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BUREAUCRATISATION AND THE STATE REVISITED: CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON ADMINISTRATIVE REFORMS IN POST-RENOVATION VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

In spite of administrative reforms implemented over the past 30 years of Renovation Policy (Đổi mới) by the Vietnamese Communist Party with massive support from donor agencies, Vietnam's state machinery and bureaucracy has largely remained bloated and fragmented. As they evolved from state to market, administration and public service did not reform as envisaged in a long-term policy that aims to bring Vietnam closer to Western-dominated, normative models of "good governance." The ineffectiveness of these reforms has commonly been attributed to poor human capacity, weak law enforcement, inconsistent legal frameworks and similar types of formal institutional shortcomings, all of which ought to be remedied by strengthening formal institutions and capacity building. In going beyond such mainstream institutionalist views, this paper appraises administrative reforms from a more critical, sociological perspective. It takes into account socio-cultural and socio-political institutional factors, such as norms, values and worldviews, which often serve as pivotal elements shaping reform trajectories and outcomes. Conceptually, the paper draws on a 1987 study by Hans-Dieter Evers that traces different types of bureaucratisation as a means to unravel the nature of bureaucracy and its evolutionary process through the lens of social history. This study elucidates that despite formally proclaimed commitments to Weberian bureaucracy, in practice, bureaucratisation as currently observable in Vietnam is chiefly featured by strong tendencies of so-called Orwellisation and Parkinsonisation.

Keywords: Vietnam, administrative reforms, bureaucracy, bureaucratisation, institutionalism

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INTRODUCTION: OMNIPRESENT BUT INEFFECTIVE?

In looking back after 30 years since Vietnam embarked on its transition from Soviet-style central planning, it is apparent that the journey has met with both manifold successes and considerable contradiction. Fuzzy terms, such as market socialism, market Leninism or socialist-oriented market economy,[1] the latter of which is in official use by the Vietnamese government, are suggestive of both the ongoing transition from state to market as much as the ideological dilemmas stemming from attempts at fusing capitalism and socialism. Although there is little doubt that Vietnam's Renovation (*Đổi mới*)[2] propelled social modernisation and contributed greatly to rising living standards and economic development, it has had astonishingly minimal influence on Vietnam's political and administrative landscape. Indeed, by systematically excluding political change from the reforms, the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) has remained the sole political power and thereby practically adhered to Leninist ideologies and the respective institutions of governance (Thayer 2009; Fforde 2011). Against the backdrop of this enduring "bureaucratic socialism,"[3] it is unsurprising that characteristics such as bureaucratic omnipresence, statism and authoritarianism have persisted as hallmarks throughout the post-Renovation era. The lasting economic dominance of state-owned enterprises, top-down development planning, state-centred policy making, tight control over civil society, and limited political freedom are, in this regard, manifestations of political conservatism rather than indicators of a an integral transition away from socialism.

Having said this, the political leadership has not been unaware of the necessity to institutionally adapt one-party rule to accommodate the constantly changing social and economic realities. Measures taken to administratively adjust to capitalist modes of production to suit global fashions of neo-liberal deregulation and privatisation, such as reshuffling personnel and streamlining the state machinery, partly favoured state retreat and decentralisation, but did not prevent the further mushrooming of state structures. Indeed, after more than two decades of "renovating" the one-party state, Vietnam's bureaucratic apparatus remains huge and pervasive. In 2006, Painter, an administrative scholar, labelled Vietnam the most bureaucratic country in Southeast Asia in terms of organisational complexity and numbers of state personnel (Painter 2006: 328). In 2011, civil servants numbered 5.3 million, a significant sum for a country with a population of about 90 million (Tuổi Trẻ 26 July 2011). The extent of these figures is illustrative of the vital role the Leninist state continues to play as a source of employment, career options and lifetime secure livelihood in a

society otherwise characterised by limited diversity of occupational opportunities.[4] Since 2008, Vietnam's emerging economy has cooled off profoundly with growth rates falling short of expectations[5] due to the economic fallout from high inflation, rapidly mounting public debts, mass liquidations of private businesses and a real estate market on the brink.[6] In such times of growing insecurity, the (socialist) state, and this includes (semi-privatised) state enterprises and the military, constitutes an even more favourable option for many seeking income and job security. This not only holds true for the capital Hanoi, where a large share of government officials is concentrated,[7] but also for provincial capitals, district towns or rural communes, which are endowed with large cohorts of government officials. A recently conducted census in *Quảng Ninh*, one of Vietnam's 63 provinces, revealed that the number of beneficiaries on the state's payroll accounts for more than six percent of the entire provincial population (Tuổi Trẻ 16 December 2013).

The magnitude and omnipresence of the party state is immense. Administrative buildings profoundly shape the face of urban areas and rural towns. Over the past 10 years, public investment boomed not only in terms of infrastructure development, such as new roads, schools or industrial parks, but also with regard to the construction of immoderately oversized and pompously designed government premises across the whole of the country. Whether in the plains or mountains, rural districts or urban towns, what all these constructions share is the gradual occupation of space by an ever-expanding array of government buildings. In many rural locations, as illustrative in Figure 1, oversized and modern administrative buildings, or often whole compounds, have replaced old, simple constructions, and now outlandishly tower over adjacent paddy fields, thatched farm cottages and grassing water buffalos. Equipped with modern facilities and cast in steel, concrete and glass, these new bureaucratic facades are icons of ultimate state managerialism.

Figure 1: Icons of bureaucratic mangerialism. Recently modernised administrative premises in Northwest Vietnam, one of the country's most remote, socio-economically backward and sparsely populated regions.

Figure notes:
- *Top: Parts of the recently completed Lai Châu provincial administrative campus, occupying large areas of the inner city of Lai Châu.*
- *Middle: Administrative centre of Sìn Hồ district, Lai Châu Province.*
- *Bottom: Two of a whole array of newly constructed government buildings at the outskirts of Mộc Châu town, Sơn La Province (all photographs by the author 2015).*

Looking behind such Potemkin facades of bureaucratic power, however, reveals that Vietnam's administration has long been mired by low effectiveness, poor performance, red tape, administrative arbitrariness and

systemic corruption. Beyond the various constitutional narratives (1992 and 2014) portraying the Leninist state as tightly organised and committed to rational, scientific management and planning, Vietnam's administration and governance have been largely fragmented, disconnected and inconsistent due to poor allocation of responsibilities, overlapping mandates, as well as ministerial fractionism and departmentalism. Different ministerial agencies are in disharmony with each other and local government operations are often detached from those at the centre (Koh 2001: 536). Since the Leninist state came into being in 1954, as empirically documented by MacLean (2013), the politics of mistrust and bureaucratic self-interests have gradually hollowed out the idea of technocratic and central planning. Over the decades, and with this trend continuing in the post-Renovation era, the state documentation system has steadily deviated from actual developments on the ground. Subsequently, based on these paper realities, the central government has continued to draft fuzzy policies and vague legislation. While the number of official guidelines and regulations adopted annually is enormous, the bulk of these provisions are expected to remain affectless because of poor consistency and coordination in their implementation, lack of resources and departure from the everyday reality at the grassroots.[8] This has led to some more radical views, such as that of Fforde (2011: 176), who views Vietnam as a "land without a king" drifting towards "ungovernability" due to a deficit in centralised authority and coordination that has not so much to do with the monopoly of political power under the party, but rather with the fact that there is so little consistency in governance.

By evaluating the Vietnamese bureaucracy from a sociological perspective, the purpose of this paper[9] is to make sense of the contradicting circumstances depicted above in light of the administrative and public service reforms that have been ongoing now for over 15 years. As an introduction into the study, the next section seeks to conceptualise bureaucracy, bureaucratisation and administrative reforms. Drawing on this, subsequently, the analysis will take stock of Vietnam's civil service and administrative reforms by tracing different trajectories of bureaucratisation in order to capture the underlying nature of the bureaucracy and shed light on reform outcomes. The paper argues that beyond the formal reform rhetoric emphasising on rationalisation and rolling back the state in the meaning of "good governance," in fact, bureaucratisation in Vietnam is better described as a process featured by uncontrolled organisational and structural state expansion. Statistical data, selected newspaper articles, along with an exhaustive literature review and personal observations[10] build the methodological backbone of this analysis.

CONCEPTUALISING THE STUDY: EXPLORING THE NEXUS OF BUREAUCRACY, INSTITUTIONS AND REFORMS

Bureaucracy as a Socio-cultural Phenomenon

This section will begin with some theoretical considerations meant to clarify the angle from which the state and bureaucracy are evaluated in this paper. According to traditional Weberian concepts of state-society relations from political sociology, the society and state are assumed to exist as separate spheres, with the state treated autonomous from society (Nettle 1968). This rather orthodox image of the state-society dichotomy has been increasingly rethought, with the effect that the scientific debate has shifted from state-centred to more holistic approaches that take into account diversity and complexity (Sellers 2012). Kerkvliet (2003), for instance, claims that administrators cannot be conceived as separate from society; they are as much a part of it as anyone else, making state officials subject to the same set of societal norms, values, culture and routines. Bureaucratic structures thus rarely appear standardised or universal in guise and behaviour, but rather highly diversified, taking on manifold forms against different socio-cultural backgrounds, political cultures and social realities (Migdal 2001). Crozier, a French organisational sociologist (1964: 210), portrays bureaucracy as a cultural phenomenon that may differ profoundly in different parts of the world. The legal-rational and disciplined officialdom in the Weberian sense of the term, which emerged in Europe in conjunction with the rise of modern nation-states, capitalist modes of production and the corresponding rationalisation of society, presents only one possible type of bureaucracy. In other societal and cultural environments, as depicted by Evers (1987) for Indonesia and Malaysia, modern bureaucracy has not evolved endemically. Instead, it mostly entered these societies as a Western import of modernity overlaid on traditional, often non-supportive social structures and political cultures (Evers and Gerke 2009: 6). Importantly, while respective mandates, functions and roles have been formally enshrined in the constitutions of these countries, Weberian bureaucracy rarely unfold in real life. Instead, traditional, more informal institutions forming around patronage, cronyism and kinship have remained persistent (or even resistant), eventually giving rise to what has become widely known as "bureaucratic capitalism" or "crony capitalism," or systems in which bureaucratic-political elites deliberately blur the boundaries between public office and private life with the aim to appropriate resources (Robison 1978; Evers 1987). Under such conditions, bureaucrats show attributes of what has been defined as strategic group. These are quasi-groups whose members are

united by the common goal of collectively securing present and future chances of accessing, sharing and redistributing scarce resources, both material and immaterial (Evers and Gerke 2009: 2).

Bureaucracy in the Context of Institutionalism

An institutionalist perspective embracing both formal and informal institutions may help to better understand the socio-cultural nature of bureaucracy. Institutional theory, in general, falls into two schools of thought. First, following rational choice theory, mainstream or classical institutionalism assumes that individuals act within institutions in order to maximise their personal interests. Institutional scholars from this camp argue that formal institutions, such as laws, regulations and organisations are set up to govern people's interaction in society and economy (Selznick 1949; Ericksson 2009). This economic orientation on institutionalism has received heavy scrutiny from scholars who have pushed institutional theories in a more normative direction. In this formulation, values, norms, culture and routines of individuals who form and represent institutions, are ascribed a critical role in shaping organisational and behavioural patterns, including those of the bureaucracy (March and Olsen 1989; DiMaggio and Powell 1991). The role of social structures in shaping individual behaviour, for instance, has been emphasised by Archer (2000) and Sayer (2000). In the sub-field of critical institutionalism, the history of institutional evolvement is seen as crucial for understanding social change. "Path dependency," in this context, describes how institutions come into being along historical processes, in which modern, traditional, formal and informal elements coalesce into patchworks of indigenous and global ideas of how things should be done and organised in society (Cleaver 2012). From this perspective, the way that the bureaucracy operates in practical terms is not only defined by formal institutions such as regulations, provisions and coda that frame officialdom, public service provision and administrative procedures, but also by informal institutions such as socio-cultural norms, values, worldviews, routines that determine a great deal of what constitutes administrative culture.

Bureaucracy and Administrative Reforms: Formal vs. Informal Institutions

Administrative reforms often aim to institutionally restructure bureaucratic organisations, streamline procedures and improve work routines with targeted interventions. Typically, these reforms address formal institutional

arrangements. By citing the alleged correlation that robust institutions promote economic growth, multilateral organisations such as the World Bank and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have long prescribed institutional adjustments under the banner of "good governance" (Aron 2000). According to UN definitions, governance is considered "good" and "democratic" to the extent that institutions and processes are transparent and accountable. Moreover, good governance is said to promote equity, participation, pluralism and the rule of law in an effective and enduring manner.[11] This normative notion of "good governance," as practically deployed in the largely apolitical development discourse (Ferguson 1994), however, is less about democratic institutions and human rights, but rather emphasises the rationalisation of organisational structures and administrative procedures following the principles of Weberian bureaucracy in tandem with economic deregulation (Grindle 2007). As Reis argues (2014), in the post-Washington Consensus era, "good governance" can be equated with "high managerialism," which is a set of rationalised (formal) institutions and procedures for managing society, planning development and enhancing market mechanisms for maximum economic performance.

Real life developments, however, are not so simply managed and, accordingly, there is often a wide gap between policy and reality. Unsurprisingly, mainstream thinking that conceives the policy process as scientific-rationale problem solving that is apolitical, mechanic and neat have become increasingly contested (Sutton 1999). Over the past two decades, scholars have more and more acknowledged the inherently political nature of policy interventions, referring to the involvement of multiple actors from the state, private sector and civil society with different, often competing ideas, worldviews, routines and interests (Haas 1992; Hajer 1993). Drawing on this, informal institutions like norms, values, culture and worldviews have been increasingly recognised as crucial factors in policy processes. Leaving aside oversimplified command-and-control models, (local) policy implementers have received far more attention as actors shaping policy through the implementation process (Lipsky 1993).

By not denying the diversity of actors involved in policy processes, the bureaucracy can be considered a pivotal component in public policy. This is even more relevant in state-centred environments of authoritarian regimes such as Vietnam, where the lack of extra-bureaucratic forces allows the state machinery to dominate politically. The role of the bureaucracy is even more decisive when it comes to the formulation and implementation of public service reforms, where bureaucracy is both reformer and the object of reform. Collective resistance against institutional change is likely to be fierce from inside as intended structural interventions easily clash with state

official's hidden agendas and vested interests. More precisely, administrative reforms brought about by changing formal institutions may curtail privileges, impair career prospects, re-draw mandates and diminish political influence, thus potentially narrowing bureaucrats' resources and power base (Grindle and Thomas 1991). Moreover, new formal institutions regulating organisational structures and administrative procedures may contradict informal (traditional) institutions inherent to specific forms of patronage, cronyism and similar routines that pervade bureaucracy as a socio-cultural phenomenon. These may undermine the proper functioning of formal institutions such as laws and regulations (Grindle 2012). In sum, self-serving interests align with informal institutions based on traditional values, norms, culture, worldviews and belief systems (Sabatier and Hunter 1989), some of which conflict with global models of institutional reform in public administration towards "good governance." It is therefore at the interface between the persistence informal institutions and formal institutional interventions where public administration reform outcomes are being shaped, most likely as complex hybrids incorporating elements of both.

Bureaucracy and Bureaucratisation: Tracing Institutional Change in Administrative Reforms

In the above context, the concept of "path dependency" is useful for tracing institutional change. To this end, this paper considers trajectories of bureaucratisation and uses them as means for examining administrative reform outcomes in Vietnam. In doing so, this analysis builds on an earlier study by Evers (1987), who investigated different dimensions of bureaucratisation across Southeast Asia. In order to form a typology of bureaucracy in Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia, he looked into bureaucratisation processes and how they evolved alongside historical events, as well as cultural and social developments. The three types of bureaucratisation he referred to are outlined as follows:

(1) *Weberisation* refers to Max Weber's notion of bureaucracy, which depicts the imposition of legal-rational institutions of administration as part of a process of rationalisation of society. Here, bureaucracy is understood as rationalised and disciplined in respect to the fashion in which it is organised and behaves. Prominently featuring in this model is a clear separation between public office and private life supported by adequate remuneration schemes for public service.

(2) *Orwellisation* draws on George Orwell's portrayal of totalitarian-bureaucratic power and authoritarianism in his world famous novel, *1984*. Here, bureaucratisation is expressed as the mounting omnipresence and pervasive control over society.

(3) *Parkinsonisation* refers to the Parkinson's Law (see Parkinson 1955), which is based on the assumption that bureaucracy naturally tends to expand in structural and physical terms. Expansion is mainly driven by two factors: first, the desire of state officials' to increase the number of their subordinates; and second, the fact that civil servants create (unnecessary) work for each other.

All three types of bureaucratisation are interconnected but, nevertheless, also exist as independent processes, each developing at its own pace and intensity (Evers 1987: 668). Interdependencies, for instance, manifest in the relationship between Orwellisation and Parkinsonisation, since authoritarianism tendentially favours bureaucratic expansion as a mode of pervading society and gaining control over extra-bureaucratic forces. Weberisation is expressed in the gradual rationalisation of organisational structures and procedures of administration. It also features the promotion of a merit-based civil service that is disciplined, transparent, accountable and committed to the rule of law, which is similar to the variation promoted in "good governance." This, in turn, is closely associated with contemporary neo-liberal development paradigms that favour privatisation and state retreat as measures for counteracting Parkinsonisation and enhancing government performance in economic terms. Outlining these typologies facilitates a better understanding of the trajectories of bureaucratisation currently underway in Vietnam. Adding to this, institutional theory helps to capture the underlying rationalities of these processes, thereby illuminating how they are embedded in Vietnam's societal, cultural and historical environment. The ensuing section considers recent trends of Weberisation in Vietnam and how these have emerged against the backdrop of administrative reforms, their corresponding institutional interventions and socio-cultural embeddedness.

THE WEBERISATION OF VIETNAM: PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION REFORM (PAR) AND THE POLITICAL-CULTURAL RENAISSANCE OF MERITOCRATIC IDEAS

When the VCP seized power in 1954, policy processes turned, as common for Leninist regimes under "mono-organisational socialism,"[12] into solely

state-centred and bureaucratic affairs, leaving no or only limited space for public engagement (Porter 1993; Thayer 1995). New opportunities for social engagement, however, emerged in the wake of *Đổi mới*, although under close state observation. With the bureaucratic elite doing its utmost to keep political change off the reform agenda, social engagement has been limited to relatively non-political spheres such as social relief work, poverty alleviation, the environment or health (Wischermann 1999; Thayer 2009). Party members, bureaucrats and others affiliated with the political system feared that once a certain tipping point is exceeded, reforms might track into territory located beyond their reach and control (Thayer 2009). Whereas public engagement in policy-making remained limited, donors and their implementing agencies gained ground in domestic policy processes, at least in respect to policy formulation. It was in the late 1980s, just after the bipolar world older began to decline, that Western governments and multilateral organisations began to resume diplomatic relations with the socialist regime in the hopes that supporting economic reforms would eventually yield political change in favour of democratic institutions.[13] Although this invariably proved to be overoptimistic, with the system remaining strongly authoritarian, donors were and still are attracted by the country's nimbus of being a "success story" in rapid development, modernisation and poverty reduction, and nevertheless gradually intensified their engagement with the party state. One result is that Vietnam has become a top destination for official development assistance (ODA) and a "donor darling" (Cling et al. 2009; Olivié 2011); Vietnam has come to be seen as a place where, at least putatively, "development" is manageable and plannable using the right policy choices and institutional interventions. Despite lingering real world governance challenges, what earned Vietnam the title of best-practice (or model) country was, as Reis (2014) claims, the Leninist state's formal rational planning machinery, which delivered the image of sound and proper development policy making through its command-and-control system of rational administration, target-oriented planning and rigid top-down implementation. Whether public health, education, macro-economy or the environment, one rarely finds a policy sphere in contemporary Vietnam that remains without exhaustive efforts undertaken by the World Bank, UNDP, Asian Development Bank (ADB) and others to impose on policy formulation, albeit with little influence when it comes to implementation.

**Weberisation and Good Governance in Vietnam:
The Mainstream Perspective**

PAR, which began to take off in the early 1990s, has been no exception to the imposition of outside influence. From the very beginning, government attempts to implement market-based economic principles in conjunction with administrative reforms in the spirit of "good governance" have received strong financial and technical support from the Western-dominated donor community (Buhmann 2007). Initially, administrative reforms manifested in many forms but these activities remained mostly isolated from each other, targeting issues such as decentralisation (Fritzen 2006), state-owned enterprise reforms (Fforde 2007), empowering the National Assembly or the People's Councils (both representing legislative state power) (UNDP 2001), or promoting grassroots participation (Minh Nhut Duong 2004). Since 2000, a great deal of these initiatives have come under the banner of the Master Programme for PAR (Prime Minister of Vietnam 2001). Briefly, the first programme period, running from 2001 to 2010,[14] comprised the following four main components:

- Institutional reforms
- Streamlining organisational structures
- Civil service reforms
- Strengthening public finances and fiscal reforms

Interventions such as downsizing staff, streamlining organisational setups, decentralisation, facilitating cross-sectoral workflows at national and sub-national levels, as well as curbing party hegemony over state management were expected to harmonise and optimise administrative procedures and remove overlapping mandates within the apparatus (UNDP 2001: 15; Painter 2006: 325). Following the models of bureaucratisation outlined in the previous section, PAR therefore addresses problems typically presented by Parkinsonisation, while at the same time promoting Weberisation through a new civil service codex and salary reforms. Adequate earnings are the prerequisite to ensure disciplined behaviour of civil servants and improve ethics and integrity for the purposes of combating corruption and other forms of malpractice. Along with this, in the hope of stimulating merit as the key feature of officialdom, civil servants are obligated to prove their professional expertise and qualification by holding academic decrees in accordance with their positions, and by passing compulsory examinations for recruitment and promotion.

Figure 2: State propaganda billboards promoting public service reforms.

Figure notes:
- Left: "*The party (apparatus) and the people of Can Tho City decisively build up a transparent and strong administration!*"
- Right: "*Can Tho City decisively builds up a corps of cadres and civil servants that serves the people with all its strengths*" (photographs by the author, 2011, Can Tho City [Mekong Delta], translation by the author).

In essence, PAR is all about building a bureaucracy that is disciplined, service-oriented, tightly regulated and responsive to people's needs; a bureaucracy that is accountable, transparent, less prone to corruption, and committed to a clear separation between private and public life. This is nothing short of a new administrative and public service culture (Figure 2). Expectations were high as articulated in the following statement by the Ministry of Home Affairs, the implementing agency of PAR:

> [. . .] to successfully build a democratic, clean, strong, professional, modern, effective and efficient public administration system which operates in line with the principle of the socialist State ruled-by-law under the leadership of the Party; public cadres and civil servants will have appropriate skills and ethical qualities to respond to the requirements of the cause of nation building and development (Ministry of Home Affairs n.d.).

Weberisation and PAR: Seeing Like the Vietnamese Bureaucratic State

What has deviated since the very beginning from donor's ideals for reform articulated in "good governance," the bureaucratic elite view administrative reforms in a context of steeped in cultural ideology that can be used to buttress traditional claims to political legitimacy. As Vietnamese rulers did in the past, drawing legitimacy by ensuring the country's national sovereignty and unity remains paramount to the present regime. If one looks beyond nationalism and patriotism, it is apparent that Vietnam's capitalist transformation made obsolete socialist economic institutions and corresponding class struggle rhetoric. As Fforde (2007: 22) argues, this has gradually narrowed the source from which the Leninist party-state has traditionally drawn a good deal of its political legitimacy that is located beyond revolutionary patriotism and nationalism. Striving for progress and modernity and promoting socio-economic development gained political weight instead (Vasavakul 1995). With the promulgation of *Đổi mới*, the party state has promised to make Vietnam's people "prosperous" and the nation "strong." Given the growing importance of such performance-based legitimacy, as Reis (2012: 161) argues, "the image of a rational administrative apparatus which serves the needs of the people is now playing a key role in legitimation of one-party rule."

In aiming to preserve the political status quo of one-party rule, the bureaucratic elite is under pressure to seek out new claims to legitimacy that are sufficiently robust to withstand the gradual ideological demise of Leninism. Looking into the past has become part of the solution. The concept of a strong state and a weak civil society, which dates to before the Leninist state emerged as a product of anti-colonial struggle, is part of Vietnam's socio-cultural legacy and deeply entrenched in the Confucian worldview of how the state-society relationship should be organised. As Reis (2012) claims, the essence of the idea of the Vietnamese state is based on the rationale that the (one-party) state exists for the exclusive purpose of serving the people and common good. This rationale is apparent in Article Two of the Constitution (both 1992 and 2014 versions), which defines the Vietnamese state as a "socialist State ruled by law of the People, by the People and for the People." In spite of the significant ideological differences between Confucianism and Marxism-Leninism, these views are compatible with socialist ideology because they are useful for aligning with Confucian notions of state-society relations that have traditionally shaped Vietnam's political culture and concept of governance. The underlying idea, is one of a managerial and paternalistic state represented by a bureaucratic elite that draws its legitimacy to govern not from being democratically elected, but

from its wisdom, virtue and morality (Woodside 2006: 23). In this system, the state is the ultimate designer and promoter of development, while extra-bureaucratic forces are perceived as redundant and disruptive of the paternalistic relationship between rulers and the ruled, potentially provoking social disharmony, unrest and chaos. It is a governance system in which the collective rules over individual interests and freedom (Minh Nhut Duong 2004: 14–15; Pham Duy Nghia 2005: 80).

Weberian bureaucracy as a rational instrument of governance increasingly has gained relevance with the need to revitalise past models for claiming legitimacy (Reis 2012: 161). Indeed, Woodside (2006), a historian, demonstrated how the rationalisation of state and administration emerged in conjunction with a merit-based bureaucracy in imperial China long before it did in Europe. The cradle of Vietnamese civilisation, the Red River Delta, was under Chinese domination for almost 1,000 years until 938 AD, which naturally led Chinese features to become entrenched in Vietnamese political and administrative culture. Originating in the Chinese model, Womack claims (2006) that the traditional Vietnamese royal administration draws on a centralised and strictly hierarchical state apparatus in which professional bureaucrats, formerly called mandarins, implement royal decrees and provided for bottom-up reporting in the form of numbers and statistics. In this system, unlike in feudal Europe, recruitment to state positions did not follow aristocratic principles of hereditary claims, but was based on civil service examinations which assessed the knowledge, skills, wisdom and virtue of applicants. Paternalistic, technocratic and meritocratic notions mingled to form a unique managerial state concept with an epistemic elite at its core. Thus, the righteousness required to govern derives from virtue and wisdom instead of election or birth right. It is a system in which political and epistemic power is accumulated in the hands of technocrats and knowledge-commanding professionals, who are in turn mandated to produce progress, increase social welfare and spur development on behalf of the collective (Woodside 2006: 18; Dao Minh Chau 1996: 51). Policy failures are not considered to be the result of unsound institutional arrangements or ineffective organisational structures, but rather are attributed to the poor qualifications of state officials in terms of knowledge, virtue and ethics.

Incumbent political leaders, like the General Party Secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng, have repeatedly referred to this notion when expressing their concerns about the ongoing moral decay among the state corpus, which is ostensibly driven by ignorance in conjunction with the corrupt and selfish behaviour of officials (Tuổi Trẻ 27 December 2011). As expressed by the political leadership, increasing government performance significantly is a matter of improving the quality of bureaucrats; to a lesser extent, it depends

on the quality of organisational and structural arrangements; and in no case does it require changing the entire political system (Dao Minh Chau 1996: 51–53; Woodside 2006: 18–26). The foremost goal, or so-called "remandarinisation," as Woodside argues (2006), has been unfolding since the 1990s alongside a cultural renaissance of Neo-Confucian values and stimulated by the bureaucratic elite attentions to replace the increasingly outdated Leninist ideology with "something like a higher moral authority of democratic kind without all the risks of political democracy" (Woodside 2006: 84). It thus was not by coincidence that, in the 1990s, civil service examination was reintroduced with the hope that it would "supply the country with a new mystique of public service" (84). In 2011, Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng declared that, by 2015, the number of civil servants and cadres in leadership positions would number 200,000, of which 120,000 should hold bachelor, master and PhD degrees (Tuổi Trẻ 26 July 2011). Although party membership remains the most indispensable tool for advancing one's career in the civil service, holding academic degrees has become just as important in light of Vietnam's meritocratic turn away from purely socialist ideology and class struggle rhetoric.

Although different interpretations of public service reform persist, there is, nevertheless, a broad consensus among donors and the Vietnamese government about the necessity of reform. Weberisation and the corresponding institutional interventions made to propel change have gained momentum over the past three decades of Renovation Policy, leading to the country's capitalist transformation, ideological shift towards "good governance" and meritocratic turn. Reaching beyond policy formulation and declarations of commitment, the next two sections critically deal with the extent to which formal institutional interventions actually materialise in day-to-day practice.

ADMINISTRATIVE REFORMS AND THE CHANGING PATTERNS OF PARKINSONISATION

Scratching the Surface of Reform: Downsizing and Streamlining the State Machinery

As outlined earlier, the key objectives of PAR were to rationalise organisational structures, streamline the state machinery, downsize staff and promote state retreat, all of which were aimed at enhancing administrative performance. To which extent these objective were achieved is questionable in light of the contradictory scenario described in the introduction.

Historically, an enormous growth in bureaucratic structures coincided with the socialist takeover in 1954 in the North, and 1975 in the South. Centralised economic planning coupled with mono-organisational socialism provided conditions conducive for the state machinery to gradually expand in terms of its mandate, organisational complexity and personnel (Porter 1993; Thayer 1995). In the pre-reform era, Parkinsonisation was at the core of the evolution of a highly complex, inflated and all-pervasive bureaucratic apparatus consisting of countless state management units, party organs, mass organisations, and state enterprises, all of which were, and still are, intertwined in many respects. In effect, Orwellisation in the guise of Leninism constantly propelled state fattening. It was in the 1980s, on the eve of *Đổi mới*, that this trajectory reached its apogee with an all-time record of 37 ministries and ministerial-adequate agencies (see Chart 1).

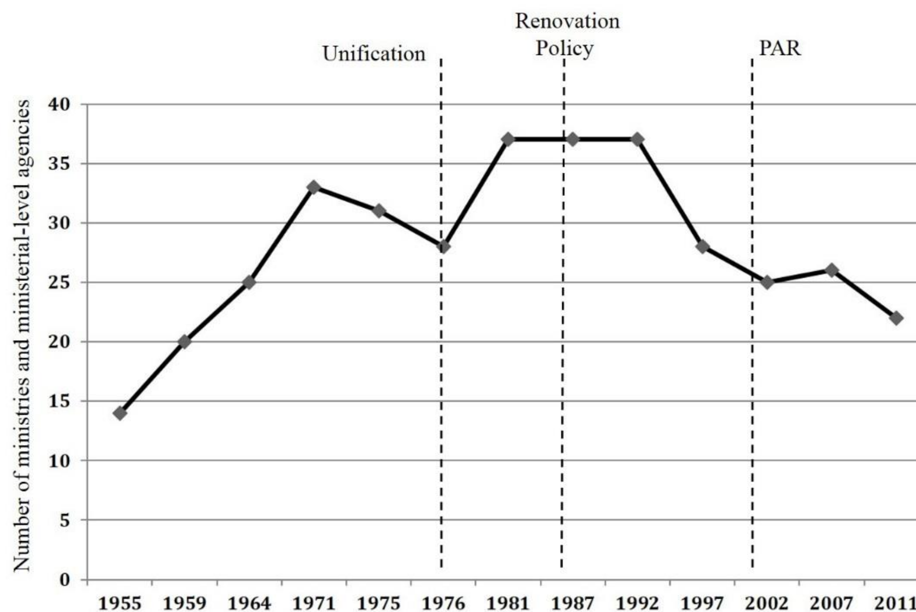

Chart 1: Number of ministries and ministerial-level agencies from 1955 to 2011 (source: Data according to Koh et al. 2009: 9 and Vietnam GSO).

After Renovation was formally adopted, the number of ministries and ministerial-agencies gradually declined to 22 by 2011. State retreat, economic decentralisation, socialisation and other reform policies adopted to restructure the state machinery compelled the numerical reduction in ministries. This, first and foremost, was brought about by ministerial mergers aiming to reorganise administrative organisation by strengthening sectoral integration, improving workflows, reducing costs and lessening administrative fragmentation. From the central level, reforms then trickled down to sub-national levels. From 2002 to 2011, the number of provincial

departments per province decreased from 27 to 20. Subsequent restructurings at subordinate levels caused the number of district offices drop correspondingly[15] (Saigon Times 23 April 2011). From this, one could conclude that PAR was highly efficient, as it obviously reduced and streamlined the state machinery. However, when comparing with data on the number of state officials, as summarised in Chart 2, it becomes questionable whether PAR had a substantive effect on the ground. Recruitment into public service (to the state and party), has, in fact, increased rather than decreased. Indeed, the data indicate that irrespective of the numerical decrease in state agencies, both at central and local levels, the number of state officials now working (in fewer ministries and provincial departments) was constantly rising. To illustrate, the number of state officials doubled from approximately 300,000 to almost 600,000 from 2000 to 2007. That this happened in spite of the implementation of PAR poses questions about how one should make sense of PAR, particularly its goal of staff downsizing.

Breaking apart the actual developments that occurred within organisational structures during PAR implementation provides some clarification. For example, what is noteworthy is that the increase in state personnel was unevenly distributed across the national level and sub-national tiers of the apparatus. At the national level, although the number of ministries and ministerial-level agencies declined by about 40 percent, the amount of central-state officials, in contrast, remained relatively stable (see Chart 2). This suggests that the bulk of growth in state personnel occurred at sub-national levels, where the number of state officials rose four-fold from 1995 to 2007. Analysing this further, the next section looks separately at central and sub-national level developments.

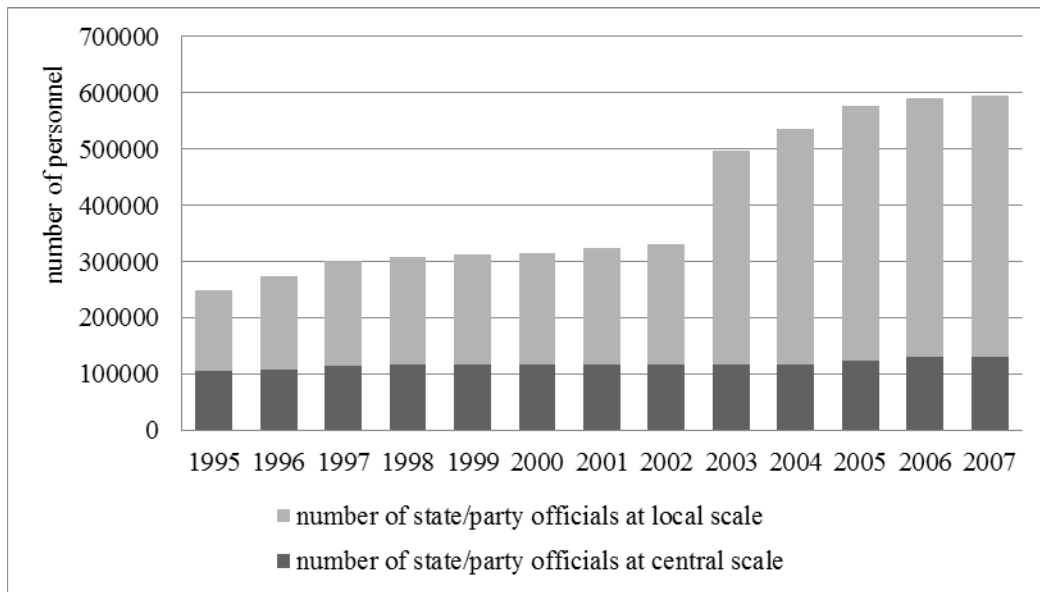

Chart 2: Numerical development of state personnel in Vietnam (source: Vietnam GSO, statistical yearbooks).

Digging deeper into reforms: Bureaucratic involution and the exploration of complexity

Although an unlikely inspiration, Geertz's (1963) "agricultural involution model" provides a helpful conceptual gateway for contextualising the peculiarities of Parkinsonisation in the central tier of the Vietnamese state machinery. In his anthropological study of socio-ecological change on Java under Dutch colonial rule, Geertz documents that when exposed to massive outside pressure, a social system that is no longer capable of expanding will most likely respond with inward development. In other words, if expansion as a first choice is unattainable, a system copes by moving deeper into already existing structures.[16] He denotes such inward-oriented development "involution" in reference to the process of increasing complexity in existing social and organisational structures. Borrowing from Geertz, if we take bureaucracy as the social system of organisation, then PAR is the source of outside pressure. Facing limitations to expansion due to PAR, Parkinsonisation either ceases or manifests in alternative pathways that are less conspicuous and detectable. Indeed, Parkinsonisation shifts track to bypass reforms by switching from expansion to involution. As illustrated in the following cases examining ministerial mergers, it does indeed become apparent that the organisational structures of ministries did not further expand, but instead submerged deeper into pre-existing structures.

From 1992 to 2011, Koh et al. (2009: 10–11) documented a total of 16 mergers between ministries and ministerial-equivalent agencies, each

involving two to five central government agencies to be fused. In 1995, for instance, the Ministry of Industry was established by merging the Ministry of Energy, the Ministry of Light Industry and the Ministry of Heavy Industry. Later on, in 2007, the Ministry of Industry was then merged with the Ministry of Trade to give birth to the new Ministry of Industry and Trade. In the same vein, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) came to life in 1995 when the Ministry of Agriculture and Foodstuff, the Ministry of Forestry and the Ministry of Water were merged. In 2008, MARD further absorbed the Ministry of Fisheries, now encompassing four former ministries in one super ministry.

Such mergers appeared, at first, to contribute to the streamlining of organisational structures, perhaps even simplifying administrative procedures and enhancing cross-sectoral coordination. Nevertheless, it remains unclear to what extent organisational arrangements within these new ministries have truly changed as a result of ministerial mergers. Also unclear is what happened to the respective personnel from each ministry. Looking into the internal organisation of merged ministries reveals that a great deal of the administrative structures have not changed at all. Rather, despite their loss of autonomy as a discrete ministry, many of the old ministries preserved their former organisational shape when put under the umbrella of the new ministry, thereby creating the impression of integration. "Downgrading" is another process through which ministries preserved the organisational structure of their departments: former ministerial departments became sub-departments and, likewise, former sub-departments turned into even smaller units. Unsurprisingly, the number of associated personnel remained unchanged, partly even increased. Critically reflecting on PAR, the following quote found in a Vietnamese newspaper underpins the assumption that PAR triggered involution rather than encouraged substantive streamlining of the state apparatus:

> […] despite the reduction of ministries [*bộ*] and line-agencies [*ngành*], the state apparatus actually has further fattened since the number of sub-divisions within existing agencies has been growing constantly, specifically due to the trend in establishing new sub-divisions [*vụ*] and the renaming of sub-divisions [*vụ*] into general offices [*tổng cục*] and departments [*cục*] under ministries and ministerial-equivalent agencies. In the last tenure of government [2007–2011], the number of general offices [*tổng cục*] in national agencies, and likewise, the number of respective units at local levels increased by 100 percent (the previous period of government was 21, this period is 40).

> Furthermore, the number of ministerial departments [*cục*] increased from 82 to 103 over the same time (Saigon Times 23 April 2011, translation by author).

Given this reorientation from expansion to involution, it appears that PAR has had little effect on Parkinsonisation because organisation expansions was simply re-directed into pre-existing organisational structures, where it was able to evolve more subtly and silently. Chart 3 portrays this trajectory as consecutive sequences of bureaucratic involution.

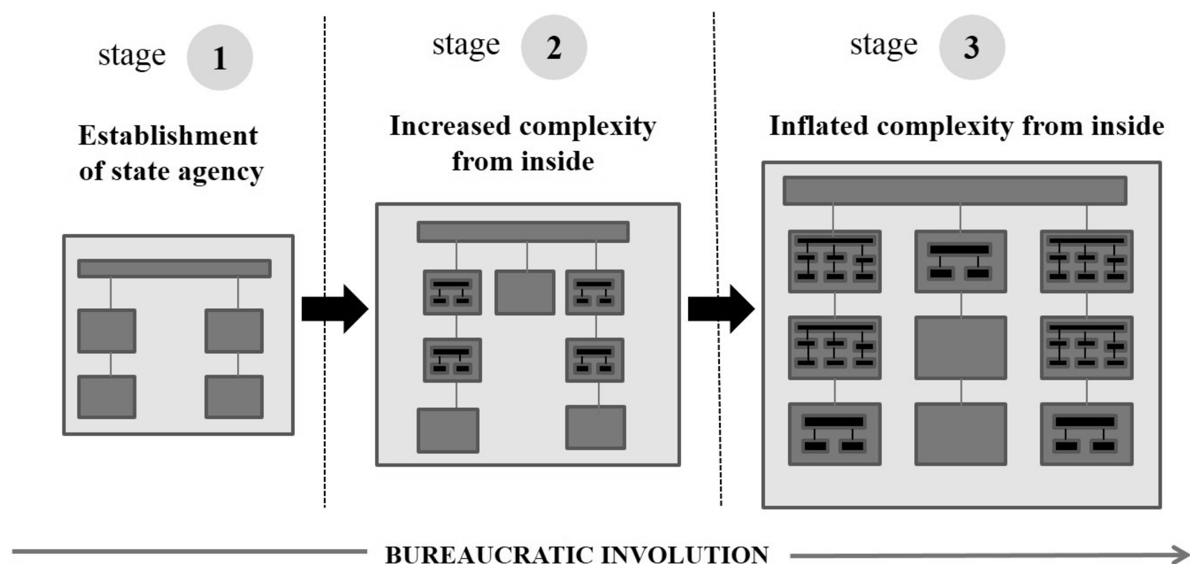

Chart 3: Sequences of bureaucratic involution (source: author).

Out of Control: Bureaucratic Expansion and Administrative Fragmentation

Structural changes at the central level were followed by comparable measures taken at sub-national scales, namely in the provinces, districts and communes. One result of the various sequences of involution is that new opportunities for entering state service were generated and the possibility for promotion grew. Drawing on bureaucratic involution alone, however, would fall too short of explaining the immense numerical growth in state officials at sub-national levels over the past 10 years. Apparently, other even more pervasive forces were at work to fuel growth at sub-national scales, as illustrated in the following analysis.

Since the socialist state came into being, administrative boundaries, whether provincial, district or commune, have been in a constant state of flux. In 2013, Vietnam administratively consisted of 64 provinces and

cities.[17] 35 years earlier, in 1978 (two years after the North and South reunited), the country comprised merely 38 provinces (Kerkvliet 2004: 5). This process of re-drawing boundaries reached an apogee in the 1990s, when more than 13 provinces were split up within a single decade. Thayer (1995: 55), analysing these changes, argued that the fear of losing control over powerful provinces caused Hanoi to break them into smaller units. Whether this interpretation holds true, or the increase of provinces is better ascribed to Parkinsonisation, is difficult to tell. However, there is no doubt that the apparatus and its administrative landscape has become fragmented over the past decades, leaving behind an immense administrative patchwork. Similar tendencies are observable at the district scale, where the rearrangement of administrative boundaries raised the number of districts from 600 in 1997 up to 689 in 2011. This corresponds to a 16 percent increase in 14 years. At the commune level, the lowest administrative scale, the number of units increased by seven percent—from 10,331 to 11,121 communes over the same time period.[18] Each time an administrative unit is split, additional state agencies, party organs and mass organisations come to life, and along with this come staff transfers, promotion opportunities into higher positions and the recruitment of fresh staff to occupy vacant or newly created positions. Considering only the provinces that have been established since 1978, this accounts for 25 new provincial People's Committees, 25 Departments of Finance, 25 Departments of Trade and Industry, 25 Departments of Agriculture and Rural Development, 25 provincial/municipal Party Committees, 25 provincial/municipal Famer's Unions, 25 Women's Unions, to name but a few organisations.

Given the fact the Vietnam's population increased from 50 to almost 90 million over the same time, one could ascribe this process of sub-division to demographic changes. In this perspective, the state grew in order to keep step with the provision of public services to its citizens. When and under what conditions administrative units are rearranged is defined by a set of government regulations. These regulations are based on criteria, such as socio-economic development indicators, population density, ethnic composition and land size of jurisdictions, coupled with topographic and geographic parameters for different regions of the country, such as highlands, deltas or coastal plains. Moreover, the urban and rural divide also plays a role (Government of Vietnam 2007). Decisions over whether to sub-divide, nevertheless, are not necessarily bound to these regulations:

> Instead of merging administrative units, localities strive to split up. This is fuelling the steady growth and expansion of administrative entities in terms of numbers […] in some areas,

> the local population is declining due to migration into urban areas, local governments still opt for establishing new administrative entities instead of merging them (Saigon Times 23 April 2011, translation by author).

This quote critically hints at arbitrariness of restructuring measures. Merging and splitting administrative units, apparently, is not necessarily a matter of scientific evidence-based decision making. Rather, as the author would argue, it is the result of an uncontrolled, self-dynamic process that lies beyond the regulatory power of the centralised state. Around the turn of the millennium, Koh (2001) pointed to various weaknesses of the central state, while Pike (2000) and Thayer (1995) highlighted the informally decentralised nature of Vietnam's bureaucratic apparatus. More recently, decentralisation policies, many of which are linked to PAR, have relocated power over administrative arrangements and personnel issues to the provincial authorities (Fritzen 2006), while monitoring and control mechanisms, both within and outside the state apparatus, have remained absent or dysfunctional. Consequently, bureaucratic expansion often managed to remain unnoticed and beyond the reach of development agencies and central state bodies in Hanoi that were overseeing the reform process. As a result, instead of streamlining the state machinery and rationalising workflows, the continuous fragmentation and sub-division of administrative landscapes has brought about just the opposite. With a constantly growing number of administrative units involved in any kind of planning, decision-making, and policy implementation, the coordination of activities has become more complex and disordered. This, for instance, is manifested in the management of natural resources, such as land and water, or infrastructure development, where instead of pooling forces and resources to make use of synergies and potentials, local planning remains isolated and fragmented (Waibel 2010: 17–18).

Self-management as Bureaucratic Routine: Creating (Unnecessary) Work for Each Other

Creating unnecessary work for each other is, as outlined earlier, a major driver of Parkinsonisation. Vietnam is no exception in this sense. Despite the formal departure from central planning more than two decades ago, statism and bureaucratic managerialism have largely prevailed as key features in post-Renovation Vietnam. Now as then, exhaustive planning procedures drawing on bottom-up reporting (*báo cáo*) coupled with rigid top-down implementation lie at the heart of what constitutes the

bureaucratic work routine in Vietnam. Formally, state-directed planning is a key element for the managerial-paternalistic regime to claim political legitimacy. Planning is omnipresent and the planning agenda gradually has extended with each new problem emerging in public discourse and, eventually, being absorbed by the managerial state.[19] There is abundance of planning documents including long-term plans (*quy hoạch*), such as master plans and 10-year sectoral plans, as well as short term plans covering periods of five years and annual plans (*kế hoạch*). Closely connected to this phenomenon is the bureaucratic legacy of what previously was called the "application and grant"[20] mechanism. Although formally removed, vestiges of this process persist in rigid state planning, budgeting and (top-down) resource allocation. Apart from directives, plans, strategies, circulars and reports moving back and forth within the apparatus, meetings and workshops, and an increasing number of steering boards (*ban chỉ đạo*) also act as major interfaces through which communication is conducted between state management agencies, party organs, mass organisations, research facilities, security forces and other branches of the party state.

Against this background, it is not surprising that the growing number of administrative units and state agencies creates additional work in the form of reports, planning documents, meetings and workshops and that this owes to the ever-increasing complexity of organisational structures, reporting mechanisms and a growing number of planning procedures that need to be linked up with each other. Hence, bureaucratic expansion and involution in tandem have contributed greatly to the numerical explosion of governmental meetings, workshops and to the exhaustive reporting and planning culture. In 2008, a series of articles in a national newspaper investigated the phenomenon:

> According to the Department of Construction of Ho Chi Minh City, the department has received 814 invitation letters to meetings at ministerial as well as municipal level, as well as to state management departments at the district level during the first six months of the year [2008]. Half of these invitation letters came from the city's administration. In the meantime, the department itself has issued not less than 455 invitations to other state management agencies at the district level for joint meetings. Hence, the Ho Chi Minh City Department of Construction had to attend a total of 1,270 meetings within six months. This would be 10 meetings per day on average, not including the department internal meetings (Tuổi Trẻ 4 August 2008, translation by author).

State bureaucrats, specifically senior staff, are heavily burdened by the attendance at meetings and workshops, which according to the newspaper investigation accounts for 70 to 80 percent of their weekly working hours (Tuổi Trẻ 4 August 2008). In this sense, the managerial bureaucracy appears to be largely occupied with managing itself. Whether at the national or sub-national level, such bureaucratic meeting marathons are being organised daily, and are indicative of the Weberian rationality of state management, policy making and development planning. The communication typical for these kind of events, however, is somewhat vague, superficial and ambiguous, fraught with "empty signifiers" and "stereotypical phrases," as MacLean documented (2013: 187). Reports and plans, whether written or orally presented, score poorly in terms of contents. There is a lack of precise evaluation of what has been done, while statements of what will be done next remain vague. Plans and reports appear to be mere rhetorical exercises aiming to produce images of commitment and responsiveness by drawing on mobilising metaphors and truisms formed around terms such as renovate (*đổi mới*), reform (*cải cách*), overcome (*khắc phục*), modernise (*hiện đại hóa*), drastic solutions (*giải pháp quyết liệt*), decisive action (*quyết tâm hánh động*), increase (*tăng lên*), serving the people (*phục vụ nhân dân*), just to mention a few of the most common. Planning and reporting are ends in themselves. Ultimately, it is the process that counts, not the outcome. Therefore, meetings and workshops within the apparatus are best taken as a ritualised enactment with bureaucrats as the protagonist and government premises as the stage. This is, as Reis (2012: 161) claims, the formal sphere of Vietnam's bureaucratic state, in which images of merit-based officialdom aim to exhibit an aura of rational administration in the Weberian sense—a bureaucracy that only exists to serve the people. Looking backstage, however, reveals a very different picture, as the next section will elucidate.

BEYOND IMAGES OF WEBERISATION: CULTURAL IDEOLOGY, STRATEGIC INTERESTS AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

The Persistence of Informal Institutions: Cultural Ideology of Patronage and Cronyism

How the state would like to be seen, as both Gainsborough (2005: 16) and Reis (2012: 161) have depicted in Vietnam, does not necessarily coincide with what bureaucrats actually do and how they behave. As will be shown in this section, which is concerned with everyday administrative culture and

bureaucratic behaviour, social and moral institutions rooted in traditional culture, norms and values have largely undermined and hollowed out formal institutional interventions made in the context of PAR.

Although Weberian-style bureaucracy in the sense of rational administration has existed in Vietnam far longer than in Europe, traditionally administration and politics have been pervaded by informality and systems of patronage. Adages are plentiful in the Vietnamese language. The idiom, "If one becomes a mandarin, the whole lineage asks for favours"[21] is perhaps the most prominent one hinting at cronyism and favouritism inherent in the country's political and administrative culture, both past and present. Commonly referred to as an umbrella (*ô du*) in Vietnamese, informal institutions forming around favouritism, cronyism and patronage have traditionally shaped social structures and the way people interact with each other. As Pike (2000: 273) claims, people in Vietnam have a strong faith in the power and rightness of personalised networks as a means of coping with problems and gaining opportunity. Such informal institutions are governed by mutual trust, a moral commitment based on (equal) taking and giving (Gillespie 2001; Beresford 2008: 234), many of which last from cradle to grave. State officials and cadres are subject to them just as anybody else in society. The following quote by Gainsborough captures what is conceived as morally right behaviour, an attitude that fundamentally differs from Weberian ideals of bureaucracy as formulated in PAR:

> In relation to the tendency to pay attention to servicing one's patronage network rather than working for some notion of the public good, the argument is that in the Vietnamese system, looking after those in your immediate circle or patronage network is regarded as the culturally right thing to do. In fact, not to do so, would be viewed as behaving badly (Gainsborough et al. 2009: 380).

Disproportionately powerful, and saturated by socio-cultural norms and values, informal institutions reign supreme over any formal institution enshrined in laws, regulations and policies. The Vietnamese government and its international development partners, however, seem blind to these social realities when assessing the challenges to PAR. After all, in the mainstream development policy discourse, as illustrated by Ferguson long time ago (1994), bureaucracy is still mistaken for a neutral, unitary and effective machine bound to laws and the strict implementation of policies and plans, and governed by no other interest except for serving the public

good. By entirely depoliticising reforms, policy implementation gaps are then blamed on formal institutional weaknesses such as improper law enforcement, lack of financial resources, poor organisation and the lack of capacity within the state apparatus. These, however, are not the actual root causes of sluggish reform, but merely represent the symptoms of something more deeply ingrained in informal institutions. More training, better laws and improved organisational arrangements, which are usually prescribed by development partners in consensus with the Vietnamese government, are unlikely to be effective measures for strengthening formal institutions if the limited potential to unfold in their cultural environment is not addressed.

Behind Potemkin Walls, or Under Opaque Umbrellas

The promotion of merit-based civil service provides an illustrative case of the limitations of overly formal interventions. In general, despite having created rules, regulations and procedures to guide examination-based recruitment and promotion, career prospects have largely remained subject to the primacy of informal institutions. Diverging from what is stipulated in the Law on Civil Servants,[22] vacant positions are rarely announced publicly and recruitment modes are neither open nor transparent, let alone competitive. In the absence of clear job requirements, what counts most are personalised relations and the amount of money one is willing to invest in purchasing a chair (Gainsborough 2005: 27).[23] For the time being, there is little evidence that formal requirement of professional qualifications has been successful in doing away with informal practices and the underlying cultural ideology of patronage and cronyism (Poon et al. 2009: 217; Bauer 2011: 55). For applicants ineligible on the basis of merit, there are many means of bargaining for one's place, many of which border on deception. "In-service" university programmes,[24] hiring ghost-writers for completing a thesis, or the outright purchase or counterfeit of university degrees have become parts of the solution (*Tuổi Trẻ* 27 June 2011). Dubious PhDs earned in less than a year, academic titles from abroad without knowing a word of foreign language, or whole cohorts of commune cadres with faked high school degrees are only some of countless anecdotes commonplace in Vietnam's meritocratic turn (Tuổi Trẻ 20 April 2009, 8 June 2011, 26 July 2010, 28 July 2010). Adding to this, Pike (2000: 276) points to the exclusivity of government organisations and the narrow scope of recruitment, in which those in control tend to recruit from their own ranks. This is compounded by the trend that access to state service has become somewhat locked up due to declining social mobility (Benedikter 2014: 138). Apart from the moral duties towards their own networks, maintaining

and diversifying one's patronage systems are vital ingredients for an advanced career in state service. They enlarge one's power base, help to move up the ladder, and provide protection against rivals and hostile networks (Gainsborough 2007). Each time a new department is founded or an administrative unit is split, informal networks are activated in order to fill new space through promotion and additional staff recruitment. Against this backdrop, policies designed to streamline the apparatus, which invariably suggest staff dismissals, are condemned to fail as long as the whole apparatus is pervaded by a web of personalised relations based on reciprocity. No superior would ever be willing, or even be morally able, to dismiss subordinates to whom he or she is bound by any form of kinship, cronyism and patronage. Moreover, it would be rather difficult, if not impossible, because dismissing subordinates who invested considerable amounts of private assets for their own recruitment or promotion would be reluctant to lose chair they are sitting on.

Collectively driven, bureaucratic involution has provided a way out of the dilemma. Staff do not permanently need to drop out of the system; they can be kept on by shifting them back and forth until new and suitable positions are found or created deliberately. Said differently, unnecessary work is constantly created in order to maintain and create new departments and administrative units. Over coffee, the director of a provincial state agency said that about half of his staff is incapable of performing their actual tasks due to insufficient or mismatched qualifications. Without any assignments that they can accomplish, such workers' sense of duty is narrowed to their physical presence at the workstation, rather than their performance. Nevertheless, as the director explained, there is nothing he could do about this because replacing them with others is infeasible, because higher approval would be needed by those who had placed them there for good reasons.[25] While employed as an advisor in a ministerial agency in Hanoi,[26] the author made similar observations. The department in which the author worked comprised nine staff, each of which, according to the department's formal delineation, was ascribed a certain field of expertise that came with clear responsibilities. Apart from sitting in workshops and conferences, most of which were sponsored by donors, the department as a whole was largely dormant. Behind the Potemkin walls of bureaucratic effectiveness, most of the staff spent their office hours in leisure, reading novels, surfing the internet, chatting, drinking coffee or simply sleeping, albeit with a remarkably high sense of discipline in terms of sticking to prescribed office hours. In sharp contrast to this everyday reality, the frequent documentation and reporting by the department drew the opposite picture. On paper, every single staff member was performing multiple tasks

on various projects that were both nationally and internationally sponsored. The language deployed in these reports was broad, fuzzy and vague. Although details on activities and results achieved were not forthcoming, the department was reportedly described as swamped with work and chronically understaffed. Deliberate misreporting aimed to bulk up funding to enable the recruitment of additional staff to deal with growing amounts of illusionary work. This situation was well known, but understood as somewhat normal throughout the agency. Most department staff were said to maintain personal ties to the directors, both of whom originate from the same province and spent considerable time studying together in Eastern Europe during the socialist era. Recruitment followed kinship or, more indirectly, patronage, the latter becoming important when considering the appointment or advancement of siblings and other relatives of high-ranking ministerial officials to whom the directors were bound to for their own career.[27] Speaking to consequences of these phenomena, a recent evaluation estimated that the proportion of redundant and unproductive workers who were employed just to sit under their "umbrellas" without performing any actual tasks accounted for 30 percent of the entire civil service, with another 50 percent considered unqualified (*Tuổi Trẻ* 7 November 2014).

Self-serving Interests and Modes of Appropriation

In pre-Renovation Vietnam, embarking on a career as a cadre, whether in a state-owned business or administration, was desirable as it provided benefits such as lifetime job security, a stable income, social prestige and many means of accumulating wealth (Porter 1993: 62). This impression still holds true today although current remuneration schemes have fallen far behind the reality of living standards (Painter 2006: 337). Salaries in public service lag far behind what would actually be needed to make a living for oneself, let alone a whole family.[28] Recent attempts to adjust the public salary system have been counteracted by high inflation, rising consumer prices and, above all, an ever increasing number of individuals on the government's payroll (a consequence of Parkinsonisation). Patronage and cronyism in conjunction with inadequate payment is perhaps the main driver of Parkinsonisation because new state positions can still be financed cheaply out of state coffers. In response to chronic underpayment, it is somewhat normal for state officials to minimally attend to their duties, while devoting much more energy and time to generating additional income. Since the one-party state came into being, the necessity of informal income generation among state officials has steadily become institutionalised; it is now largely taken for granted and societally accepted. Found within the complicated patchwork of

income sources, in which the official salary only accounts for a fraction of monthly earnings, bureaucrats have collectively created and institutionalised remuneration schemes that often draw on patronage networks and cronyism (Painter 2006). This includes a range of supplements such as allowances, per diems and other bonus payments, as well as sources more informal in nature, which can be collectively and individually appropriated. The enormous number of meetings and workshops, most of which remain rhetorical exercises without any concrete outcomes, make sense in this light, as they function as a means for allocating state funds and ODA[29] among members of the bureaucracy. It turns out that coming together for countless meetings is by no means irrational and ineffective. What counts here, however, is only to a lesser extent the precise outcome, and to a larger extent the mere implementation as an end in itself that allows for redistribution and accumulation through sitting allowances, travel expenses and money redirected through irregular accounting procedures (*Tuổi Trẻ* 5 August 2008).

In addition to this, and certainly more critical nowadays, are the multiple forms of systemic corruption and other rent-seeking behaviours that have increased in intensity and complexity along with the country's capitalist transformation. The margins available through informal appropriation typically fall behind basic needs and expectations. Civil servants, especially those in higher positions, consider themselves middle and upper class, obliged to pursue corresponding lifestyles and material consumption, often including aspirations for modern housing, cars, expensive smartphones and other commodities that are actually unaffordable with official salaries.[30] To deal with this dilemma, the transition from state to market has fostered a new commercial culture of administration that is virtually without limitations in terms of the ingenuity of bureaucrats and their "umbrellas" to capitalise on their authority in order to generate private income. Running private firms under the names of relatives and straw men, renting out public property for personal gain, land grabbing in the context of fuzzy property regimes, collecting informal levies, capitalising on insider information, or collecting kickbacks are only some of many means of privatising the assets of holding a public office (Painter 2006: 335–336). As a consequence, decision making in policy and planning is not necessarily governed by Weberian rationality, but often by self-serving aspirations embedded in collective action. Boundaries between public office and private interests have become deliberately blurred due to the myriad of new possibilities for wealth accumulation brought about by the market (Greenfield 1993; Gainsborough 2003). The aforementioned construction boom of public buildings and infrastructure need to be

understood in this light, namely driven by the nexus of bureaucratic business interests, crony capitalism, corruption and bid-rigging, which reign supreme in the soaring public investment sector (Benedikter 2014: 183–265). With no clear distinction between what is public and what is private, the "office has not been kept separate from the person" (Painter 2006: 13 cited in Gainsborough 2005: 13). Consequently, the way the civil service behaves contradicts the image of the bureaucracy that it wishes to produce. Calling the events of the past decades a "meritocratic turn" or "good governance," is merely playing out scripts from PAR and Weberisation in order to distract from backstage realities.

CONCLUSION: RETHINKING BUREAUCRACY AND REFORMS

This paper critically reflected on administrative reforms and the nature of bureaucracy in Vietnam through a sociological approach to institutional interventions. Analytically, this proceeded by looking at different trajectories of bureaucratisation, namely Weberisation, Parkinsonisation and Orwellisation, consulted for tracing reform outputs and change. It was illustrated that the combination of Orwellisation and Parkinsonisation prevailed after Vietnam's Leninist state came into being, and Weberisation gained relevance only in the wake of Renovation Policy (*Đổi mới*)—more specifically due to the necessity of administrative and public service reforms. Behind the imperative of creating rational and efficient structures of administration and governance, and promoting accountability, donors and Vietnam's bureaucratic elite comprehend differently the broader prospects of PAR. For the international donor community, PAR has become an instrument for directing Vietnam towards Western-dominated, normative "good governance" rationales and more economic deregulation, while Vietnam's bureaucratic elite increasingly understands PAR, and Weberisation as a cultural impetus to revitalise Neo-Confucian values expressing in meritocratic concepts of rule. The latter has become the new locus for developing alternative modes of claiming political legitimacy in the post-socialist era of transition towards more performance-based legitimacy and meritocratic style of administration. However, regardless of these different perceptions, ultimately, the Weberisation brought about by PAR and the respective institutional interventions have remained an illusory phenomenon—a paper tiger with little potential to unfold in real life despite continued capacity building, training and improved regulatory frameworks. To phrase this more drastically: PAR predominantly helps the superficial

image of the managerial state and its meritocratic bureaucracy to sustain the current political regime and social order. Beyond this formal sphere, however, Parkinsonisation and Orwellisation prevail as key features shaping bureaucratisation within Vietnam's enduring authoritarian and unicentric system of governance.

Since the very beginning of reform policy, Weberisation has merely existed as a vision or ideal, one which is continuously captured and hollowed out by the power and societal supremacy of informal institutions embedded in cultural ideologies, traditional values and norms. The traditional commitment of state officials to moral and cultural institutions forming around kinship, cronyism and patronage clashes fundamentally with notions of a merit-based bureaucracy featuring personal accountability, transparency and competitive promotion/recruitment. Going one step further, decision-making within the state machinery has come to be less about legal-rational analysis and scientific-rational procedures, and more about how to best sustain and serve patronage networks. The result is an administrative culture that barely distinguishes between public office and private life, which is, in fact, one of the key prerequisites in Weberian bureaucracy. Nevertheless, this does not imply irrationality, but rather demands a change in perspective to one that is able to see rationality and goal-orientation in the Vietnamese socio-cultural context of bureaucracy. Overstaffing, low salaries in public service, departmentalism, administrative sub-division, bureaucratic expansion, increasing organisational complexity, and an inflated meeting culture are, by this token, not symptoms of inefficiency, but rather point at a view of efficiency based on its own rationality and goal-orientation. Hence, the countless workshops and meetings, in the first place, serve the redistribution of material resources, and second, the creation of images of Weberian bureaucracy committed to rational policy making and development planning. This is a rationality that well serves the collective interests of the bureaucratic polity, a strategic-group pervaded by informal arrangements that collectively strive for appropriating, monopolising and redistributing scarce resources in a society with limited opportunities. Therefore, a bureaucracy that is often termed sluggish, slow and complex could, in its own terms, can also be described as innovative and creative, if one of the actual goals is organisational expansion and growth. Unsurprisingly, hence, it is Parkinsonisation that stands out most prominently in Vietnam's post-Renovation process of bureaucratisation. As documented in this paper, the past 20 years have, in spite of PAR, witnessed the increasing complexity of state structures, fattening of the bureaucracy and muddling of administrative procedures. Compounded by the present economic difficulties, this tendency is likely to

continue as long as official salaries in public office remain so low that absorbing additional staff is not a question of cost. Although formal criticism is sometimes expressed by politicians and the media, fragmenting the state apparatus is not necessarily perceived a bad thing, but rather as something morally justified, as it provides jobs, social security and opportunities to fulfil societal commitments and serve one's patronage network. Continuous recruitment and the accumulation of administrative authority and power, which can be capitalised for generating private income to augment low official salaries, allows the pie to be continually split, thereby feeding an ever enlarging cohort of state officials. If one considers bureaucracy a social-cultural phenomenon, resistance to public service reforms stems from the persistence of informal institutions based on routines, behaviours, norms, values and worldviews that do not match the principles embedded in "good governance" nor Weberian bureaucracy as anchored in Western-dominated development paradigms and policy models. Orwellisation, sustained by enduring one-party authoritarianism, provides the social order under which the civil service, as a strategic group, finds the best conditions for appropriating resources and expanding in terms of power and the number of followers.

NOTES

[*] Since 2014, Simon Benedikter works as a researcher and adviser in the field of environmental change and natural resources governance in Hanoi, Vietnam. Prior to that (2007–2013), he served as a senior researcher at the Center for Development Research (ZEF), University of Bonn, Germany. Being based in the Vietnamese Mekong Delta during that time, he was engaged in a wide range of social science research activities on water governance, rural development and environmental issues. He holds a Diploma in Southeast Asian Studies and a PhD in Development Studies, both from Bonn University. He is the author of the book *The Vietnamese Hydrocracy and the Mekong Delta: Water Resources Development from State Socialism to Bureaucratic Capitalism* (2014). His current research interests are concerned with the political and social dimension of ecological change and critical development studies focusing on Vietnam.

[1] *Kinh tế thị trường định hướng xã hội chủ nghĩa.*

[2] *Đổi mới* was promulgated during the VI Congress of the VCP in 1986 in response to a severe economic and political crisis facing Vietnam in the 1980s caused by the failures of central planning, increased international isolation and dwindling support by the Soviet Union.

[3] This term is borrowed from Porter's (1993) analysis of Vietnam's regime in the 1990s.

[4] In the countryside, where the bulk of Vietnam's population lives, livelihoods, directly or indirectly, remain reliant on agriculture, forestry and fishery. Non-farm businesses sufficiently large to stimulate labour markets, the bulk of which are either state-owned

or foreign-owned, are limited to metropolitan areas. Domestic private business, in comparison, which includes establishments in rural areas, essentially consists of subsistence-oriented enterprises—mostly self-run or family-run micro enterprises with little effect on additional job creation (World Bank 2005; Benedikter et al. 2013; World Bank 2013: 35).

[5] Annual GDP growth remained above nine percent in the mid-1990s but, since 2008, has dropped to about five percent (data according to IMF and ADB). According to Vietnam's Central Institute of Economic Management (CIEM), with 5.98 percent GDP growth in 2014, Vietnam came last in the Greater Mekong Subregion (Tuổi Trẻ 12 February 2015).

[6] Regarding the enduring economic crisis and its political implications on the one-party regime, see Le Hong Hiep's (2013) analysis of performance-based legitimacy of autocratic one-party rule in Vietnam.

[7] According to the Vietnam General Statistics Office, the number of state officials in Hanoi is at one million, while the city's population is approximately seven million. This makes the state by far the largest employer in Vietnam's political capital.

[8] Annually, Vietnam's bureaucracy produces not less than about 600 circulars (*thông tư*), 100 decisions (*nghị định*) and a few thousand other official (legal) documents (*công văn*) that are to be implemented by different state agencies at various administrative scales (Tuổi Trẻ 12 February 2015).

[9] The author wishes to thank Hans-Dieter Evers and Gabi Waibel for commenting on earlier drafts of this paper.

[10] This is based on informal talks and observations made by the author over the past eight years of doing research in Vietnam.

[11] http://www.un.org/en/globalissues/governance/ (accessed 04 June 2014).

[12] This term was borrowed from Thayer (1995).

[13] This refers to Fukuyama (1992) and his hypothesis that with the collapse of the Soviet Unions, Western-like capitalism, in combination with democracy, would prevail as the paramount development model globally.

[14] In 2011, PAR was extended for a second phase, lasting from 2011 to 2020 (Government of Vietnam 2011).

[15] Local government structures adhere to tiered subordination. Each province has line departments (*sở*) which are linked to the respective ministry in Hanoi, while at the same time being subordinated to its provincial People's Committee in a horizontal direction. The same structures apply at the next lower level, where district offices (*phòng*) report to the district People's Committee and the respective provincial department in equal measure. The Ministry of Health, for instance, is linked to the provincial Departments of Health, and the latter oversees all district Offices of Health within a given province.

[16] Geertz describes how Javanese paddy farmer communities coped with a subsistence crisis of extreme severity when the Dutch colonial administration occupied agricultural land previously under paddy production and subjected people to an exploitative system of sugarcane production. At the same time as demographic pressure was increasing, possibilities for land reclamation were declining. In response, communities managed to intensify production on less land, which allowed for a stable per capita paddy output. This was achieved by an inward-oriented

development of traditional rural institutions, which led to more social complexity but secured subsistence along moral economic ideas of shared poverty (Geertz 1963).

[17] This refers to cities under direct management of the central government (*thành phố trực thuộc Trung Ương*), which have an administrative status equal to provinces.

[18] Data from on the General Statistics Office of Vietnam (GSO).

[19] The total number of plans to be drafted, adopted and implemented by the state apparatus across its different administrative scales is immense, exceeding 19,000 for the time period 2011 to 2020, as the Vietnam's Ministry of Planning and Investment recently estimated. This includes not only land use plans or infrastructure development plans, but also more than 3,000 production plans for the industrial and agricultural sector (Saigon Time 6 June 2014).

[20] This refers to the Vietnamese phrase *cơ chế xin cho*, describing top-down resource allocation as rigidly applied in the era of central planning.

[21] *Một người làm quan cả hộ được nhờ.*

[22] According to Vietnam's civil service codex, the recruitment and promotion of civil servants must be carried out along examination-based, competitive, transparent qualification-oriented and objective procedures (National Assembly of Vietnam 2008).

[23] To provide an additional example of the many cases that exist: in 2013, it was revealed by the media that a high-ranking central official promoted about 60 cadres into higher positions under dubious conditions. Notably, this took place in the six month prior to his retirement (Tuổi Trẻ 4 March 2013).

[24] In-service programmes (*đại học tại chức*) are being offered by universities and colleges using simplified curricula, which allow civil servants to obtain Bachelor of Arts (BA) or Master of Arts (MA) qualifications quickly and with minimal effort, while continue to work in their agencies.

[25] This is on the basis of informal talks in 2012 and 2013 in the Mekong Delta region. The name of the agency is withheld by the author in order to guarantee anonymity to the informant.

[26] In 2014, the author was an advisor to an institute, the name of which will be withheld.

[27] Confirming this, Zink (2013: 161–162) found that many government offices in Vietnam, especially in Hanoi, are populated by staff coming from to two to three extended kinship networks, including different generations (senior and junior staff).

[28] While working in Hanoi for a governmental agency at the central administrative scale, junior staff of the author's department officially earned about VND 3 million per month (around USD 140), which is even below the threshold of income taxation. When conducting field work in the Mekong Delta in 2010, the author learnt that newly recruited staff in provincial agencies earned about VND 1.2 million (USD 60).

[29] The bulk of grants and loans provided is assumed to be spent differently from its intended purpose, with the majority ending up in the informal cash economy of the civil service. See Zink (2013: 230) for the example of ODA destined for combating climate change impacts in Vietnam. During the time the author worked for a ministerial agency in Hanoi, which managed extensive donor funding, the author witnessed how frequently (especially before Vietnamese New Year) money that was sequestered from different projects was distributed among staff in envelops as salary augments in amounts exceeding official monthly salaries by many times.

[30] These observations were made while the author was working as an advisor in a ministerial agency in Hanoi. Most of the author's colleagues, for instance, possessed expensive smart phones, tablets, laptops, etc. Some even came to work by their privately owned cars.

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