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*The Politics of Civil Society Organisation in  
Cambodia and Vietnam*

This is the Accepted version of the following publication

Fforde, Adam (2013) The Politics of Civil Society Organisation in Cambodia and Vietnam. *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, 12 (1). 35 - 53. ISSN 1568-0584

The publisher's official version can be found at  
<http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/journals/10.1163/15700615-13120105>  
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# The politics of civil society organization in Cambodia and Vietnam

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Thanks to anonymous reviewers, to John Kleinen, Kevin Hewison, Joerg Wischermann and Gabi Waibel for comments and support, and especially to the latter for inviting me to a valuable workshop at the Centre for Development Research at Bonn University held in January 2012. I also thank the other participants at the workshop for their stimulating discussion.

## Abstract

The paper builds on recent research that challenges common political assessments of Vietnam and Cambodia. It examines the correct analytical positioning of donor support for civil society in the two countries. By arguing that references to the 'state' should, when conceptually clarified, *include* such political activities (by donors) this allows for better understanding of the effects of the quite different donor strategies in the two countries. By discussing the question of sovereignty the paper argues that the weakness of civil society in Vietnam is linked to the weakness of state agency, and vice versa in Cambodia. The paper concludes that donors' analyses should have (and in Vietnam did not) taken fuller account of the positive effects of support for civil society upon state strength.

Key words: political analysis, political stability, Southeast Asia, sovereignty, aid

Forthcoming *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, 2013

## Introduction

Analysis of Cambodian and Vietnamese politics since their re-emergence to integration into global markets has not until recently tended to the comparative. The countries are usually viewed as very different, with dissimilar histories, political cultures and social norms.<sup>1</sup> Three recent provocative studies, however, suggest the value of comparison, driven by arguments that challenge common views.

The literature on Vietnam, generally and widely seen as politically stable, with a developmentally-focused ruling Communist Party, has very often attributed success to a combination of good policy, political stability and various contextual factors such as a hard-working population and ready participation in powerful Asian growth processes. Martin Gainsborough, however, in a tightly-argued article, denies any links between political action there and policy differences; rather, politics is all about the division of spoils [Gainsborough 2007]. By contrast, Cambodia has generally been seen as a country that has failed any reasonable test of political development, mired in corruption and deeply authoritarian. Yet, bearing in mind her rapid economic growth over the past decade or so, analysts are starting to develop arguments that Cambodia's polity is both stable and increasingly capable of supporting continued economic growth [Scopis 2012]<sup>2</sup>. Rhetorically, Vietnam is allegedly a 'land without a king', whilst Cambodia is not.<sup>3</sup>

Landau, in an overtly comparative study, contrasts the situation in the two countries. In Cambodia, she sees a clear "legally protected realm for civil society and where there are clear contestations and clashes between competing ideologies and interest groups over the nature and boundaries of the Cambodian state". However, in Vietnam she observes a situation "where the boundaries between state and society are associatively, as well as conceptually, ill-defined and elusive and the most important contestations often occur within the state "[Landau 2007].

Such views link to wider discussions of the possibilities (and limitations) of such phenomena as 'authoritarian consolidation' (see for example Goebel 2011) where elites may obtain a

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<sup>1</sup> In the 1980s various academic conferences looked at 'Indochina', linking Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia through their common communist regimes, albeit that these were very different, but since then comparison has been very limited.

<sup>2</sup> See Scopis 2012 chapter 3 for a discussion of the emerging literature discussing Cambodia's apparent political stability.

<sup>3</sup> This was put to me in 2010 by a Saigonese businessman with experience in Cambodia.

broader and less costly range of options to address political challenges by governing through regulation and the management of discourse rather than through coercion [Goebel 2011:1].

Since the early 1990s both countries have seen major interventions by Western donors. As China has become more powerful her presence has increasingly been felt in the region. Western influence is an important issue, and one amongst a range of forces driving and explaining donor activities.

The lines of argument presented by the studies mentioned above engage with two important analytical issues.

First is the question of the correct analytical positioning of international support for civil society in both countries. By arguing that references to the 'state' should, when conceptually clarified, *include* such political activities (by donors) this allows for a far better understanding of the effects of quite different strategic engagements by donors in the two countries. To simplify, Cambodia saw a donor engagement strategy that supported (materially and in terms of attention) emergence of Landau's "legally protected realm", whilst Vietnam did not. Rhetorically, had the equivalent of the tens of millions of dollars spent by donors on Cambodian local NGOs and their embryonic equivalents been spent in Vietnam, things would have by now been very different. Although this paper does not address the question as to why these two trajectories were so different, this does not appear in any sense to have been *necessary*, rather the outcome of donor strategy and various personal career decisions in both countries.

Second is the question of sovereignty. In this paper this question – the question of sovereignty - is understood as the issue of the presence (or otherwise), and its nature, of an idealized 'authority above all others' within these countries' polities to which society and state may refer. This paper develops a line of argument that links discussion of civil society to ideas about sovereignty in the work of Hinsley. This permits an argument that analytically the weakness of civil society in Vietnam should be necessarily linked to the weakness of state agency, and vice versa in Cambodia. The comparative perspective is here interesting, not least as the implications of the research mentioned above confounds much standard thinking. Therefore, it is wise to reflect on this issue of sovereignty.

The paper therefore concludes that the strategic direction taken by donors has consequences, that these are important, and that therefore a suitable analytical framework is needed to guide such strategic decisions. This framework should have (and in Vietnam did not) taken fuller account of the effects of support for civil society upon state strength, given

that what seems to have happened is that an assumption of state strength was itself overdone, and that lack of social development weakened the possibilities for the development of political authority.<sup>4</sup>

## **Analytical issues**

### ***Positioning donor activities as part of local politics***

The paper argues that the central analytical issue is to secure some clear way of understanding how the politics of civil society (CS) organization may involve (and so can be understood in such terms) participation in political processes, including but not limited to the creation and maintenance of order in their particular context. CS issues should not be separated from the big political picture, and that picture should not *assume* that apparent political order reflects fundamental political stability. There is in the case of Vietnam a substantial literature arguing that the successful transition from plan to market was *not* the result of conscious policy at all [de Vylder and Fforde 1996 and 1997]. Conversely, the equivalent literature on Cambodia has found it extremely hard to accept that, despite apparent policy weaknesses, economic growth since the early 'noughties' could have been as fast as it has been.<sup>5</sup> At the core of these tangles is the question of agency, and the extent to which there is a state that is 'doing development'.

Here the tension between realist and constructivist approaches mirrors issues in the practicalities of donor intervention. So we find different understandings, of course, of how the term 'political' should be used, and also what it is taken to mean. Thus, CS organisation often involves activities that may be *labelled* political, both analytically and politically, and so arguably involved with the business of 'the state', but at the same time, using commonly accepted empirics, are rather easily said *not* to be part of 'the state'. This may give donors room for manoeuvre under trying conditions. Thus, one might say, they are political without being political, which may well be tactically useful, or constraining, or something else entirely.

Thus, this being about politics, such frameworks are illuminated by the warning of Dunn [Dunn 2000] about terms such as 'the state'.

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<sup>4</sup> See Fforde 2009 and 2001. But see Wischermann 2010 arguing that much of what passes for civil society organisation in Vietnam has highly authoritarian norms and attitudes.

<sup>5</sup> For example, USDA 2010 and Sjoberg and Sjoeholm 2006.

Each of these two conceptions (the state as sociological fact and the state as normative political proposal) must relate in some way to most of the entities which we now call states, but neither makes quite clear how to apply it in practice. [Dunn 2000:69]

Coping with analytical frameworks that should be able to illuminate these issues requires some deeper understanding of how these frameworks do what they do. Problems here stem to a large degree from tensions created by the ways in which contestation over various important terms (especially 'state' and 'power') *blur* boundaries that are – this blurring notwithstanding - of considerable importance to many actors (both political actors and analysts). Central here are three questions:

How does one address the *empirical* issues associated with attempts to use the term CS in trying to understand politics in the two countries?

A good reason for this is that the term CS is used within a complex debate in different ways, and that this suggests that it is an 'essentially contested concept' with meaning close to that offered by the inventor of the term 'essentially contested concept' [Gallie 1956, also Kekes 1977]. Whilst many analyses argue that they themselves are 'right', and others 'wrong', an important suggestion made by Gallie is that such differences should *not* necessarily be taken as indicative, of themselves, that one or more parties in the debate are being unreasonable. As the paper discusses further below, this allows for a perspective on analytical frameworks that copes with the familiar combination of shared terms and contested meanings.

How does one manage the analytical question of how to position CS activities *within* the Cambodian and Vietnamese political communities? Here also arises the particular question of local NGO (LNGO) and international NGO (INGO) organization.

It is clear that a large part of the debate on CS organization relates to political action of various forms. INGO decisions to fund or not to fund activities, usually those of LNGOs, the roles played by official aid donors (bilaterals and multilaterals) who have tended to provide most their funds, and negotiations amongst these parties, may all be fitted into a variety of definitions of political activity, *but this fits badly with analytical approaches that adopt state-society frameworks*. As the paper will argue, we may here refer to insights from scholars such as Mitchell, arguing that references to 'the state' are best seen, given the typically blurred boundaries, as epiphenomenal. Viewing 'the state' rather, as Mitchell suggests, as an *effect* of certain techniques of rule, as part of sources of order, means that focusing upon those techniques or rule enables us to treat LNGO and INGO activity as part of evolving issues of political power, its production, reproduction and exploitation. This could be said to

be expanding the concept of the state to *include* various CS activities, but this produces a confusing language.<sup>6</sup>

The paper argues that analyses of CS activity may usefully be seen as revealing how CS activities are useful *indicators* of politics and political activity.

In addition, a closely related final question:

How does one cope analytically with pressures to treat civil society as a *definable realm*, linked to debates about its autonomous (or not) character in any particular instance?

This, arguably, is illuminated by the treatment of CS as an ‘essentially contested concept’, allowing us to appreciate how such pressures (and their opposition) may be seen *politically*.

In discussing analytical frameworks for understanding the politics of CS organization, we may also draw upon the idea, valid in both countries, that important political actors have been thinking about CS and its wider implications *strategically*.<sup>7</sup> By this is meant that politics has been about how the ‘rules of the game’ may evolve and change, and how the existing ‘rules of the game’ influence what may be done in the here and now. This may then be related to the question of sovereignty, understood as the question of the presence (or otherwise), and its nature, of an idealized ‘authority above all others’ within these countries’ polities to which society and state may refer.

The paper turns now to consider what Hinsley has to say about sovereignty. A great analytical advantage of his views are that they may be applied to situations where for whatever reason relations between rulers and governed are such that sovereignty, as a political issue, remain unresolved; therefore, this analytical framework may be applied (if conditions are suitable) to situations where sovereignty is either weak or non-existent.

### ***CS politics and the issue of sovereignty***

From Hinsley we may take the idea that political communities historically (and so to a certain extent necessarily) come to the belief that there should be domestic sovereignty through tensions in the debates about relations between those who are governed and those who govern. Here precisely the value of the CS debate in both countries is that, in different

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<sup>6</sup> See Wischermann 2010 arguing that it is less confusing to treat CS as the certain *characteristics* of action, rather than as a discrete ‘realm’.

<sup>7</sup> As a consultant, working in the sector in the late ‘noughties’, it was clearly to me that views within the VCP were organizations such as School Councils, if actively democratic, would threaten Party rule precisely in that they would increase the power of CS. Money (bribes, access to real estate deals etc.) could overcome this, but rather a lot would have been needed, more than was available.

ways, it adds to discussions of their evolving political orders by, as is central to such debates, injecting into politics important issues that engage powerfully with questions of relations between governed and government whilst posing sharp questions about the effectiveness of state power.

Here the 'developmental' agenda can be seen having powerful discursive effects, both potentially and actually, since this agenda place policy to the fore. It is policy that is argued to be crucial to the success or failure of national development, and policy requires the firm exercise of domestic sovereignty.

Donors are therefore deeply unhappy when there appears to be a 'failed state', or some other situation where domestic sovereignty, the prerequisite for policy in the classic sense (Fforde 2009), appears absent or weak.

From Lukes (2005) the paper takes the idea that it is useful (both analytically and politically) to think of power as having three dimensions: not only a first dimension to do with what 'deciding what will be done', and also not only a second dimension to do with 'deciding what will not be part of the agenda', but also that third dimension that pulls the whole thing up by its bootstraps, to do with 'deciding what may be thought doable'.

## **The value of comparison: Vietnam and Cambodia**

Across a number of dimensions, in the matter of the politics of civil society organization the two countries appear as diametric opposites: though perhaps, like some siblings, this may be precisely how similar issues rub antagonistically together to provoke useful reflections on similarities. Certainly, of all the generalizations found in the unhappy world of nationalisms, frequent Cambodian dislike of 'the Vietnamese', and a not uncommon Vietnamese sense of somewhat puzzled confusion at how people could be quite so 'ungrateful', are matters familiar to many of us when we think of ourselves in common sense terms rather than as 'analysts'.

First, given the apparently clear developmental thrust of Vietnamese Communism, and the apparently clear architecture of rule associated with its rule, how and why do we find ourselves facing the need to explain arguments of sustained *failure* to deal with policy problems such as education and health reform, corruption and that tangle of issues commonly associated with transition to and through 'middle income status'? [Fforde 2004; 2005; 2012] How can one also cope with arguments that whilst these issues may point analyses to consider whether fundamental issues confront Vietnamese politics, because they



can be construed to amount to a 'crisis of authority', the reverse may appear from considerations of Cambodian politics? If this debate is then further developed to include consideration of CS organization, can this (and if so how) imply that there is something about CS organization within the Cambodian political community that is part of evolving power relations within which issues of hierarchy and political authority are more coherent and less tense than in Vietnam. Granted this, what may this imply about the politics of CS organization within Vietnamese politics and how this, in some way or another, is associated with incoherence in hierarchy and political authority.

Second, given the very different historical trajectories relatable to CS issues in the two countries, what does re-examination of these gain from analysis of the politics of CS organization here and now?

A puzzle here is the ways we may understand the very different accounts of the years immediately after each country 'returned to openness to the West' – largely, the 1990s (though precise dates are of course contentious). If we hypothesize that Western engagement was important in both countries, then we need to accept that this was very different.

In caricature, donors and INGOs together in Cambodia appear to have pushed hard for relationships with 'new' structures - the 'money chasing NGOs' phase. Existing formal structures are largely absent from narratives we can find that illuminate these processes.<sup>8</sup> There are different accounts of what caused this, as we would expect. However, a range of analyses clearly does not find it hard to argue in various ways that there is something to study, and to take seriously, in these 'spaces'.

By contrast, donors and INGOs in Vietnam appear to have followed strategies that did not open up new space for CS organization. By contrast with the CS debate in Cambodia, it is formal structures that we read about, and informal structures are largely absent from narratives.

It is the politics of CS organization that is crucial, although perhaps neither agreed nor obvious exactly why. To understand this we need to include donor activities when we think about policy and political development: in a naïve sense, this makes them part of the local state, in a proper analytical sense, though this has for obvious political reason to be denied (not least to maintain the charade of external sovereignty). We also need to consider the

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<sup>8</sup> There are obvious interesting histories here, to do with donor and INGO decisions, suited to ethnographic study.

interactions between society and government that Hinsley's approach to sovereignty place centrally.

Let us return now to a discussion of ways one may use CS as an 'essentially contested concept'. This makes it easier to understand the political space open to donors and others intervening in ways that may be related to CS.

## **Civil society as an 'essentially contested concept'**

Just as the phrase 'multiple truths' reveals much about the field of contest, so the notion of 'essentially contested concepts' is *itself* useful to understanding what is going on. As we shall see, this alludes to, and so need not necessarily directly engage with, matters of power as well as of overt political action. This is of obvious utility in a wide variety of situations.

Gallie (1956) presents his argument in terms that suggest necessity; that is, his discussion of various concepts implies that they have some essential meaning. We do not need to get too hung up about this, treating his ideas as contextual when we want to. He suggests, and these proposals seem usefully applied to the CS debate, that some terms *qua* concepts have the following characteristics [Gallie 1956: 171 et seq] and so are 'essentially contested':

First - "*appraisive* in the sense that it signifies or accredits some kind of valued achievement" [171]. It seems quite clear that CS is generally, whether overtly or not, used in such ways, which is of course part of its power and attractiveness. Thus:

Witness the tragedy that has befallen the proponents of the concept: people struggling against authoritarian regimes had demanded civil society; what they got instead was NGOs! [Chandhoke 2007:608]

Second, "This achievement must be of an internally complex character, for all that its worth is attributed to it as a whole" [171-2]. It seems quite clear that references to CS in the literature differ with reference to assertions and discussions that platform on the idea that CS, and its contexts, are complex. One thinks here of the different elements said to make up CS 'action' (Wischermann 2010; this volume), discussions of the meanings of 'relative autonomy', and so on.

Third, thus, "the accredited achievement is *initially* variously describable" [172]. Here Gallie appears to be asserting that for him a crucial aspect of an ECC is that there are no great pressures to force agreement on one particular way of describing how the internal complexity of the concept should be dealt with. Contestation, thus, happens.

Fourth, “The accredited achievement must be of a kind that admits of considerable modification ... {that} cannot be predicted in advance” [172]. In this sense, contestation thus not only happens, but can continue. Does anybody expect the CS debate to stop?

To these four points Gallie adds three more:

His fifth adds to the idea that there is a social contestation: “... to use an essentially concept means to use it against other uses and to recognize that one’s use of it has to be maintained against these other uses ... both aggressively and defensively.” [172]

Finally, to tighten up his position, Gallie adds two final conditions “to distinguish the ... concept from the kind of concept that can be shown to be ... radically confused” [180]. These are, first, “the derivation of any such concept from an original exemplar whose authority is acknowledged by all the contestant users of the concept” and, second, “the probability or plausibility ... of the claim that the continuous competition for acknowledgement as between the contestant users of the concept, enables the original exemplar’s achievement to be sustained and/or developed ...” [180].

Noting that definitions of the exemplar may also be contested, this seems to make sense in the context of the CS debate, lurking behind many elements of which are shared (often somewhat vaguely) narratives of various events, especially those in Eastern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s [Chandhoke 2007].

Gallie was writing in the 1950s, when essentialist argument had far greater authority than nowadays, at least in scholarly debate. However, his points are useful when assessing assertions that there is (and that this *should* be accepted) a true definition of CS. Rather, we can see such assertions in other ways, especially the political. In turn, this allows us to re-examine crucial claims made in the comparative histories of donor engagement under CS headings in Cambodia and Vietnam. A common reason given by donors in Vietnam in the 1990s for *not* putting more resources into emergent local CS activity combined arguments that ‘they were not really independent’ with a sense that the Party was ruling effectively and policy mattered – the former view was politically inept, the latter highly contestable.<sup>9</sup>

An early reference to the idea of contested space can be found in Fforde and Porter 1995.

We favour {an} approach which starts from the assumption that the elusiveness of the boundary is a clue to the nature of the phenomenon. In this view, the distinction

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<sup>9</sup> I recall being told by donor experts in the 1990s that informal farmers’ groups were few in number and, when they did exist, ‘not truly autonomous’ [Fforde 2008].

between the state and civil society is not best understood as a boundary between and around or external to two distinct entities. Rather, in understanding recent historical events in Vietnam, as well as current possibilities, we think it more useful to focus on 'zones of contest' which develop internally within the network of institutional mechanisms through which social and economic order is maintained [Fforde and Porter 1994:5]

One can note here that the authors do not state any need *a priori* to say much about such 'zones of contest'. This becomes, therefore, a more empirical question. What this argument does, though, is sidestep attempts to argue that too much should be made of terms such as 'state' and rather to look instead at sources of 'social and economic order'. As already mentioned, this risks confounding classic developmental ideas that stress the importance, to development, of policy and so the vital importance of its prerequisite, that domestic sovereignty lacking in, say, 'failed states' [Fforde 2009].<sup>10</sup>

Two writers tell us something about frameworks of political analysis useful here. These are Mann and Lukes.<sup>11</sup>

A central issue to developing some persuasive account of the politics of CS organization is clearly how to manage the term 'state'. Useful inputs come from Skocpol 1979, who stresses the view that 'the state' is not only "an arena in which conflicts over basic social and economic interests are fought out" [25].

Mitchell's already-mentioned contribution to the literature on 'the state' is useful [Mitchell 1991]. He argues that the boundary between state and society, as observed, is *usually* blurred, suggesting that 'states' as observed are an *effect* of more powerful logics, which he calls certain 'techniques of rule'.

The state needs to be analyzed as ... a structural effect. That is to say, it should be examined not as an actual structure, but as the powerful metaphysical effect of practices that make such structures appear to exist ... [Mitchell 1991:94]

Bearing this in mind, consider the debates about the 'relative autonomy' of the state that offered a platform to the rediscovery of the state – the 'bringing the state back in' that was well argued by Skocpol, though many of these ideas have long histories [Skocpol 1979; also

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<sup>10</sup> Clearly, the extent to which a nation-state may be observed has a lot to do with the politics of the communities involved, in struggles both to preserve and create social identity.

<sup>11</sup> I am well aware that there is a vast literature here, but, in keeping with the goal of the paper – to clarify analytical frameworks efficiently – leave this as it is here. It is not hard to research the wider literature.

Mann 1984, and (usefully) a review by Almond (Almond 1988) that includes a discussion of why many had earlier abandoned use of the concept]. Central to these views is the belief that understanding political change requires proper analysis of the ways a state may deploy particular sorts of power largely unavailable to other actors. This gives her a way of thinking where a state has a 'relative autonomy' from other political forces. She argues that the state is not an 'arena', and that positions within it therefore offer the possibility of using those powers specific to those positions. For her, these stem from the idea that the state is no mere arena:

It is, rather, a set of administrative, policing and military organizations headed by, and more or less well coordinated by, an executive authority [Skocpol 1979:29].

Thus

The state normally performs two basic functions: it maintains order, and it competes with other actual or potential states [30]

Given this, one of her intentions is to ensure that analyses pay enough attention to differences *within* those factions, groups or individuals sited within 'the state'. The tangles here appear in part as linguistic. If we expand our sense of 'the state' to base it, following Mitchell, upon the idea that 'the state' – *as observed* - is better thought of as an effect of certain techniques of rule, then we can provide ways for analyses to create space to manoeuvre, linking CS organization and practices *directly* to the politics of rule and government, rather than getting necessarily entangled in questions of whether they are or are not 'part of the state'. There is of course a substantial literature arguing that post-colonial states inherited strong state organisations weakly linked to CS. The argument here is that such strength was to a large extent an illusion precisely because of the state of links between rulers and ruled. To return to the comparison between Vietnam and Cambodia, the suggestion for Vietnam is that victory in 1975 and the apparatus of Soviet rule created the illusion of strong rule, whilst for Cambodia the peculiarities of Khmer politics and the chaos of the years after 1975 created the illusion of weak rule.

What Skocpol provides here is a clear view that when one wishes (for whatever reason) to discuss the politics of CS organisation in ways that include the activities of NGOs and INGOs, then:

“The state properly conceived is ... a set of administrative, policing and military organizations headed, *and more or less well coordinated by*, an executive authority” [29]

Her particular choice of words is telling.

It is for us obvious that, when thinking about CS organization in both post-colonial Vietnam and Cambodia, this way of thinking allows, if one wishes, a considerable development of the concept of 'the state'. For example, to include, if the analyst wishes (and the audience buys it), INGO activities in delivering, through local channels, resources and training. Here of course we need to be careful to keep the analysis political, mindful of situations such as that in The Philippines where abundant NGOs and INGOs do not seem to accompany great popular satisfaction with their government.

The paper discusses below how such analyses (which the paper does not assert are *necessary*) might benefit from reflections on what has been said about the nature of 'power'. Furthermore, Mann's use of the phrase "more or less" surely resonates strongly with many familiar with practical politics of CS organization in both countries, where it would be unwise to work on the assumption that there is always a clear "executive authority". Hinsley's contribution to the discussion is then through ways of thinking about how such authority may form under conditions where it is contested or troubled.

Skocpol's position is echoed by Mann who in giving a list that gives the 'four main elements' that the state contains, which he says he will follow, gives as the fourth element "a monopoly of *authoritative binding rule-making*" [Mann 1984:112 – stress in original]. If one asks what happens if that monopoly of rule-making is absent, or seen by important political groups as questionable, then this is an obvious candidate with a political analysis seeking to identify pressures for change. It also may encourage reflection on the domestic sovereignty that has already been mentioned.

As a caveat, note how Hindess argues that it is unwise to use the term as though power were some addable quality, so that one may predict outcomes from a calculation of which side has 'the more power':

Once the exercise of power is seen as involving the use of definite resources under conditions that are not entirely determined by the persons concerned, then it ceases to be a capacity to secure one's preferred objectives. Instead, and at best, it becomes a capacity to act in pursuit of those objectives....

In view of its glaring deficiencies the most interesting question raised by the quantitative conception of power is why it is that so many students of power have been able to take it seriously.

[Hindess 1996:26]

If Lukes' first two dimensions refer to power first to influence decisions, and second to influence what is *not* to be decided, then his third dimension - "securing the consent to domination of willing subjects" [109] – further expands the choices available to the analyst and so the need for readers to appreciate what is happening, analytically. One may argue, and suggest that one observes, situations where the state creates the preconditions for consent; and one may argue and observe situations where driving forces come from the governed, not their government. The power of Hinsley's position is that he focussed upon the relationship between rulers and ruled. Returning to the comparison between Vietnam and Cambodia, this framing of the question poses intriguing questions. For example, in Vietnam, had there been a far greater donor resourcing of local CS activity, what would the political implications of the 1997 rural unrest have been? The upheaval in Thai Binh, the province for which '1997' is famous but by far the only place where there were 'hot spots' (*diem nong*) was treated as contained by the security apparatus, with foreign researchers negotiating access to information. Arguably, had far more donor money been in play, this could have played out very differently. Framing donor intervention as part of domestic politics allows one to see how this narrative imbues the state with considerable power, arguably a misreading of Vietnamese politics [Gainsborough op.cit., Fforde 2012].

At the risk of vast simplification, the choice here pivots on the analysts' view of the *necessary* nature (or otherwise) of their own analysis. The more necessary the analytical framework is asserted to be, the harder it is to manage questions of choice. This is clear in discussions of interests, especially of those thought to be weak and relatively powerless, for if people apparently do *not* act in accordance with what the analysis asserts their interests to be, there is a need for some variant of 'false consciousness' to be introduced, by the analyst, into the analysis.<sup>12</sup> A priori there is probably no need to come down on one side or the other of this debate; it is probably healthier to consider this an empirical issue. Analysis of the politics of CS organization may assume that people know what their interests are, and it may assume that they do not really, and what they believe their interests to be are constructed for them (such as by INGOs' or their political leaders current views of, say, 'democracy').

Landau 2007 is an example of what can be done with such ideas:

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<sup>12</sup> See Lukes 2005 chapter 3 especially his discussion of Scott on pp.124-132.

“Gramsci reminded us that civil society is not apolitical and that the realm of civil society, just like the political and economic realms, is permeated by ideological, sectoral and material interests. He also highlighted the way the state achieves domination and legitimation not only through coercive and regulatory means, but also through influencing social ideas, values and norms. His conception of the state exercising dominance but not hegemony over civil society provides an important clue as to where to look for contestations occurring within contemporary Southeast Asia [254]

She also argues that a major shortcoming of much analysis that uses a realm-based CS notion is that:

{Gramsci’s} perception of civil society as a realm associatively separate from the state limits the utility of his theory to Western-style liberal democratic regimes where there is a clear institutional, legal and conceptual space for civil society [idem]

Here one can see clearly the way in which an analysis may avoid the point made by Mitchell (that the state is epiphenomenal) by focussing analytically upon contestations over *boundaries*. Thus, we have the analytical question - who says, and how, what the field of contest is? This question is powerful in that it should be capable of generating very interesting and empirically founded arguments. For example, in both Vietnam and Cambodia, what over time were the different effects upon their own engagement opportunities of the very different donor decisions to fund LNGOs?

## **Sovereignty, relations between rulers and governed, and the issue of sovereignty**

Much of the CS debate is closely involved with, if not well within, developmentalist thinking and practices. As already mentioned, these tend to take a somewhat mechanistic view of change processes, largely as they involve the management and conceptualisation of the delivery of resources to seek pre-definable (or at least knowable) outcomes. Development is thus ‘done’, is transitive, and therefore tends to give high importance to establishing and implementing correct policy as a known means to knowable outcomes [Fforde 2009]. Even if LNGOs and INGOs do not really believe this, in that they secure important resources and authority from international official donors (who may not actually believe it either), they may all need to dance to that tune.

As already mentioned, in discussing Mann’s view that the state should be thought of as “a set of administrative, policing and military organizations headed, *and more or less well*



*coordinated by, an executive authority*”, one may ask to what extent it make sense (and when and where) to think in terms of coherent political authority in sovereign terms.

To quote Hinsley:

If we wish to explain why men have thought of power in terms of sovereignty we have but to explain why they have assumed that there was a final and absolute authority in their society – and why they have not always done so ...

The concept has been formulated when conditions have been emphasizing the interdependence between the political society and the more precise phenomenon of its government. It has been the source of greatest preoccupation and contention when conditions have been producing rapid changes in the scope of government or in the nature of society or in both. It has been resisted or reviled – it could not be overlooked – when conditions, by producing a close integration between society and government or else by producing a gap between society and government, have inclined men to assume that government and community are identical or else to insist that they ought to be. *In a word, the origin and history of the concept of sovereignty are closely linked with the nature, the origin and the history of the state.* [Hinsley 1986:1-2, stress added]

Thus, analyses that investigate the politics of CS organization may include discussions of the conformity of otherwise of local politics to the notion that there is some authority that is based upon domestic sovereignty in the sense Hinsley uses, *and what implications there may be, such as for local power relations*, if that authority is lacking.

For example, as we saw in the discussion of Vietnamese CS in the paper above, such reflections pose the question, in thinking about CS activities, or whether apparent close alignment or relationships with formally official structures (Landau’s “contestation within the state”) is worthwhile, as to what happens *if advocacy fails in ways attributed to the lack of executive authority*. For Cambodia, the CS debate rather seems to engage with an existing executive authority.

Fundamentally, for political analyses what seems to come out of this is the value of seeing CS organisation as an *indicator* of relations between rulers and government. Hinsley’s rather open analysis allows, if the analysts wishes, links to be made between studies of particular CS organisation and the macro-political issue, founded on notions of power and of authority, of the extent to which, through the issue of sovereignty, these may be used to link state power to government issues: rhetorically, does the state need CS and does CS need the state? The argument stresses the importance of understanding the rhetoric here, since, as

should now be clear, these terms may be used relatively freely within the overall framework of the 'essentially contested concept'. To repeat a quote from Gallie, such contestations involve the need that:

... the probability or plausibility ... of the claim that the continuous competition for acknowledgement as between the contestant users of the concept, enables the original exemplar's achievement to be sustained and/or developed ... [180].

## Reflections

It may strike the reader that the paper has to a great extent ignored concepts that are central to many analyses of the politics of countries apparently comparable to Vietnam and Cambodia. For example, in the development literature much attention is paid to ideas such as the developmental state and, if this concept is actually applicable in a particular context, whether or not this has implications for legitimisation, or not. One reason that this concept has been ignored is the simple one that it seems to *assume* sovereignty: it takes as given a solved political problem, so that the state can be 'seen to be doing development'. This paper is more interested, following Hindess in a theoretical vein, and analyses such as those of Gainsborough more empirically, in thinking about situations that may exist whilst that political problem is being solved, that is, before it has been. Thus, whilst analysts may pose the question of the actual or potential role of avenues of state legitimisation vis-à-vis civil society, this somehow presupposes that the sovereignty issue (in the sense used in this paper) has been resolved. What if it has not? In such cases, and surely there are many historical examples (as well as what some argue has been happening in Vietnam), in some political sense there is nothing, yet, to legitimise. This perhaps helps explain the vacuity of many developmentalist arguments about development models and policies, which *assume* a state with authority that is there to receive (say) World Bank advice. Political analysis may well retort that the key issue is quite different – not to get policy right, but to make policy advice matter, and that is a political issue above all.

It may well be argued that neither Vietnamese nor Cambodian histories contain much that is familiar to Westerners. They draw upon quite alien traditions and cultures. Yet over the past couple of centuries, at least, and increasingly from the early 1990s, there have been important patterns of engagement and cross-cultural interactions. Frameworks for analysing the politics of CS organization thus have some need to find ways of managing such cross-cultural tangles. This tends to be best served by the use of 'open' frameworks of analysis that allow a particular analyst a structured freedom to see what they can do with their

information and their own positioning. This paper therefore poses the question of sovereignty in the way Hinsley does; that is it asks how the question may or may not be posed and answered. It does not assume that the question has been answered.

There are many analytical tangles here, above all in hindsight, where patterns of change become central puzzles. One might argue that in Cambodia Khmer Rouge (KR) rule created a void that after the end of Vietnamese occupation was only gradually filled in, and that the Cambodian People's Party never had the power of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP), not least as KR grassroots cadres still survived. Yet this presumes that the VCP had power, and that this power would transfer across easily to the new conditions of a market economy, extensive corruption and globalisation. Hinsley's focus upon sovereignty and its emergence as to do with relations between rulers and ruled allows us to go beyond such ways of thinking, and to start to understand how the analyses of Gainsborough, Landau and Scapis fit into the mainstream debate. It allows us to see how power and authority are dependent upon relationships that exist in time, and so how sovereignty may or may not exist and may or may not be created, or destroyed: it takes two to tango.

In terms of 'non-Western modernities' [Woodside 2006], perhaps for Vietnam there has been a tendency to delusion, amplified by beliefs about Soviet institutions and 'transitional reforms' (*Doi Moi*), seeing a strong centralised political authority where, one may argue, there has rather been increasing confusion in matters of hierarchy and political ideas. The state of CS organisation perhaps indicates this. For Cambodia, the delusion was perhaps that, after the violence and the Vietnamese occupation, there was a great weakness of political order, so that, through the 'noughties', CS organization was thought, politically, to be operating in a relative vacuum, when, analyses tend to show, it was not. To quote again Landau, things were "clear", by contrast with Vietnam.

## Conclusions

The paper has argued that donor strategies in Vietnam and Cambodia show very different patterns of engagement with CS. In both cases, it makes sense to view these engagements as drawing donors into domestic politics. Further, the paper has argued that this means that it is analytically useful to view donors as part of local political processes. Understanding the sovereignty issue as a question – that of how relations between rulers and ruled are understood locally, and to what extent this creates an imagined 'authority above all others', the paper contrasts and compares the two countries. It argues that more active donor engagement with CS in Cambodia contrasts with preference for working with formal

structures in Vietnam and that this may have caused or contributed to the different evolutions of the sovereignty issue in the two countries. Specifically, it argues that Cambodia may, rhetorically, be called a 'Land with a King', and Vietnam a 'Land without a King', meaning that whilst sovereignty has become clearer and more powerful politically in Cambodia, in Vietnam it has eroded badly.

However, the paper also argues that donors tend to organise in ways that push them to *assume* that 'there is a King'. This is to do with how mainstream developmentalist thinking assumes that development is 'done', and marshals policy expertise that requires the existence of some agency to adopt and implement policy. That agency is usually assumed to be a local state. It therefore assumes, and wants to assume, that the political issues associated with the sovereignty question (as the paper understands it) have been resolved. Clearly, if they have not been resolved, or are being resolved, this will put donors on the wrong foot, probably supporting what, with a better understanding, they would want to avoid.

Much of what has happened in the two countries since the early 1990s has neither been what donors have expected nor what they have wanted. This paper argues that this is in part because donors and their experts have not properly understood in either country either the evolving origins of political authority or their own roles therein. The studies cited at the start of the paper start to show the right direction for a better understanding, and so also to the mistakes that got us here.

Melbourne

May 2013

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