

**Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858-1954*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2010.**

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Both Professors of Contemporary History at University Paris VII-Denis Diderot and specialists of Ho Chi Minh<sup>1</sup>, Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery were among the first scholars to work in the Indochinese colonial archives (after 1920) following their opening in the early 1980s<sup>2</sup>. Written in memory of Jean Chesneaux and Georges Boudarel, and translated by Ly Lan Dill-Klein, with Eric Jennings, Nora Taylor, and Noémi Tousignant, *Indochine: La colonisation ambiguë (1858-1954)* (Paris: La Découverte, 2001) is now available not only in English but also in an updated version (enhanced by a precious select bibliography, p. 447-466). An excellent piece of news for non-French-speaking students, scholars, and general readers interested in the region, in the Vietnam War, and in French imperialism, among other topics. Combining new approaches with a groundbreaking historical synthesis, this accessible work is the most thorough and up-to-date general history of French Indochina. Unique in its wide-ranging attention to economic, social, intellectual, and cultural dimensions, it is the first book to treat Indochina's *entire* history, from its inception in Cochinchina in 1858 to its crumbling at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 and on to decolonization. Basing their account on original research as well as on the most recent scholarship, Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery tell this story from a perspective that is neither Eurocentric nor nationalistic but that carefully considers the positions of both the colonizers and the colonized. Thus the work skillfully avoids nationalist, colonialist, and anticolonialist historiographies. With this approach, the authors are able to move beyond descriptive history into a nuanced exploration of the complexities of the French colonial period in Indochina (1858-1954). Rich in themes and ideas, their account also sheds new light on the national histories of the emerging nation-states of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, making this book essential, instructive and stimulating reading.

Built in eight chronological-thematic chapters (The Colonial Moment: The Making of French Indochina, 1858-1897; The Structures of Domination; Colonial Capitalism and Development, 1858-1940; Colonial Society: The Colonizers and the Colonized; Cultural Transformations; The Impasses of Colonial Development; Resistance, Nationalism, and Social Movements, 1900-1939; The Decline and Fall of the French Empire in the Far East), the book includes sixty very useful maps, graphs and tables, and eleven documentary appendices (sources and tables). Readers will find rich information on and analyses of the whole aspects of the making of the colonial

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<sup>1</sup> Hémery Daniel, *Hô Chi Minh: De l'Indochine au Vietnam*, Paris: Gallimard, 1990; Brocheux Pierre, *Ho Chi Minh: A Biography*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007: [http://centre-histoire.sciences-po.fr/centre/groupe/histoire\\_colonisations.html](http://centre-histoire.sciences-po.fr/centre/groupe/histoire_colonisations.html), 24 novembre 2010.

<sup>2</sup> « La France et l'Indochine », *La Fabrique de l'Histoire* (France Culture), <http://www.franceculture.com/emission-la-france-et-l-indochine-44-2009-05-14.html>, 14 mai 2009.

experience in Indochina and its unraveling along national lines. Much more than a simple *histoire événementielle* or a “textbook”, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization* proposes a distanced and balanced approach. Brocheux and Hémery argue that the colonial period was more than just a fleeting moment or an artificial stage in the history of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia; it was also a crucial period of historical change and interaction, and an integral component of French and postcolonial Indochinese pasts. Moreover, the authors articulated this argument at a time when nostalgic and nationalist-minded French writers and associations were trying to recast colonial history as the record of a benevolent, civilizing project. Brocheux and Hémery emphasized instead the “ambiguous” nature of the colonial experience, the complexity of the colonial encounter<sup>3</sup>, and the diverse nature of the multiple interactions between colonized and colonizers. In what way was the French colonization of Indochina “ambiguous”? Daniel Hémery confided that the final choice of the title, using the term “ambiguous”, was inspired by Georges Balandier’s *Afrique ambiguë*<sup>4</sup>. Hémery and Brocheux were equally influenced by Paul Mus’ work on Vietnamese nationalism and French colonialism<sup>5</sup>. “Ambiguity” marked an important shift in French colonial historiography on Indochina and set it on a track different from the more Saidian-inspired works of the time<sup>6</sup>.

Second title in the series *From Indochina to Vietnam: Revolution and War at a Global Perspective* directed by Fredrik Logevall (Cornell University) and Christopher E. Goscha (Université du Québec, Montréal) for the University of California Press, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization* provides a better understanding of the decolonization of French Indochina and the emergence of modern nation-state of Vietnam. It examines the nature of the Vietnamese revolution and the war that accompanied it. Furthermore, Brocheux and Hémery situate the history of Indochina within its local, regional, and global dimensions between 1858 and 1954. This is a very rare work of interpretative synthesis. Thanks to Brocheux and Hémery, readers will be better equipped to tackle in new ways those less studied elements that this series seeks to bring to light. The original French book has been followed in omitting diacritics for Vietnamese words. However, interested readers will find a list of Vietnamese proper nouns used in the text with full Vietnamese diacritics at the back of the book.

The book’s high ambition is to put forth the crucial project of transcending memory – a project that can only be undertaken through a history that is rigorous and critical, one that seeks to be as comprehensive as possible without eliminating narrative altogether. That is to say a problem-based history. Several choices were made to do so. First, Indochina is approached as a historical construct, not only imposed and improvised from without, but also rooted – for the entire period under study – within the tensions and dynamics of the social and anthropological space of the peninsula. This was, of course, a colonial space, but that does not mean it lacked complexity. It was the site of an intermingling that brought colonizers and colonized into

<sup>3</sup> Nicola Cooper, *France in Indochina: Colonial Encounters, 1900-1939*, New York: Berg, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Georges Balandier, *Afrique ambiguë*, Paris: Plon, 1957 (Paris: Pocket, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Paul Mus, *Viêt Nam: Sociologie d'une guerre*, Paris: Le Seuil, 1952; see David Chandler and Christopher E. Goscha eds. *L'espace d'un regard: L'Asie de Paul Mus (1902-1969)*, Paris: Les Indes savantes, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> See Daniel Rivet, « Le fait colonial et nous: Histoire d'un éloignement », *Vingtième siècle. Revue d'histoire*, no. 33, janvier-mars 1992, p. 127-138.

confrontation but also, inevitably, led to cohabitation. Indochina is also approached through its multiple dimensions and various temporalities, encompassing the long colonial period as well as the brief, violent ruptures of decolonization. Beyond these choices, what was Indochina if not a meeting – characterized by violence and exploitation, as well as the day-to-day interactions of a self-confident European society – with the peoples, systems of power, and civilizations of Southeast Asia, in search of their own identities over the troubled course of the twentieth century? This colonial contact<sup>7</sup> has often been portrayed unilaterally: on the one hand, as fundamentally civilizing, even if faulty, by the older colonial historiography; on the other, as purely dominating, repressive, and exploitative, by the various anticolonial and nationalist historiographies of the more recent past. Obviously, one must look beyond these black-and-white assessments to find the truth<sup>8</sup>. For the colonial relationship was formed through more veiled modalities; it had unforeseen consequences and hidden resonances, as difficult to grasp as they are to measure. These are evident, for instance, in the appropriation by the colonized of the innovations imposed by colonization, in the reversibility of modes of domination as soon as circumstances permitted, and in the subtle investment in these modes on the part of subjugated societies who redirected and deflected them. It is thus the ambiguity of the internal Indochinese colonial situation between “dreams and realities” as painted in the wise conclusion of the book, “Land of Lost Opportunities: Indochina Ablaze” (p. 375-379).

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Fourniau and Trinh Van Thao, eds. *Le contact colonial franco-vietnamien: Le premier demi-siècle, 1858-1911*, Aix-en-Provence: Université de Provence, 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Amaury Lorin, « Pour une histoire coloniale, circonstanciée », *H-France Review*, vol. 6 (May 2006), no. 54, <http://www.h-france.net/vol6reviews/lorin.html>.