Civil society and socio-political change in Vietnam through Tocquevillian and Gramscian theoretical lenses

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Civil society as concept/(s) and theory/(ies)

- Concepts and theories – "to think by/with"

- Elusive concept
  - Different spatial and temporal contexts
    - Greeks, Hegel, Marx, Gramsci, Habermas, Putnam...
  - Scholars not clear about what they mean
  - Used in multiple arenas – intellectual, political rhetoric, policy intervention

- Empirical mis-recognition – "NGO"

- Policy (mis)-focus

Vietnam – why should one care?

- Complexity deserving careful examination - Knowledge and inspirations for practitioners

- An illustrative case study

- Knowledge of Vietnam beyond the advertising

- Reflections on your own society and politics

" *Gramsci's distinctive approach to the analysis of civil society [...] should animate a new series of inquiries into the present condition of civil society in different parts of the globe. The results of such enquiries are likely to be disconcerting; [...] the prison notebooks raise difficult and unsettling questions and are an antidote to complacency – the sort of political and intellectual complacency that has taken hold of civil society since 1989.* "

Joseph Buttigieg, 1995

Structure of the content

1. Vietnam's general context: political, economic, socio-cultural
2. The puzzle of Vietnam's civil society
3. Unravelling the puzzle with Tocqueville and Gramsci
4. Prospects of progressive socio-political change

Vietnam – political context

- French colony from the late 1800s to the 1940s-early 1950s
- Monarchy officially ended in 1945 and Communists in formal power
- Split of North and South Vietnams
- 1945 – 1975: Communist rule in the North vs "semi-democratic" rule in the South
- Since 1975: one-party rule and limited civil-political rights

  - No free and fair election

  - "Propaganda against the state", "organising activities to topple the government", "abusing democratic freedoms to infringe on the interest of the state"…

  - Crackdown on street protest, plainclothes police, harassments…

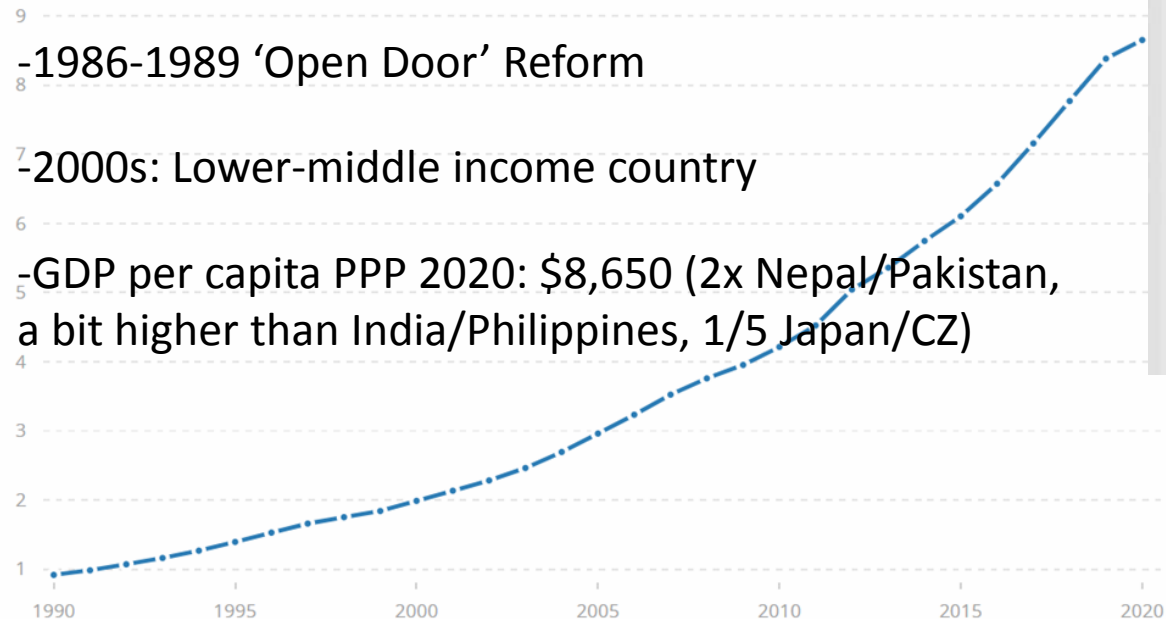# Vietnam – economic and socio-cultural context

Economy and living standards: 'the other Asian dragon'

-Before 1975, relied on Soviet Union and the US
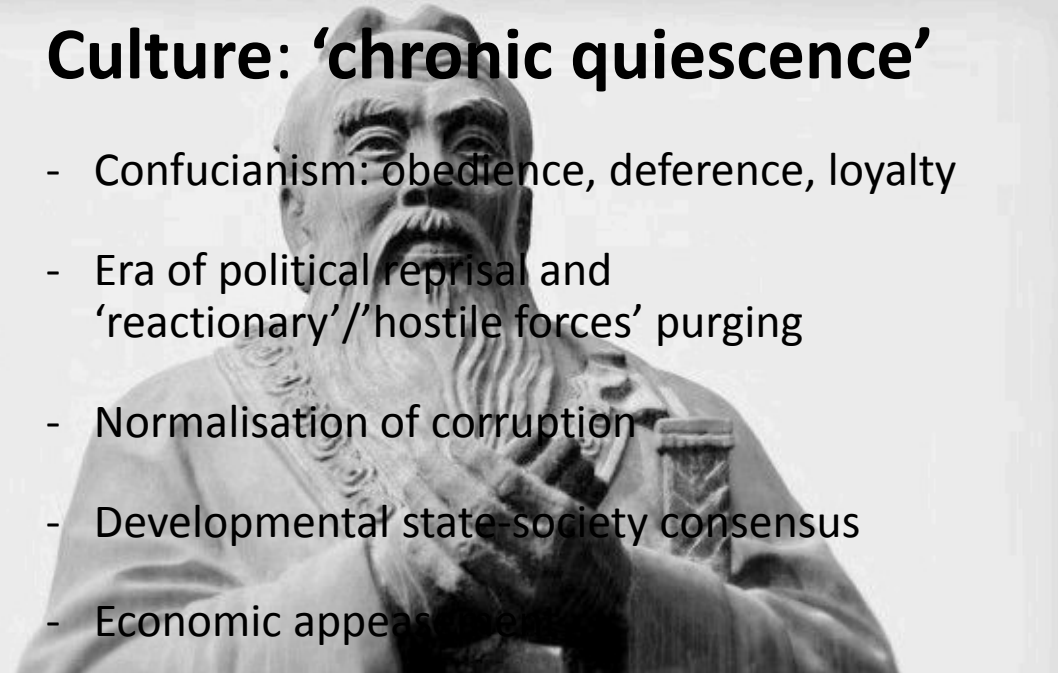
-1986-1989 'Open Door' Reform

-2000s: Lower-middle income country

-GDP per capita PPP 2020: $8,650 (2x Nepal/Pakistan, a bit higher than India/Philippines, 1/5 Japan/CZ)

Culture: 'chronic quiescence'

- Confucianism: obedience, deference, loyalty

- Era of political reprisal and 'reactionary'/'hostile forces' purging

- Normalisation of corruption

- Developmental state-society consensus

- Economic appeasement

2. **The puzzle of Vietnam's civil society**

Minimalist definition**:** a public sphere and actors that exist relatively separately from state apparatuses, the family, and the market
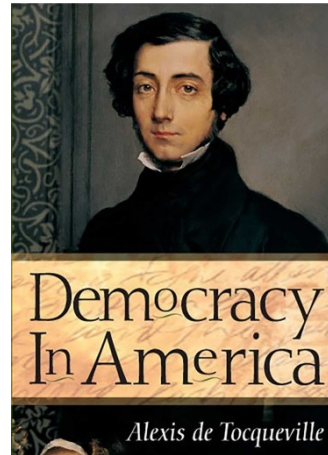
↳ **Too broad and vague to be meaningful or of any use**

1) How to make sense of the vast difference amongst these actors? – formation, purposes, functions, relations towards the state/ruling class…

2) Who are the likely actors to drive progressive socio-political change?

Self-help community groups

Religious bodies

VNGOs

Citizens collectives

Pro-democracy activists

Mass organisations (e.g., Women's Union, Farmer's Union…)

Anti-corruption journalists

Schools

Street protesters

3a. Unraveling the puzzle with Tocqueville

Enlightenment, 17th-18th century

Aftermath of American Revolution (1785-1791)

Democracy In America

Alexis de Tocqueville

civil society vital for democracy

1 Civil society representing diverse interests of the people

2 People learn the norms of democracy through associational life

3 Civil society balancing state power/keeping government in check

VNGOs = typical (failed) Tocquevillian story of Western aid

Historical context of the 1990s:

- Collapse of the Soviet Union and unrivalled rise of liberal-democratic West, blossoming of the Tocquevillian style of civil society
- Western donors rushed into Vietnam now free from Soviet influence
- Post-war Vietnam being a highly 'legit' recipient of Western aid
- VN transitioned to market economy in 1986-1989
- Normalisation of US-VN relations
- Aid requirement: domestic recipients must be "civil society" organisations – not government-"owned/controlled", formally registered, focusing on socio-economic development and political representation

=> Oscar Salemink (2006) – '*Translating, interpreting and practicing civil society in Vietnam: A tale of* <u>*calculated misunderstandings*</u>'

VNGOs = typical (failed) Tocquevillian story of Western aid

<u>Reality of VNGOs</u>:

- E.g., Center for Creative Initiatives in Health and Population (1999), Center for the Studies and Applied Sciences for Gender, Family, and Adolescents (2001), Center for Sustainable Rural Development (2006), Center for Social Initiatives Promotion (2006)…
- VNGOs' differing legal statuses vis-a-vis Vietnam having never allowed the freedom of association nor establishing law towards that end
- VNGOs born out of common interests in socio-economic development of the West and VN's govt
- VNGOs failing in political representation/counter-balance state power

    -Legal status can be revoked at the whim of the government

    -Weren't intended to become a political actor

    -VNGO people do not perceive themselves in political role

    -Non-membership-based, hence absence of social base

Self-help community groups

Religious bodies

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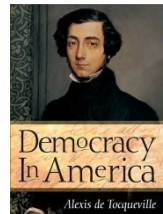
Schools

Street protesters

The Centre for Sustainable Rural Development (SRD) is a leading Vietnamese non-government organization supporting poor rural communities to adapt to the changing environment and sustainably manage their own livelihoods.

https://www.devex.com › organizations › centre-for-sustai...
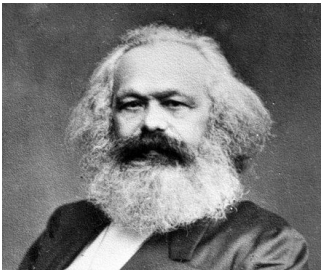
Centre for Sustainable Rural Development | Devex

3b. Unraveling the puzzle with Gramsci

Alexis de Tocqueville
1805-1859

Antonio Gramsci
1891-1937

- Activist for workers and peasants

- **"Bourgeois democracy"**
  - Capitalist + aristocrat ruling class
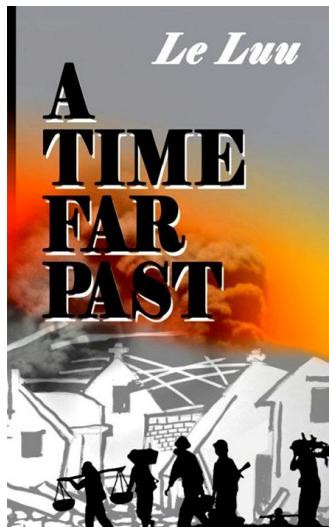 - Violent siege of power

Russian Revolution failing to spread to Italy + own observation of Italian society

- Civil society -> **consent** & political society -> **coercion**

- Consent = norms, ideas, beliefs...

- **Consent + coercion** = **hegemony** , i.e., the power of commonsense

- Site of struggle: civil society

Mass organisations = typical Gramscian story of manufacturing consent

Historical context of war and post-war Vietnam:

- Vietnam War 1950s-1975
- Established in the 1950s, top-down process lead by the VCP
- Leninist idea of two-way conduit
- Effective downward war mobilisation and legitimation and upward reporting of dissent
- Communists = ruling class

Reality of mass organisations in modern Vietnam:

- Continue to be a far-reaching arm of the state, focusing on consent and legitimation
- Reporting to 'Vietnam Fatherland Front'
- Wide membership, especially in rural areas
- Hardly seen by international donors or VNGOs as 'civil society', nonetheless an important partner to work with
- Declining influence on urban, educated population, esp. in SVN

Self-help community groups

Religious bodies   VNGOs   Citizens collectives

Pro-democracy activists   Mass organisations (e.g., Women's Union, Farmer's Union…)

Anti-corruption journalists

Schools

Street protesters

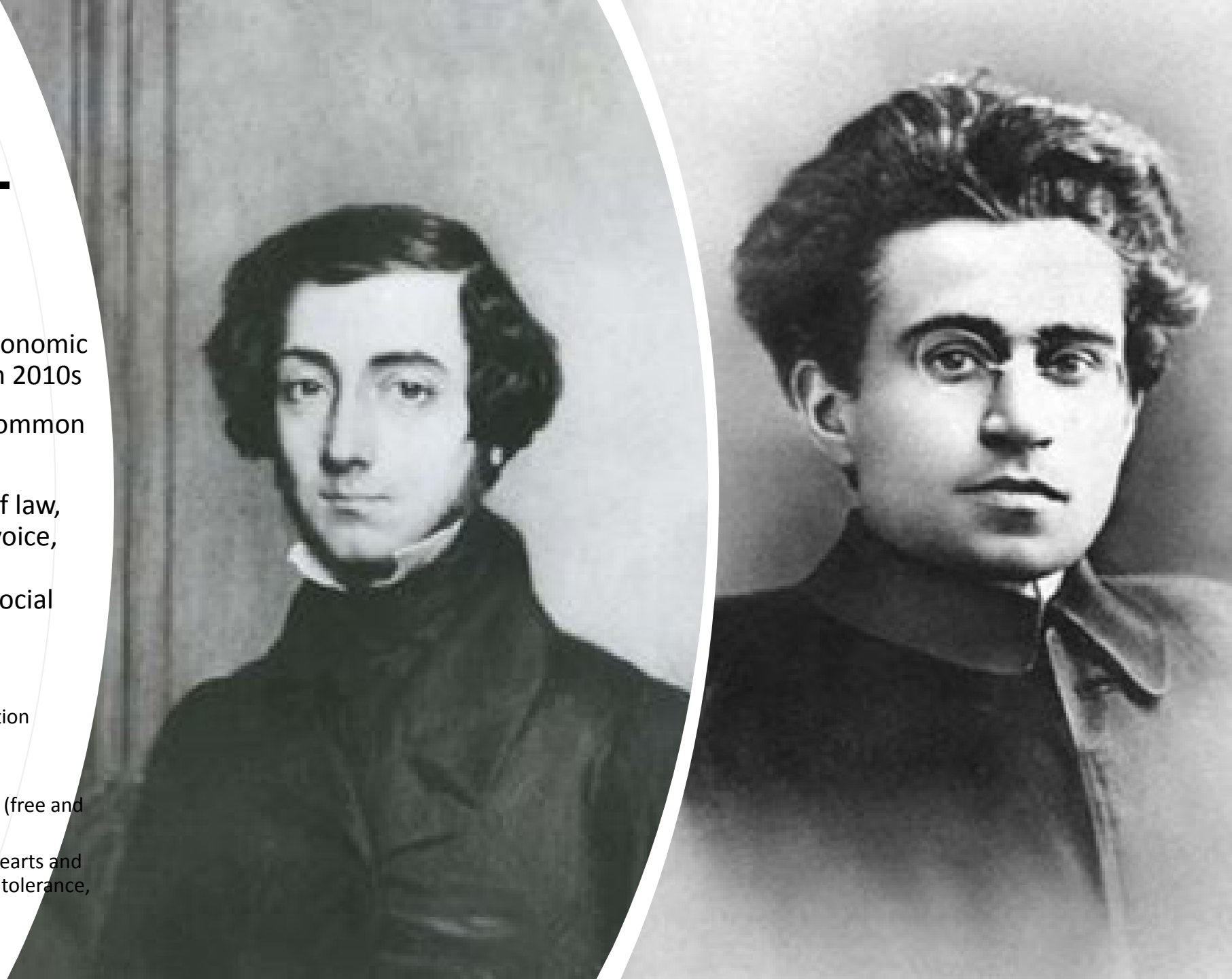# 4. Prospects of progressive socio-political change

- Proliferation since Internet and economic development in 2000s and peak in 2010s

- Bottom-up formation, based on common interests

- Counter-hegemonic ideas – rule of law, transparency and accountability, voice, freedom of thought/expression/association, social and political equality

- Ideas translated into actions
  - Horizontal – association and mobilisation
  - Vertical – criticism of the VCP and its government
  - Political change – towards democracy (free and fair elections, civil-political rights…)
  - Social change – towards democratic hearts and minds (active citizenship, respect and tolerance, critical thinking)

Self-help community groups

Catholic church

VNGOs

Citizens collectives

Pro-democracy activists

Mass organisations (e.g., Women's Union, Farmer's Union…)

Anti-corruption journalists

Schools

Street protesters

* For brevity…

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