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Martin Gainsborough's latest book *Vietnam: Rethinking the State* is a long-awaited contribution to the discussion of the role of the state in Vietnam. Gainsborough is a reader in development politics at the University of Bristol, UK, and has spent more than 20 years working and living in Vietnam as an international consultant and scholar. His analysis is consequently strongly informed by his experiences. The book itself is based on field research conducted between 1996 and 2007.

As can be inferred from the title, the book aims at grasping the nature of the Vietnamese state. Yet, Gainsborough's analysis differs from those of other scholars who analyse the state by directly focusing on the "entity we call state" (p. 3) as such. Accordingly, he claims that his analytical approach differs from Weberian approaches insofar as he does not focus on the state itself, but rather applies a wider analysis of societal power relations in order to shed light on 'the state'. Gainsborough aims to advance an understanding of the state "by studying issues to do with politics and more pertinently power" (p. 2-3). He argues that focusing on the role of various societal actors and paying attention to their historical practices allows for an embedded understanding of the state. By applying his approach to the case of Vietnam, Gainsborough aims to address two key questions: "What is the nature of the state? And what is the relationship of the state to the political?" (p. 4).

Gainsborough argues that most scholars who currently work on Vietnam tend to overemphasise the aspect of 'change' since the launch of *doi moi* (renovation) in 1986. They thereby unquestioningly accept that the changes attributed to the 'reform years', such as economic openness, private sector development, and alignment with neoliberal policies, have undermined the power of the state. As a result of his empiri-

cal analyses over the years, Gainsborough challenges such notions and makes clear that "the book is not very sympathetic towards ideas of state retreat" (p. 2). Instead, he provides a rich analysis of different empirical cases in support of his argument that the Vietnamese state has been able to maintain its central role in organising society and the economy as a whole.

Rather than focusing on the overused label of 'reform' which is often understood as a move towards liberalisation, export-oriented trade, and privatisation (or 'equitisation' as called in the case of Vietnam), and thereby evoking a loss of influence of the Vietnamese state, he questions the "unmediated advance of neoliberalism" (p. 2) on a global scale. Gainsborough's analysis evolves around the empirical observation that despite formal changes, large "areas of continuity, in form of existing power structures, elite control over the economy and particular forms of rule" remain. He argues that a major reason for this is that "power continuously seeks to re-create itself" (p. 4) and in order to understand the Vietnamese state, it is crucial to detect where power structures have been re-created in order to secure existing power relations.

Each chapter presents an analysis of a distinct feature of contemporary Vietnamese politics. The major issues around which the analysis evolves are the unchallenged role of the Communist Party, the phenomena of corruption and patronage, the process of privatisation, the impact of globalisation on Vietnam as well as the minor influence of neoliberal ideas on the Vietnamese state. Taken together, each chapter fulfils the role of a puzzle piece necessary to see the whole picture.

Gainsborough argues that the economic and social change of the past decades did not harm the rule of the Vietnamese Communist Party because it was able to secure its central role in organising the social order. He regards this as a central reason why the Communist Party continues to rule in Vietnam today.

The originality of Gainsborough's analysis especially becomes clear when he discusses the process of 'equitisation' in Vietnam. He argues that the sale of state companies does not automatically indicate a retreat of the state from the realm of economics. Instead, the decision to allow for the privatisation of state assets was accompanied in such a way that the Vietnamese Communist Party could continue to control the new owners. They used 'uncertainty' as a means to exert power, as they did not sufficiently inform the new owners about their rights and duties. Hence, the

new owners became dependent on the state authorities.

Similar to 'equitisation', the author shows that globalisation did not lead to the retreat of the state either. By assessing the impact of globalisation on the local state in provincial Vietnam, he comes to the conclusion that the increase in cross-border flows and the rise of transnational and private actors did not lead to a weaker state. Globalisation, and neoliberalism as its underlying rationale, is regarded as less influential by the author than most scholars working on Vietnam would assume. Instead, Gainsborough shows that the local state elite has been able to maintain its rule by resisting international agreements and using the new developments to enhance its power.

By analysing the party congress, Gainsborough directs the attention towards another crucial aspect of political power in Vietnam: patronage and network politics, as well as uncertainty as the *modus operandi* of power in Vietnam. The Communist Party has been able to preserve its power by remaining tacit about the actual application of rules and procedures. In this sense, uncertainty fulfils a disciplinary function in order to enhance control over the Vietnamese population.

Gainsborough's critical stance towards the argument that we have witnessed a retreat of the state in the last decades is similar to the position of leftist scholars such as J. Hirsch (*Materialistische Staatstheorie*, 2005) and L. Panitch (*Globalisation and the State*, 1994) who argue that the state has remained vital in organising institutional and economic restructuring. Nevertheless, it would have been fruitful for his analysis to widen his definition of neoliberalism. Instead of understanding neoliberalism as a homogenising force, J. Peck and A. Tickle (*Neoliberalizing Space*, 2002, p. 36), for example, speak of "neoliberalism**s**", using the plural form of the term in order to stress that different forms of neoliberalisms exist and become manifested in "hybrid or composite structures". Hence, national specificities in light of neoliberal pressures for state restructuring do not necessarily constitute a contradiction but can instead be regarded as an essential feature of how past and present struggles interact and result in heterogeneous forms of statehood.

The author's analysis is driven by his critique of mainstream accounts of the state. Therefore, he explicitly calls for a new research agenda which turns away from analyses that stress the virtue of the state in the global North only to impose a governance agenda over the global South. He draws two major implications from this position.

First, "what is presented today as offering a robust analysis of the state is nothing of the sort, and in fact is a selective, politically motivated characterization of the state" (p.185). Second, in order to arrive at a better understanding of how power is organised, it is crucial to uncover "in whose interest the state is acting" (p.186). Only by pursuing such an approach it is possible to arrive at a contextual analysis of the state.

In a nutshell, *Vietnam: Rethinking the State* is a unique account of politics and the state in Vietnam. It challenges conventional analyses by offering rich empirical investigations of state 'change' and 'continuity' in an era of globalisation.

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