreign markets of Vietnamese exports, of Vietnamese craft goods, began to disappear with the appearance of an industrialized Asia — in other words, an Asia subject to the West. So that the boatbuilders of Vietnam, for example, who had sent their craft wares into the areas of the Far East, they began to disappear by the end of the nineteenth century. And finally, it's simply a question of administrative fiat, and that is the governors-general refusing point-blank to permit any kind of competition to those industrial wares that the French want to sell in Indochina — and refusing to permit these distilleries, these sugar refineries, these textiles that the Vietnamese had traditionally made.

Now, there is a parenthesis to note, and note it well, and that is that the crafts don't disappear completely. They disappear when they are closest to the urban centers or closest to the railroads. But if you get out into the distant areas, in China especially, if you get out into the far-flung provinces, then quite obviously the crafts remain. And I want you to underscore and note that because those crafts, then, begin to be a form of resistance, of resistance against imperialism. That what the Chinese did, for example, in creating what they called revolutionary bases, first in Kiangsi in the south of China, and then, after the Long March, in Yen-an in the north: those revolutionary bases in which they fought first against the Kuomintang armies in the south, then against the Japanese, then against the Kuomintang again. In those bases, they managed to survive because they had a complement of native crafts. And the same is true of the Vietnamese. That the Vietnamese in the far-flung villages maintained a craft tradition, and those became, as you very well know, terribly important in the production of textiles, in the production of war material in the resistance against, first, the French and, then, the Americans in the course of those two wars that the Vietnamese people fought.

But what is true and what has to be underscored is that, complementary to this decline in the traditional crafts, there is no exploitation of the resources of Vietnam or of any colonial area for a rational industrialization. That Doumer and other governors-general will not do, because they will not have industrial competition to what the French, after all, want to sell.

All of which leads us, then, to enforced illiteracy. And I want you to note that the Vietnamese were a very literate people before the French got there — that it is considered that they had, in the pre-colonial period, 80% literacy. That they had, after all, an educated caste called the mandarins. And those mandarins occupied the state offices and some of them simply were teachers. And every mandarin who went through a classical education had the obligation to teach. And in pre-colonial Vietnam, every village had a school and every school had a teacher. And there was very high literacy. And then came civilization.

And the French came in and within a decade in Cochinchina, they had destroyed the educational system. And ten years after they established themselves as a colony in south Vietnam, in Cochinchina, in an area of a million and a half peasants, there were only 5,000 in schools. And you know why? Because the French wanted coolies. They wanted people, after all, to work in their farms and in their plantations. They wanted people not to be educated or resist, but to be pliant. And so it was that when certain Vietnamese founded a school in 1907 — a school that had some promise, called the Free School of Hanoi — and it was founded by certain modernists in Vietnam, those who thought that the Vietnamese had to get a modern scientific culture in order to cope with the West. And with their own resources, not asking anything of the French, they opened a school called the Free School of Hanoi. And they put both boys and girls in it, and they taught in both French and Vietnamese, and they taught classical and modern subjects. And it became, naturally, a hotbed of nationalism. And it was closed.

And the reason is summed up very clearly by its founder. Its founder was a great Vietnamese patriot named Phan Châu Trinh. And Phan Châu Trinh, in a letter to the governor-general Paul Beau written on the 15th of August of 1906, tells us a great deal about what the status of colonized people are. "The French always hold us in hatred and contempt. They consider us not merely as savages but as dogs and swine. Not only do they not treat us as equals but, to them, we are something dirty and stinking to be avoided. So many in the countryside have been beaten to death by Frenchmen for no cause at all. When a Vietnamese meets a Frenchman, whether a civilian or a soldier, the Vietnamese is always ready to take flight lest the Frenchman beat him or kill him or mutilate him."

And what you get there, you see, is something I think, really, you ought to try to understand. And that is the fact that it is not only the objectification of people that you have in the colonial situation. I can't think of anything in all of the rapport between human beings that is worse than the colonial nexus. And that colonial nexus, whether it takes the form of imperialism or simply the dominion of one group over another. It's not only the objectification, you see, but it is the reduction to the position of non-people. That there are simply no human attributes left. It really is what was terrible about the American position in the war in Vietnam. All of this talk, you see, about gooks, all of this talk about these non-people. And if people have a history and they have a culture and this is a continuity, then how, really, do you cope with it?

But, you see, there is something self-defeating about imperialism. And it brings us to the second part of my analysis. And that is that it is not only the nexus of power that comes in the colonial relationship but its disintegration and contradiction. And that's so important. You see, every traditional society has a traditional social structure. It is true with Asia. It is true with Africa. It is true with Latin America. Before there is a colonial condition, there is a traditional social structure. And that traditional social structure generally has what we would call much more caste relationships than class relationships. In other words, the definition and the relationship of

groups is defined much more by custom, by law, even by religious sanction, than it is by property relations or by economic function. They're not so much class relationships as they are caste relationships. One thinks about the caste system of India. One thinks about the four estates that are defined by Confucianism in China, where you have the scholars on top, followed by the farmers, followed by the artisans, and last, the merchants. And that becomes a kind of traditional relationship. All of which means it takes imperialism, in other words, it takes the economy of imperialism to disrupt and dislodge a traditional, customary social structure and replace it with class relationships. In other words, class relationships that have no sanction in tradition or custom but that, really, are naked power relationships. And, consequently, very productive of the kind of struggle out which liberation movements come.

So look at Vietnam. Vietnam before the French came, in the pre-colonial period, Vietnam was primarily a peasant country. More than 90% lived as peasants and most of them lived as quite poor peasants. To eat more than two bowls of rice a day was really unusual. What you had in the villages was a traditional structure in which most of the peasants were poor and in which you had a rather small stratum of wealthier peasants. Those wealthier peasants were also the so-called notables, dominated the village council. But even if there was that kind of social structure, even if you have a small caste of wealthier landowners, even if you have them dominating the village council, you have in the village a community. And that is crucially important, that there are richer landowners, but there are not landlords. In other words, no peasant is deprived of land. Some are poor, some have very little, some have very much more, some even have to do corvée labor on the land of the richer but there is nobody deprived of land. And there is, in the village, a certain communality. There is the village church, there are village rites, there is the village custom, there is village tradition, and there is the family. And in the villages, almost everybody is interrelated. Note it well, that there is a certain cohesion. And as far as the political structure is concerned, nobody in the villages has political power in the central government. That belongs to the emperor and to a very special group of mandarins, or officials.

Then, you see, you have imperialism. And what imperialism does is to create two classes that have never existed in Vietnamese history, and two other classes that really are truncated and extremely volatile in the entire social perspective in Vietnam. You create big landowners, on the one hand, and landless peasants. And that has never existed, in the terms in which imperialism created it, after the French arrive. And then you create a truncated working-class and a truncated bourgeoisie. Both of which, really, become important harbingers of the Vietnamese revolution.

Now, how do you create these classes? You create, of course, the large landlords and the landless peasants on the basis of the wars of acquisition that the French colonialists wage. The French come into Cochinchina in the 1860s and they have seven years of warfare. And in that period of time, the peasants are killed off or they flee from their villages as French armies and French troops appear. And the French then go into Vietnamese history, and they make a very superficial

reading, and they say that the ultimate owner of all land in Indochina is the emperor. And since they replaced the emperor, they have eminent domain. And if there are villagers who have been killed or who have run away, that land now belongs to the French state to distribute. So that what you begin to get is the donation of very large tracts of land, tracts of land either to colon, in other words, to favored French settlers, or to indigenous Vietnamese who are great collaborators. And in Cochinchina, in the south of Vietnam, that increases tremendously. It increases over the decades because the peasantry becomes indebted and simply has to give up its land. And it's even more dastardly in the north of Vietnam because that's the poor area, that's the poor rice area.

And, consequently, when you get the same condition — that the villagers flee their villages in the face of French armies and they come back and that land is taken from them — it is just awful. And it is Jean Lanessan, who is governor-general between 1891 and '94, who pointed out an extremely interesting thing, that whole provinces really were redistributed on the basis of the peasants running away from French armies or from *corvée* labor, from conscript labor. And so, Jean Lanessan says, "The province of Bắc Ninh has literally been decimated by the recruitment of coolie labor. Whole tracts have finally been abandoned by the villagers in order to avoid any contact with the French. And that land has been given away in large tracts to the *colons*." So that you get, you see, the creation of a system that statistically adds up this way. That in 1938, in the south of Vietnam, in Cochinchina, that there were 2.5% of all landowners that owned 50% of the land. And that 70% of the smallest owners owned only 15% of the land. But what is most compelling is that 57% of all those who live in the villages own no land at all. In other words, you get this phenomenon of the landless which you had never had before. It's just as bad in the North where you get 2% owning 50% of the land in 1938, 98% own the other 50% of the land.

And along with those two classes, these truncated classes. And these truncated classes come out of a very, very interesting story. You see, along with rice is rubber. And rubber, in a sense, makes a modification of the monoculture. And rubber is French. And the Vietnamese have no relationship to it. And it's magnificent. And in 1938, nineteen French companies control, in plantations, 75% of all of the rubber produced in Vietnam. And that was in south Vietnam, in the five southeastern provinces, and in parts of Cambodia. And how did they get those great red lands for rubber? They ousted the tribesmen, those tribesmen who lived in those plateau areas. And listen to this. This is a book by a man named Roland Dorgelès, a very touching book called *Sur la route mandarine*, written in 1929, and it talks about the Moi tribesmen. The Moi tribesmen, M-O-I, were the ones who lived in those red plateau lands. And listen to this carefully: "On these uncivilized beings civilization is going suddenly to hurl itself, attracted by the wondrous potential of their red lands. What do they know until now of this civilization? Taxes, the *corvée*, the police. But now, they're threatened by another advantage of civilization, the plantations and the mines. And from these forests in which they live, concessions of 40,000 hectare will be carved out. And if they don't flee north and join up with the insurrectional Tai Dam or with the forest rebels of the south, they will have no alternative except to become

coolies, slaves, waiting for starvation, disease, and alcohol to exterminate them." And so the great river plantations are carved.

Now, on the rubber plantations you need labor. Now, labor is coolie labor, and it comes from the north imported down into the south, because it's in the north, which is the poor rice area, that you have all that unemployment. And you have unemployed villagers, and they live up there in the village, and they have no jobs, and they have no land. And I tell you that they don't want to go south to the rubber plantations. And that to take them to the south means to take them by forced labor. And the French officially abolished forced labor in 1935, but it is never really abolished. And what happens is that the plantation owners hire Vietnamese who are the dregs of society, the lowest people you can possibly imagine outside of those who were recruiting labor for the Nazis. And so, they get these so-called *cái*, the C-A-I. And the *cái* are these very brutal labor bosses, and they go up into the north, and they use sorcery, or they use drugs, or they use force and they impose these three-year contracts on this labor that goes south to the rubber plantations.

And how then does it live in the rubber plantations? We have this magnificent description, again, of Louis Roubaud: "Even on the better plantations, the working day is usually twelve hours. On the smaller plantation, the worker is driven out of their sleeping quarters two hours before daybreak and allowed to retire only after dark. They sleep in long barracks with just enough space to lie close to each other on their sides. The wages are paid to the *cái*, who is not only recruiter but also the overseer of work. As he has absolute authority and is subject to no control whatsoever, he can fine workers for alleged misdemeanors or charge them for imaginary services until the poor devils are in debt to him and are obliged to sign another three-year contract." Well, that is labor on the rubber plantations.

Now, you see, it's a very, very curious phenomenon. With all of that money that the French made out of the rubber plantations, and it became fantastic in the 1930s as the vehicle industry really became important, huge profits, and as they made money out of that rice export, they didn't put that money back into development. There is no development in Indochina to speak of. And there is no use of the resources, of the iron, of the coal, of the hydroelectric power to make industries in Indochina. That is not done. It's not done because you don't want to compete with native French industry, but it is also not done out of social fear. Out of the fear that you will create a working-class, which may become a revolutionary proletariat. And the fear that you will create a bourgeoisie, an indigenous bourgeoisie which, like the Indian bourgeoisie, may try to drive you out. And out of that deliberate policy of not developing Indochina, what the French did was to create two truncated classes and to get the worst of both possible worlds. Because they did create something of a working-class out of these rubber plantations, out of the mines. But what a working class.

Now, in 1931 it is estimated that there were 220,000 so-called proletarian workers in that country, a very small number in industry, in mines, and the plantations. But that doesn't tell you something important, that most of those workers are marginal workers. In other words, that they work for a while and then can't stand it and go back to the villages. They can't stand the rubber plantations. They can't stand the coal mines, and they go back to their villages. So that literally, by the time you come to the end of the '30s, there have been millions of Vietnamese peasants who have worked for a while in proletarian labor. And, consequently, have seen the worst aspects of imperialism, who have gone back to their villages and are terribly discontented. What you have created is not a proletariat that can ascend in the social scale, not a proletariat that has opportunity. But you have created, by the millions, those who understand what the work process is under imperialism.

And the same thing is true with the middle class. You do not create that kind of comprador middle class in commerce, in industry, which some kind of development would have yielded. What you create is an intelligentsia, a kind of defunct educated middle class. Because as some of these farmers, as some of these peasants, for example, who had more land than others began to accumulate money – as some of them were, really, clients of the French. They sent their sons off to Paris, for example, to be educated. And if you have no opportunity in real development, then you come back to Vietnam and you are recruited into the movement.

And all of this is a disruption of the social structure and the Vietnamese resisted. And they resisted throughout their history. From the second century BC until the tenth century AD, they are under Chinese rule. And they knock it all in 939 AD. And under a national leader, they drive the Chinese out. The Ming Dynasty imposes its rule again in 1417. It lasts only twenty years. They find a legendary leader, Lê Lợi, a peasant, who drives the Chinese out twenty years after the Ming Dynasty has established itself. The Manchus try to impose their rule at the end of the eighteenth century. They get to the gates of Hanoi in 1798 and are driven back by the Vietnamese. And the French got there, and every inch of the way they had to fight. Resistance led first by the mandarins. In other words, the old educated class that wanted to restore the old Vietnam. Impossible — defeated by the end of the nineteenth century. Then modernists, intellectuals who say, "We must be like Japan. We must get a modern base, a technological base to cope with the French." And they have no mass appeal. Ultimately, ultimately, it will be with the mass movement. And the mass movement, ultimately, will be identical with the Communist Party.

And you see, the story winds around Hồ Chí Minh. Because Hồ Chí Minh tells us so much about how that resistance finally takes its form. The son of a mandarin nationalist, always burning with indignation about the French. Takes off as a young man, only 21 years old in 1911, as a merchant marine. Hits the United States in 1913. Fourteen months in America working in Brooklyn. It's enough to drive anyone into the revolution. Working through one of those

agencies that placed oriental servants with rich families, worked for a rich family in Brooklyn in those days. And when we found out about that through an interview that he gave with Dave Dellinger, and he said something magnificent to Dellinger, you know, about that. He said, "You know I lived in your country for fourteen months in 1913, '14. And when I was there I worked long hours for a very nice, rich Brooklyn family that wanted an Oriental house boy, really preferred a Japanese but they weren't available at the time, so they took an Indochinese. And I was there, and I had some time. I read. I saw Harlem. I went up and visited and so-forth and so-on." And Dellinger said, "Well, what kind of pay did you get?" He said, "Well," he said, "they paid me \$40 a month for that work." And he said, "You see there is progress, because now," and this was many, many, years later, four decades later, he said, "now, you see, I am the President of the People's Republic of North Vietnam and my wage is \$43 a month."

And there was something instructive in that story. It was very Hồ. It's a very Hồ story. And there's something very instructive about it because it indicates the kind, basically, the kind of sacrifice that, ultimately, would be made to get out of a colonial regime which, after all, never had any form of dialogue whatsoever, whatsoever, with those people in that area. The racism was very thick — the callus of control very, very thick.

And finally the movement began to get off the ground. And once that movement got off the ground, why was it? Why was it that there were Americans who thought they could go in and reverse two thousand years of some kind of history and some kind of direction anyway? It is a certain kind of vanity that is absolutely terrific about that... a real vanity. [*applause*]