

development. According to the author, the continuous marginalization of the poor has set the battleground for an unending cycle of ideological clash. So long as ideologies born out of these communities continue to be suppressed, society's stability will continue to be threatened.

Despite such sympathetic excursion into the plight of the informal settlers, readers are assured that objectivity is maintained throughout the book. What makes this an engaging read is the eloquent rendering of claims and assertions that are firmly grounded on empirical data. The multidimensional systematic inquiry and well-explained technical terms make the book accessible for a general readership.

The book promises a heightened awareness that ours is indeed a "planet of slums." Ultimately, what Davis asks of us is to harness this awareness and look to ways of transforming it into positive action.—

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Ronald Bruce St John. 2006. *Revolution, Reform and Regionalism in Southeast Asia: Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam*. London and New York: Routledge Curzon. 281 pp.

No other subregion in Southeast Asia came as "prepared" for the age of regional integration as the three former French colonies in the mainland. Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia were once constituted as "French Indochina" not by their own populations' volition, but as the consequence of a European power's anxiety to avoid being left out of the nineteenth century race for overseas conquest. Locked into a geopolitical construct that made sense only insofar as the Mekong waterway that irrigated all three territories imperiously placed under the French flag, the trio found themselves committed to each other—for better or for worse—in what might charitably be called an arranged marriage, and what this book calls "fiction." But the French-Indochinese arrangement did not survive the tumultuous twentieth century; all three constituent members went on to become communist states, a development that went against the grain of Southeast Asian history and

eventually worked against their own respective arguments for integration as an ideological ensemble.

By the end of the century, each Indochinese state (non-communist Cambodia, still-communist Vietnam and Laos) finally gave in, more or less grudgingly, to the imperatives of the market economy, and thereafter to the necessity of reforms and regional integration. In this well-documented study, Ronald Bruce St John tracks the various ways by which the ideological turnabout materialized, but regrettably without giving the reader even a limited sample of the theoretical perspectives deployed by Marxist-Leninist social scientists and economists in attempting to justify the turnabout. In particular, Vietnamese literature on this subject happens to be abundant, but St John seems to be contented with short quotes from party congresses and foreign scholars. In any case, he succeeds in demonstrating that deeply embedded “traditions” cannot be obliterated by a simple conversion to either Marxism-Leninism or the liberal-democratic model. The author does not compare the Indochinese states with those of Eastern Europe, but his analysis cannot help but resonate with echoes, from other ex-communist countries, of the host of problems encountered when the transition was made from a centralized command economy to a more or less free-market economy.

The central argument of St John is that the Cambodians', Laotians', and Vietnamese's post-1975 conversion to free-market practices has not been matched by the liberalization of their political processes, at least up to late 2004. Even in the case of Cambodia, a concession to pluralist politics has so far failed to generate democratic consensus (as this is understood in the West). In the meantime, the popularity of the so-called Chinese model does not cease to amaze: gross domestic product can soar to a double-digit level, even in the absence of free elections and respect for human rights. Thus, the ironically named Ho Chi Minh stock market is now the fastest-growing bourse in Asia (*International Herald Tribune*, September 1, 2006), even as dissenters there and all over the region continue to chafe under the heavy-handed regime of the ruling parties. The authoritarian tradition, after a long period of colonialism and communist rule, is hard to shake off indeed in this part of the world.

But the fact that this anachronism is taking place in the Indochinese countries precisely begs the question: Why did the communist leaders of the region think they could make a go of the allegedly superior Marxist theory of the state and revolution, when their respective

societies were far from being technologically or culturally primed for the socialist stage of development? St John makes short shrift of the “revolution” in the book’s title, and that theme happens to be adequately covered by so many other scholars. But the problem is elsewhere: the Laotian statesman Kaysone Phomvihane has made the candid admission that Laos was “simply too underdeveloped to begin socialism” (117); and for that matter neither one of his neighbors, not even the much bigger Vietnam, was adequately “developed,” by Marxist standards, for the task. Unfortunately, this sense of lost opportunities—realized after the fact, to be sure—tends to be sidetracked by the author, who brought up the problematic of revolution in the first place. The reader is left to his own devices where discovering the origins of the epistemological fault is concerned. Thus, one would be led to think that the Vietnamese and their neighbors simply gambled, on a whim, on what turned out to be the wrong formula for the achievement of national liberation and a just postcolonial society, an imported formula out of several possible others.

What about the decision to integrate into the Southeast Asian construct, which Vietnam had previously spurned because of its formal identification with the anti-communist Association of Southeast Asian Nation? This was a matter of necessity, borne out of the ruling-party leaders’ post-1975 realization that they risked political isolation and economic stagnation if they did not join. Since Vietnam first signed up, followed by Laos and by Cambodia, the process of homogenizing the Indochinese states’ “profile” to better conform with that of ASEAN has been irreversible. Not one of the three certainly has any qualms about integrating into the larger economy, especially as regional integration is now played with the “safety-in-numbers” principle in mind. But no sense of adventurism is evident in the political field. It is not a coincidence, as St John repeatedly states, that the single biggest determinant or influence in the three countries’ trajectory toward overall development, whether in industrialization or foreign policy, is China. Hanoi, in particular, has a number of bones to pick with Beijing, yet feels that the era of ideological confrontation is over (and engaging in which may risk being co-opted by the US). The China factor weighs significantly in any Vietnamese decision to be implicated regionally, whether in the Mekong Subregion project or in the South China Sea controversy over territorial claims. How this tension pans out in the next few decades would be worthy of a follow-up study by the author.

One cannot but be impressed by the documentation effort that went into this study; the endnotes and bibliography already constitute one-third of the whole volume. But the data gathered and processed stop at late 2004, and one occasionally wonders why St John did not limit a great number of quotations: those which are either cited *in extenso* and between inverted commas but without attribution in the main text itself, and those which could very simply have been paraphrased by the author. For example, a longish quote on page 42 on the 1979-80 crisis in Vietnam not only could have been rewritten as a livelier account, but the authorship (De Vylder and Fforde) is not attributed at all, contrary to St John's practice elsewhere on the same page. The net effect: a hasty cut-and-paste operation. But these are minor details that should not detract from the virtues of the ensemble. This is an indispensable guide to the evolution of the Indochinese countries, from the backwaters of the Mekong, so to speak, to the highways of the globalized economy.—**ARMANDO MALAY JR.**, PROFESSOR, ASIAN CENTER, UNIVERSITY OF THE PHILIPPINES-DILIMAN.

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Geronimo Z. Velasco. 2006. *Trailblazing: The Quest for Energy Self-Reliance*. Pasig City: Anvil Publishing. 236 pp.

It is a dilemma to critique a book authored by someone I worked for and admire as a person but with whom I disagreed with in major policy decisions during my term as Secretary of Energy under the Ramos administration. I can either end up defending myself—which will be construed as a biased critique—or avoid a debate on policy decisions by simply citing the differences in governance during his time and my time. However, such simplistic review would ignore the significance of the management approach and policies that helped the accomplishments cited in the book, which I completely agree with. Not because I worked for the author for some time, but because I was very much involved in the energy industry during my academic career at the University of the Philippines during the Marcos administration.

The book is a good treatise on how to manage government corporations, most especially in the energy industry, which is critical to the life of a country's economy and the well being of its citizens. The story on Philippine National Oil Company (PNOC), Petron, and National Power Corporation (Napocor) showed that the state has to