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Moral Economy and the Upper Peasant: The Dynamics of Land Privatization in the Mekong Delta

TIMOTHY GORMAN

This paper examines how people mobilize around notions of distributive justice, or ‘moral economies’, to make claims to resources, using the process of post-socialist land privatization in the Mekong Delta region of southern Vietnam as a case study. First, I argue that the region’s history of settlement, production and political struggle helped to entrench certain normative beliefs around landownership, most notably in its population of semi-commercial upper peasants. I then detail the ways in which these upper peasants mobilized around notions of distributive justice to successfully press demands for land restitution in the late 1980s, drawing on Vietnamese newspapers and other sources to construct case studies of local land conflicts. Finally, I argue that the successful mobilization of the upper peasants around such a moral economy has helped, over the past two decades, to facilitate the re-emergence of agrarian capitalism in the Mekong Delta, in contrast to other regions in Vietnam.

Keywords: land reform, moral economy, social mobilization, post-socialism

INTRODUCTION

Over the summer and autumn of 1988, the Mekong Delta region of southern Vietnam was rocked by protest and social conflict. In the face of post-socialist reforms that called for the privatization of agricultural land tenure, relatively affluent farmers mobilized to demand the restitution of lands that had been taken from them and redistributed to others after Vietnam’s reunification in 1975. Across the region, these protestors engaged in land occupations, petition drives and open demonstrations at local government offices, eventually culminating in two marches on Ho Chi Minh City. In the end, this political mobilization by the Mekong Delta’s upper stratum of emergent capitalist farmers succeeded in achieving a special settlement of the land question, applicable only to that region, which allowed for the restitution of holdings to their former owners, and in turn prompted the dispossession and displacement of thousands of rural poor.

This paper seeks to explain why and how the Mekong Delta’s upper peasantry was able to successfully mobilize around deep-seated and widely-shared notions of economic and distributive justice, or what I call a ‘moral economy’, to press for the restitution of their former

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holdings.¹ In the paper, I seek, first, to ground the development of this particular moral economy in the history of settlement, production and political struggle in the Mekong Delta and, second, to show how the articulation of this moral economy has shaped not just the distribution of land, but the overall trajectory of economic and social development in the region. In doing so, I aim to fill a gap in the existing literature, providing a bridge between micro-level accounts of local politics and macro-level accounts of political and economic change, both in the Mekong Delta and in Vietnam more broadly.

The Micropolitics of Agrarian Transition

Accounts of the micro-level, 'everyday' politics of agricultural production and land allocation in northern Vietnam are relatively plentiful, with perhaps the most notable contribution being Benedict Kerkvliet's (2005) masterful account of peasant resistance to collective agriculture in the Red River Delta. Peasant resistance, for Kerkvliet, is rooted in deeply held 'sentiments' on the part of the northern peasantry, who preferred family farming and individual ownership to the collectives, and who expressed these preferences through uncoordinated and often covert acts of sabotage, theft and foot-dragging, eventually bringing down the collective system as whole. In a similar vein, those authors who have analysed the local politics of decollectivization in northern Vietnam, such as Scott (2003), Sikor (2004) and Luong (2010), have frequently described how peasants mobilized around notions of distributive equity to affect the allocation of land to individual households. Hy Van Luong (2010, 194), for example, recounts that a plan to allow better-off households in his Red River Delta study village to bid on more productive land was abandoned 'under pressure' from local farmers, who demanded 'more equality' in the allocation process, while Sikor (2004, 182) describes how villagers in a north-western village pressured cadres to enact an egalitarian redistribution more in keeping with their communitarian principles and traditional institutions.

Unfortunately, little work has been done on the local politics of land in southern Vietnam, with the notable exception of Trung Dinh Dang's recent PhD dissertation (2007), which describes how farmers in Quang Nam and An Giang provinces resisted state attempts during the late 1970s and early 1980s to reorganize production along socialist lines and redistribute land to the rural poor. His account, from which I draw extensively in this paper, is remarkable not just in that southerners resisted collectivization, but that they *also* resisted attempts to enforce a more egalitarian distribution of land, in sharp contrast to their northern counterparts. For all of its worth, however, Dang's dissertation is neither concerned with the origins of this deeply rooted attachment to private property and antipathy to egalitarian redistribution, nor does he trace the ways in which it was manifested during the process of land privatization in the late 1980s or in the two decades of rapid agricultural commercialization that followed.

Over the course of the 1990s and 2000s, the Mekong Delta emerged as a major producer of agricultural commodities for both export and domestic consumption, in sharp contrast to the more subsistence-orientated forms of production that continue to predominate in northern and central Vietnam; in recent years, the Mekong Delta has produced more than half of

¹ Throughout this paper, the term 'upper peasantry' is used to refer to a broad class of relatively well-to-do farmers, encompassing both the 'upper-middle peasant' (*trung nong tren*) and 'rich peasant' (*phu nong*) strata. These upper peasants owned larger-than-average plots of land, hired in labour (at least seasonally), and were engaged, at least partially, in the production of crops for sale rather than direct consumption. These semi-commercial farmers can be distinguished from the more subsistence-oriented lower-middle peasantry, the land-deficient poor peasantry and the rural landless (Ngo Vinh Long 1984, 289–91; Race 2010, 92).

Vietnam's total rice crop, and contributed more than 90 per cent of rice exports (Nguyen Duy Can et al. 2007, 72). While the rapid emergence of agrarian capitalism in the Mekong Delta has caught the attention of, among others, Haroon Akram-Lodhi (2005), his account of this process is curiously non-contextualized, fixating not on the region's geography, economic history or political culture – nor on ways in which these factors shaped struggles around how resources would be allocated and production organized in the post-socialist period – but on the impersonal workings of the market. Market reforms, Akram-Lodhi argues, have placed 'great pressure' on what was originally an 'apparently equitable distribution of land', leading 'processes of social differentiation [to] assert themselves, and, perhaps, a form of "capitalism from below" . . . to emerge' (2005, 108). This analysis, however, fails to provide an explanation as to why market forces would assert themselves more powerfully in the Mekong Delta than elsewhere in Vietnam, or what exactly it is about the region that has made it such fertile ground for the re-emergence of capitalist relations of production in agriculture.

This paper attempts to fill this analytical void through the use of moral economy as a theoretical frame, looking to historical patterns of settlement, relations of production and experiences of political struggle to explain how and why the Mekong Delta's upper peasants mobilized around a particular set of claims and 'moral arguments' during a key moment of political opportunity in the late 1980s. In doing so, I argue, these protestors shaped both the way in which land was eventually allocated and, ultimately, facilitated the rapid emergence of a commercial agricultural sector in the post-reform period. In particular, I use the framework of moral economy to bridge the gap between political agency and subjectivity at the micro-level and macro-level structural change, looking at the ways in which notions of distributive justice take hold within certain historical and material conditions, how these normative attachments foster collective political action and, ultimately, how they contribute to the establishment, maintenance or upheaval of systems of property and production.

Organization of the Paper

In the next section of the paper, I briefly outline the concept of 'moral economy' before surveying the modern history of the Mekong Delta, in the process tracing both the origins of the upper peasantry and of this social formation's distinct moral economy. In doing so, I pay particular attention to the region's geography, economy and history of political struggle over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I argue that the Mekong Delta's status as an agricultural frontier, the particular relations of production that predominated in the colonial and early republican periods, and the experience of political mobilization by both insurgent and state actors during the mid-to-late twentieth century all helped to shape the upper peasantry's notions of distributive justice and the arguments through which they were articulated.

In the third section, I address the theoretical concepts of grievance and political opportunity, linking these concepts to the moral economy framework. I first argue that the experience of land redistribution in the late 1970s and 1980s, after the reunification of Vietnam under socialist control, sharply deviated from the 'ideal' distribution of resources, as held by the Mekong Delta's upper-middle and rich peasants. Second, I discuss the shifting opportunity structure that characterized the Vietnamese political system in the late 1980s, arguing that leadership changes at the upper echelons of the communist party, a food crisis in northern Vietnam and an ambiguous policy environment created a uniquely advantageous moment in which relatively well-off farmers could press their land claims and seek the redress of their perceived grievance.

In the fourth section, I discuss the protests that rocked the Mekong Delta during the late 1980s, drawing on contemporary Vietnamese newspapers and other secondary sources to construct a series of detailed case studies of local land conflicts. Through these case studies, I identify the key ways in which the moral economy of the region's upper peasantry and its attendant notions of distributive justice were articulated in the context of social conflict. In particular, I discuss the ways in which notions of settlement and the frontier, appeals to productive capacity and histories of revolutionary service were used to make land claims, both against the rural poor and against representatives of the local and national state.

In the fifth and final section, I describe the resolution of these land conflicts and the enduring legacy of the moral economy around which they were articulated. I argue that the mobilization of the Mekong Delta's upper peasantry around this particular moral economy helped to shape the distribution of land and other productive resources in a way that favoured the rapid development of commercial agriculture in the region. This trajectory of post-reform development stands in sharp contrast to that of other agricultural regions in Vietnam, where a more deeply entrenched egalitarianism has slowed commercialization and accumulation.

Note on Sources

Any attempt to tell the story of local land conflicts in Vietnam, especially those to which one was not a direct witness, is limited by the scope and biases of available sources. As with Kerkvliet's study (2005) in the Red River Delta, I have attempted to reconstruct the political struggles over land that took place in the Mekong Delta during the late 1980s using contemporary newspaper accounts, in particular those of the Ho Chi Minh City-based *Tuoi Tre* and *Thanh Nien*. Despite a relative flourishing of Press freedom in the late 1980s, all newspapers were (and remain) affiliated with the Vietnamese Communist Party or one of its subsidiary organizations, and thus tend to provide accounts favourable to the party and its policies. Given the ambiguity as to what exactly the 'party line' was regarding peasant land claims during the period of study, and the relative freedom with which such metropolitan newspapers criticized local and provincial officials, these tendencies do not, thankfully, prevent the available accounts from presenting a relatively informative – and non-propagandistic – account of local land disputes in the Mekong Delta. More serious as a methodological constraint, however, is the tendency of such sources to present the viewpoints of both land claimants and local officials at length, while not providing a similar treatment to those poor peasants who were threatened with the loss of their land. While I have, in the course of my research, recovered enough material to provide an adequate treatment of the upper-peasant protestors, my treatment of the rural poor, and of the way in which they either contested or acceded to the claims of aggrieved landowners, is much more tenuous, and is limited by the narrow scope of available secondary research.

MORAL ECONOMY AND CLASS FORMATION IN THE MEKONG DELTA

As used here, moral economy is not a theory unto itself, but is instead embedded within a larger Marxian and materialist approach to political economy. Marx (1859) himself performed some of the earliest enquiry into political subjectivities and their relation to modes of production, famously arguing that 'it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness'. While such a phrasing implies that consciousness is merely an outgrowth of objective class position, his detailed

investigation into the political subjectivities of French peasants, as contained within *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (1852), reveals a more nuanced appreciation for the specificity of historical context in shaping such subjectivities: the political orientation of the French peasantry, he argues, cannot simply be deduced from the contemporary class structure, but is instead conditioned by a submerged layer of custom and culture, by the 'traditions of all dead generations', which weigh 'like a nightmare on the brains of the living'.

Picking up where Marx left off, E.P. Thompson's case study of bread riots in early modern England, contained within his 1971 essay on 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century' and revisited in his book *Customs in Common* (1993), takes as its object of enquiry the political culture of the English working class, including its 'expectations', 'traditions' and even its 'superstitions' (1993, 260). What Thompson finds is that the bread riots of the eighteenth century formed a 'pattern of social protest which derives from a consensus as to the moral economy of the commonwealth' (1971, 126): this 'moral economy', he argues, can be traced to an assemblage of beliefs, customs, norms and practices around issues of distribution and surplus extraction, rooted in the history of pre-capitalist England and expectations of inter-class reciprocity.

Building on Thompson's contribution, I argue below that the particular moral economy of the Mekong Delta's emergent class of semi-commercial upper peasants was conditioned by three factors: first, by the particularities of the region's geography and patterns of settlement and, in particular, by the existence and persistence of an agricultural frontier; second, by the tenancy-based relations of agricultural production established under French colonial rule and perpetuated under the government of South Vietnam after independence and partition in 1954; and, third, the experience of revolutionary struggle and political mobilization during the military conflicts of the late twentieth century.

Geographies of Settlement and Cultivation

Until the seventeenth century, the Mekong Delta was a region of swamps, forests and inundated grasslands inhabited mostly by ethnic Khmer and politically integrated into the Cambodian kingdom. Over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, the Khmer were progressively displaced by ethnic Vietnamese settlers from the north, culminating in the assertion of Vietnamese sovereignty over the region in 1802. This claim to sovereignty was in turn rooted in and justified by the application of labour in clearing and cultivating the 'wild lands' (*dat hoang*) of the delta. In Vietnamese historiography, the conquest of the delta has been viewed as the 'breaking' of 'fresh ground' (*khan hoang*), implying that the 'land was unused and therefore available', and 'that hard work was needed to make the land viable before ownership could be conferred' (Ang forthcoming).

The settler society that sprung up along the frontier, however, differed significantly from that of the Vietnamese homeland to the north. While the villages of northern and central Vietnam, where land was scarce and no equivalent agricultural frontier existed, had long managed such scarcity by designating large swathes of *cong dien*, or communal land, for periodic redistribution to the landless, this pattern was not replicated in the Mekong Delta.² Nor, for that matter, did villagers in the Mekong Delta cluster in closed, corporate villages, as

² Pierre Gourou (1955, 385), writing in the early 1930s, puts the figure for communal land at about 20 per cent of total land area in the Red River Delta, while Hickey (1964, 42), citing French colonial sources, puts that figure at only 3 per cent for southern Vietnam and the Mekong Delta.

did their counterparts in the north, but instead dispersed into more atomized settlements, usually strung along waterways (Rambo 1973). Such differences in the mode of settlement and land allocation led to the emergence of a very different concept of property in the Mekong Delta: while villagers in the north gained access to land (as common patrimony) through membership in a village community, their counterparts in the Mekong Delta were not granted land, but settled and cleared it themselves, and thus their right to access and use was rooted in the application of labour.

With the establishment, in 1862, of French colonial rule over southern Vietnam came a massive extension of canals and other forms of infrastructure in the Mekong Delta, all with the aim of opening up the region for rice cultivation. To encourage the rapid conversion of existing land to export agriculture, the French also established a concession system that allowed for large land grants to elites, both Vietnamese and European. These individuals, however, did 'not go out and do the actual hard work of clearing the land' themselves; instead, the 'commonest pattern of acquiring land for the relatively well-to-do and powerful was to take it away from those who were unable to defend their own' (Gran 1975, 266–7). Taking advantage of a judicial system heavily weighted towards elite interests, they would simply file a claim to land that had been cleared, but whose settlers, largely illiterate and ignorant of the workings of French law, possessed no legal title.

Rather than submit to such dispossession and accept the burdens of tenancy, settlers would often move further out along the agricultural frontier, to the southern and western reaches of the delta, where unsettled and unregistered land existed into the 1940s (Gran 1975, 314). Here as well, however, they fell prey to land speculators and rent-seeking elites. A common practice was for speculators to pick out an uncleared area, file a demand for concession with the local courts and simply wait for settlers to come, clear the land and bring it under cultivation before acting on such claims (Gran 1975, 314).

Relations of Production

Given the concept's lineage in Marxian political economy, the development and articulation of a particular moral economy only makes sense when situated, to use the phrasing of Robert Brenner (1976, 31), within the historical 'social–property relations' by which 'a part of the product is extracted from the direct producers by a class of non-producers'. As theorized by Wendy Wolford (2005, 243) in her work on agrarian social mobilization and competing claims to land among Brazilian agriculturalists, moral economy thus consists of 'moral arguments', constituted through 'historically and culturally specific production relations' and 'used by a particular group of people to define the optimal organization of society, including most importantly an outline of how society's productive resources (in this case, land) ought to be divided'.

In the colonial Mekong Delta, a capitalist mode of agricultural production was built around social–property relations that severed the vast majority of the Mekong Delta's population from ownership over the means of production, compelling them to enter into exploitative relations of tenancy or wage labour. A 1930–1 survey conducted by colonial officials (Murray 1980, 429–39) depicts this highly fractured social landscape: on one hand, landless tenant farmers comprised about 75 per cent of households in the Mekong Delta, while a 'floating surplus population' of landless labourers circulated about the countryside according to the rhythms of the agricultural calendar. Meanwhile, a tiny minority of landlords (about 2 per cent of the population) owned the vast majority of the agricultural land area, while a small class of independent peasant producers tilled the remainder.

In the words of Jeffrey Paige (1975, 319), the colonial capitalism of the Mekong Delta thus served to create 'a stark two-class system in which peasant labour created the only form of wealth and landlords simply confiscated this wealth in the form of rent'. The power of the landlord class and their exploitation of the tenants were compounded by the fact that tenants also frequently rented the non-land means of production from landlords (Murray 1980, 433–4) and went into debt as a result, ultimately allowing the landlords to capture an even greater proportion of the agricultural surplus than through mere rents alone. Rendered dependent on landlords for access to the means of subsistence and social reproduction, the political demands of the tenant class came to fixate on the recovery of land rights, prompting a constant stream of disputes, and even outright violence, between settler–tenants and concessionaire landlords.

Neither rooted in a long-standing history of paternalistic social relations nor constitutive of anything more than naked exploitation and surplus extraction, the tenancy system of the colonial Mekong Delta was subjected to near-constant resistance from below. Notable examples of such resistance include the Ninh Thanh Loi uprising of 1927, which united dispossessed Khmer and Vietnamese farmers in an attack against local concessionaries (Brocheux 1995, 40; Biggs 2010, 100–2), and a series of uprisings and land occupations in the early 1930s (Scott 1976, 126–7; Murray 1980, 465). Such resistance both grew out of and helped to crystallize an emergent moral economy, set in contradistinction to French colonial law and the social–property system it enabled, which articulated a moral argument to property based on the application of labour in its clearance, settlement and cultivation. Land, as a contemporary Vietnamese proverb put it, should rightly belong to he 'who rubs it between his hands each season' (Pike 1966, 276).

Articulation in Resistance

It is in moments of resistance and political mobilization that the 'the outlines of a given moral economy are most easily visible' (Wolford 2005, 243). The act or process of resistance thus serves to solidify or concretize a moral economy, bringing the unspoken assumptions of a normative order into the realm of political discourse. This is precisely what happened in the Mekong Delta over the tumultuous decades between the onset of the First Indochina War in 1945 and the conclusion of the Second Indochina War (the 'Vietnam War') in 1975, as the region's tenants became a target for mobilization by political entrepreneurs in both revolutionary movements (namely the Viet Minh and the National Liberation Front) and, in the early 1970s, the government of South Vietnam. In doing so, both sides adapted their ideological messages to the local, socially situated moral economy of the tenant, promising to redress the historical grievance of dispossession through land reforms.

During the 1945–54 struggle against the French, the communist-led Viet Minh positioned itself as the protector of the tenants' property claims against the underhanded and acquisitive landlord class, rather than calling for egalitarian redistribution (Elliott 2007, 33). Where the Viet Minh was able to achieve political control, it distributed land from absentee landlords and pro-French collaborators to tenant farmers, transforming the beneficiaries into newly landed farmers (Elliott 2007, 67–9). These reforms were reversed with the creation of an independent South Vietnamese state in 1954, but with the re-emergence in the early 1960s of a communist insurgency, led by the National Liberation Front (NLF), land claims again took centre stage. In territories under its control, the NLF implemented 'land to the tiller' (*nguoi cay co nuong*) reforms that transformed former tenants into '*de facto* owners of the land they worked' (Paige 1975, 317), allowing tenants a means by which to ascend to the ranks of the

landed middle and upper-middle peasantry. Since the rented plots of tenants varied in size, however, these reforms had the effect not of erasing social differences in the countryside but of cementing them (Wiegiersma 1988, 191).

Initially hostile to NLF land reforms, the government of South Vietnam changed course in 1970, launching a 'land to the tiller' reform of its own, with the guidance of its American advisors. By 1973, over one million households in southern Vietnam and the Mekong Delta had received landownership rights, transforming them from tenants to landowners (Prosterman and Riedinger 1987, 139). While aimed immediately at weakening support for the NLF, these reforms had the long-term aim both of creating a new class of 'entrepreneurial small farmers' who 'embraced liberal ideas of political and economic freedom' and of deepening 'capitalist relations' in agriculture (Porter 1993, 28, 60).³ Significantly, these land reforms went hand in hand with the introduction of Green Revolution technologies, such as mechanical inputs, fertilizers, pesticides and high-yielding varieties of 'miracle rice' (Callison 1983).

The combined effect of political mobilization by both revolutionary and state actors was thus to entrench a particular set of subjective attachments and claims to agricultural land, while at the same time creating, from the ranks of the former tenants, a new class of farmers who were deeply enmeshed in capitalist relations of agricultural production; these new upper-middle and rich peasants, who displaced the landlords as the upper social stratum in the rural Mekong Delta, were engaged in at least semi-commercial agriculture, producing more than enough to satisfy their subsistence needs and marketing the surplus, and most hired in labour, at least seasonally (Callison 1983, 119; Ngo Vinh Long 1984, 289; Quang Truong 1987, 215; Lam Quang Huyen 1997, 173). Many also owned substantial stocks of non-land capital, such as tractors, harvesters and pumps, which were both used on-farm and hired out to lower-middle and poor peasant cultivators (Ngo Vinh Long 1984). The dominance of this group of new, upwardly mobile capitalist farmers posed a distinct challenge to the post-war authorities in Hanoi, who sought to integrate the newly 'liberated' south into an economic and political system dominated by the egalitarian and collective ideology of the Communist Party, itself largely the product of the cultural and historical context of northern and central Vietnam.

GRIEVANCE AND POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY IN THE POST-WAR PERIOD

Moral economy, as it has been presented here, provides the subjective basis (derived from material histories of settlement, production and political struggle) around which a group may mobilize and make claims to resources. Such mobilization, however, requires both an impetus – a grievance that may be framed in a manner consonant with an existing set of values or principles and whose redress requires collective action – as well as a moment of political opportunity in which such action may plausibly succeed (Tarrow 1998). These dynamics are clearly on display in the post-war Mekong Delta, as the region's new landowners found themselves the targets of redistributive reforms that sought to equalize landholdings and collectivize production. This new policy, resting as it did on egalitarian principles alien to the moral economy of the delta's upper peasantry, lit a flame of resentment that smouldered into the 1980s. It was only, however, with the political and economic shifts of the late 1980s that this flame erupted into a conflagration of social unrest.

³ More bluntly, Ngo Vinh Long (1984, 300) asserts that the goal of such reforms was to create 'a class of kulaks in rural South Vietnam', which would then provide a base of support for the anti-communist government in Saigon.

Grievance

The notion of grievance has a long history in the study of political mobilization, but it is James Scott's (1976) study of peasant rebellions in South-East Asia that first employs the concept in relation to the moral economy. In Scott's conceptualization, peasants in colonial South-East Asia engaged in open rebellion only when a certain moral threshold was crossed, or when the features of an actually existing political, economic or social system strayed too far from the ideal conception of a just distribution of assets, resources and opportunities, or what he calls the peasant's 'notion of economic justice' (Scott 1976, 3). While Scott's 'moral economy of the peasant' is a distinct form, one that emphasizes notions of distributive equity and subsistence security rather than claims to land as inviolable private property, his formulation bears considerable relevance to the case at hand.

In this case, the grievance that sparked land protests in the late 1980s can be traced to the redistributive policies pursued by Vietnam's communist leadership after reunification in 1975. In the aftermath of reunification, the Mekong Delta was still a region of stark inequalities. Nearly a quarter of the rural population was comprised of poor peasants and landless labourers; these lower classes had either not qualified for redistribution under the 'land to the tillers' scheme or had received small plots insufficient to meet household needs (Ngo Vinh Long 1984, 289).

Shortly after establishing control over the region, the Hanoi government launched a new wave of land reforms – dubbed 'readjustments', or *dieu chinh* in Vietnamese – aimed at eliminating 'vestiges of feudalism' and 'exploitation on the land' (Dang 2007, 118). In practice, what this round of readjustment entailed was the confiscation of land from landlords, former allies of the Saigon regime, and from those who had fled abroad, as well as from churches and temples (Lam Quang Huyen 1997, 172). The limited nature of this reform, however, meant that there continued to exist a significant class of poor and landless peasants, whose dire lot contrasted sharply with the relatively prosperous condition of the upper peasants.

To redress these inequalities, the central government began a second wave of reforms in 1982, the aim of which was to force upper-middle and rich peasant households to 'cede back that quantity of land which exceeds their household labour capacity' (Vu Oanh 1984, 29) for redistribution to the poor and landless. In total, more than 500,000 hectares were redistributed between 1976 and 1985, or about 25 per cent of the total agricultural area in the Mekong Delta (Dang 2007, 252). According to Lam Quang Huyen (1997, 174), some 30 per cent of rural households in the region were forced to surrender land in this period, while a further 30 per cent (including landless, poor peasant and lower-middle peasant households) received land, which was distributed on a per capita basis.⁴

As a result, inequalities in landownership and landlessness decreased precipitously in the Mekong Delta by the mid-1980s (Ngo Vinh Long 1993, 183; Dao The Tuan 1997, 166); the equalization process, moreover, was seen as a vital first step towards the eventual collectivization of agriculture, since each household would be able to enter into a cooperative on an equal footing (Quang Truong 1987, 218–22). Despite efforts by the new authorities to gather households into cooperative enterprises and to develop an ideology of 'sharing rice and clothing' (*nhuong com se ao*) that cut across former class lines, such attempts were continuously stymied by the persistence of peasant attachments to private property and market relations. In

⁴ Hy Van Luong (1994, 89) observes a similar ratio of contributors to beneficiaries in his study of Khanh Hau village in Long An province. There, 100 upper-middle peasant households, or about 30 per cent of the village population, were strongly 'encouraged' by local authorities to donate 1 hectare each of 'surplus' land to a further 100 landless and land-poor households.

some cases, these extended to outright resistance to socialist reforms on the part of the upper peasantry. Farmers, for example, slaughtered buffalo and oxen (rather than turn them over to collectives), refused to harvest crops in time, destroyed fruit trees and rice fields, and sabotaged collectively owned machinery (Quang Truong 1987, 267–8; Vo Nhan Tri 1990, 79; Porter 1993, 52–3).

The overwhelming irony of these redistributive reforms is that, in its attempt to expand the ranks of landowning farmers, the government of Vietnam ran up against a moral economy that emphasized the inviolability of existing property claims, rooted as they were in regionally distinct histories of settlement, production and political mobilization. It was not just the upper-middle and rich peasants, however, who attached a high value to notions of private property. Some poor and landless peasants, for example, ‘refused to receive redistributed land’, claiming instead that it was ‘weird to take other people’s property’ (Dang 2007, 120). In the words of one poor peasant, ‘at the time of land readjustment, authorities offered me some land but I did not accept. I thought that if I had land being taken to give to others, I would feel sad’ (Dang 2007, 261).

Political Opportunity

That a grievance – a perceived violation of a particular set of normative principles – existed is in itself insufficient to explain political mobilization to redress that grievance. Instead, the shift from small-scale, everyday resistance by the farmers of the Mekong Delta to coordinated social action of a type that might actually reverse the redistribution of land and achieve the restitution of disputed plots to their former owners required a moment of political opportunity. A confluence of circumstances in the late 1980s – including a food crisis, a leadership change and a moment of policy uncertainty – created such an opportunity, leading to an unprecedented opening for social mobilization within the normally rigid confines of Vietnam’s one-party political system.

By the 1980s, Vietnam’s planned economy was in the midst of a severe crisis, particularly in regard to agricultural production. Although tentative reforms in 1981 had sought to incentivize increased production by letting households keep and market agricultural surpluses (that is, production that exceeded state requisition quotas), production had once again stagnated, particularly in the Mekong Delta (Ngo Vinh Long 1993, 174–5). Missed targets in the south, traditionally a region of agricultural surplus, contributed to food insecurity in the rice-deficient north: in the mid-1980s, some 40 per cent of the rural population in northern Vietnam faced routine hunger, and by 1988, food shortages in the north placed an estimated 9.3 million people in danger of famine (Ngo Vinh Long 1993, 176). Food shortfalls also raised the prospect of social unrest; Kerkvliet (2005, 208), for example, describes how hungry peasants in the Red River Delta province of Ha Nam Ninh province stormed warehouses and granaries in 1986. Faced with the loss of aid from its crumbling Eastern Bloc allies, the leadership of the Vietnamese Communist Party looked inward for the resolution to its mounting food security challenges; included in the proceedings of the Sixth Party Congress in 1986 was a resolution calling particular attention to the Mekong Delta as a vast reserve of untapped agricultural potential and calling for a return to ‘commodity’ production in the region (Vo Tong Xuan 1995, 192).

The Sixth Party Congress also marked the formal inauguration of an era of economic reforms known collectively as *Doi Moi*, or ‘renovation’. These reforms had actually begun much earlier, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as local cadres and provincial party leadership had experimented with ‘fence breaking’ market reforms, sometimes risking the ire of the

central leadership by defying the party line (Dang and Beresford 1998). By the mid-1980s, however, a new generation of reformists, such as Nguyen Van Linh (who served as General Secretary of the Communist Party from 1986 to 1991) and Vo Van Kiet (Vietnam's chief economic planner for most of the 1980s and its Prime Minister in 1988, and again between 1991 to 1997), had risen to the chief leadership positions in the party-state. Significantly, both Linh and Kiet had strong ties to the south; the former was a northerner by birth but had served among the southern insurgents during the war, while the latter had been born and raised in the Mekong Delta province of Vinh Long.

Under the leadership of Linh and Kiet, the pace of reform quickened, leading in 1988 to a monumental reform of the agricultural sector, known as 'Resolution 10'. Essentially, Resolution 10 marked the return of private ownership and production in Vietnamese agriculture, calling for the dismantling of the agricultural collectives where they existed and for the allocation of land to individual households for private farming. Households would then receive long-term land use rights for these parcels, with the duration of those rights ranging from 10 to 20 years (Pingali and Xuan 1992, 707). What Resolution 10 did not provide, however, was set of specific guidelines as to how land was to be reallocated. That is, it neither called for the formalization of the relatively egalitarian distribution of land that existed in the aftermath of the 'readjustments' of the early 1980s nor outlined an alternative mechanism by which land rights were to be assigned; instead, it relegated such decisions to the provincial and sub-provincial authorities (FBIS 18 May 1988).

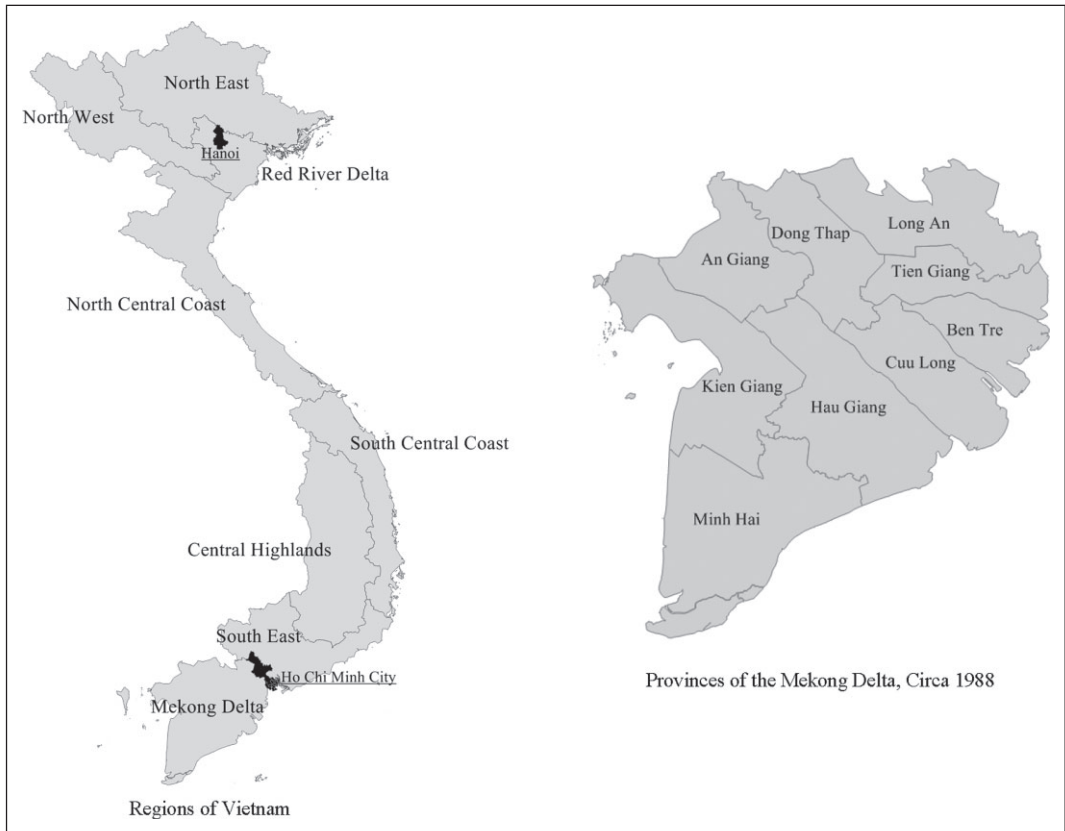
The uncertainty around Resolution 10 presented an immediate opportunity for aggrieved landowners in the Mekong Delta to organize in pursuit of restitutive reforms, while the background of the new party leadership and the dire food security situation that they faced created a climate receptive to such demands. The argument advanced here is thus not that the relatively well-off farmers of the Mekong Delta brought about or caused market reforms in Vietnam, which were already well under way by 1988, but that they took advantage of a structural opportunity to mobilize and frame their demands for land restitution in a manner that resonated with a set of widely held, but regionally specific, normative values around landownership. In doing so, they profoundly shaped the manner in which land was distributed in the Mekong Delta, setting in motion a process of agricultural commercialization during the post-socialist period.

CASE STUDIES: THE POLITICS OF LAND PRIVATIZATION

To an extent and scale never before seen in post-war Vietnam, upper-peasant protestors engaged, over the summer and autumn of 1988, in open, organized and vocal acts of contentious politics, ranging from petition drives to direct confrontations with government officials, all with the aim of recovering lost holdings.⁵ In many cases, farmers marched on government offices at the provincial, district and commune levels to demand the restitution of their old land (Thayer 1992, 354); in Hau Giang province, for example, protestors from Vinh Chau and Thanh Tri districts came to Can Tho, the provincial capital, to submit petitions on land disputes during the summer (BHG 10 August 1988), and farmers in Cuu Long province are reported to have marched on the provincial capital of Vinh Long to protest injustices in the

⁵ As Trung Dinh Dang (2007, 316–17) points out, there were also many cases of corrupt local cadres who had used the land redistribution process to appropriate land for themselves and their families; thus, an additional and overlapping set of social conflicts in the late 1980s pitted middle peasants against the local party cadres now occupying their former plots.

Figure 1 The regions of Vietnam (left) and the provinces of the Mekong Delta, c.1988 (right)



allocation of land on 11 October (Hiebert 1989, 19). In some cases, former owners simply reoccupied disputed plots and forcibly displaced their current inhabitants, but the most common course of action was to file a petition for land restitution. In total, at least 200,000 petitions were lodged with the central government, with the largest number of petitions coming from the Mekong Delta provinces of An Giang, Dong Thap and Minh Hai (JPRS 15 April 1992) (for a map of the Mekong Delta's provinces in 1988, see Figure 1).

The protestors themselves were a relatively heterogeneous group, ranging from slightly above-average middle peasants to relatively affluent rich peasants. What makes the concept of moral economy sociologically interesting, however, was the means by which a common moral framing with broad social purchase – rooted in the experiences and historical aspirations of the region's new landowners, many of whom were former tenants – was used to collapse boundaries between agrarian classes, allowing for middle and rich peasants to unite around common notions of property and propriety and to neutralize opposition (from below) and curry support (from above). Using a mix of newspaper accounts and secondary sources, I have constructed below a series of case studies that illustrate the ways in which these protestors drew upon and articulated a moral economy of property with broad social legitimacy in order to press claims against the state and other social actors, including the rural poor now occupying their former holdings.

Although these accounts differ in their particularities, they are linked, first, by the interlocking arguments that protestors draw upon to make claims to property, as those interviewed or cited frequently link land claims to notions of cultivation, diligence and hard work. Some, for example, cite the poor productive capacity of the land's current occupiers as justification for their displacement, while others point to the wetlands of the western frontier, arguing that the landless should not take what belongs to others when they can still settle and clear such 'wild' lands. Other protestors engaged in the symbolic clearance and cultivation of disputed plots to shore up their claims. In addition, land claimants frequently invoked their revolutionary service and labour, emphasizing the historical link between the land reforms of the NLF and the class aspirations of the new landowning class. In some cases, protestors sometimes went so far as to brandish war medals as they marched on government buildings (Thayer 1992).

Common themes also emerge in the way in which others responded to these claims, often echoing or acceding to the normative concepts articulated by the aggrieved landowners. First, although sources tell of conflict between land claimants and the current occupiers of disputed parcels – mostly poor and formerly landless peasants – there is also evidence that some of those who lost or stood to lose their land acknowledged the legitimacy of land claims by former owners and willingly vacated plots out of deference to shared notions of justice or propriety. Second, those local officials who were called on to mediate land disputes often came down on the side of upper-peasant land claimants, in the process articulating a reformist, pro-market discourse that explicitly linked landownership with the capacity of farmers to engage in 'commodity production' (*san xuat hang hoa*) (FBIS 15 November 1988).

Example 1: Tien Giang Province

In a story carried by the AFP in November 1988, a farmer in Tien Giang province by the name of Chu Duc Danh was interviewed by journalist Jean-Claude Chapon (FBIS 25 November 1988). Before 1975, Chu Duc Danh was relatively affluent, owning 9 hectares of agricultural land. With the coming of communist rule in 1975, he distributed 7 hectares to his children, keeping two for himself. In 1983, the local government took 1 hectare and distributed it to a landless household. In the summer of 1988, however, he reoccupied the land himself. The village officials declined to intervene, and the family he evicted became landless once again.

In the interview, he justifies his unilateral act by appealing both to his revolutionary service and to an ethos of hard work. 'During the war,' he argues, 'I paid a tax to the resistance and I aided the liberation front. I sacrificed my life for independence and it was unfair to take my land from me. I have taken back what belongs to me.' The land, moreover, he says, is already under cultivation in rice and cucumbers, as if to further solidify his claim. As for the peasant he displaced, he says dismissively, 'there are plenty of more lands that can be cleared'.

Source: Agence France-Presse via FBIS.

Example 2: Ben Tre Province

An Hiep commune, Ben Tre province, as profiled in the *Tuoi Tre* newspaper in the autumn of 1988 (TT 26 November 1988), had initially been at the forefront of the collectivization movement; when a collective farm was created there in 1979, 95 per cent of the households in the area participated. In 1982, however, land was redistributed to individual households on an egalitarian basis: not only were total holdings apportioned on the basis of household size,

but the individual plots were allocated through the drawing of lots, to ensure that no one family was favoured with better-quality or more easily accessible land. Because of this egalitarian reform, however, production land was ‘mixed up’ (*xao canh*) between families, and people were ‘working the land of others’ (*canh tac ruong cua nguoi khac*).

In 1988, farmers began requesting their old land back, and hundreds protested at the Commune People’s Committee office to demand the restitution of their former holdings (*keo len uy ban xa xin ve dat cu*). The local government eventually acquiesced to their demands, but the resolution of these land claims left 15 households in the commune without any land to farm. To rectify this situation, the commune arranged for their relocation to the province of Dong Thap, in the Plain of Reeds, where land could still be cleared and settled, promising them between 5,000 and 7,000 square metres per person.

Source: *Tuoi Tre* newspaper.

Example 3: Binh Chanh, Ho Chi Minh City

Emboldened by news that the government in neighbouring Long An province was returning land to its former owners, farmers in Binh Chanh, a rural commune on the south-western edge of Ho Chi Minh City, began demanding the restitution of their former plots in the summer of 1988 (TT 12 July 1988). In total, 108 farmers filed petitions to reclaim land, while 19 former landowners simply seized their old plots. Local officials intervened to mediate these disputes, convincing eight beneficiaries of the readjustment campaigns to return their plots to former owners because they ‘were not making a good living’, and were in arrears to the commune government over taxes and missed quotas. In total, these eight households returned a total of 1.63 hectares of agricultural land to former owners, who were characterized as ‘good producers’.

One of these petitioners, Mr Nguyen Van Hai, is profiled at length in *Tuoi Tre*. Hai owned more than 6.5 hectares before 1975, but was forced to surrender all but 1.7 hectares under the redistribution campaigns. While this still left him and his family substantially above the average per capita landownership in the commune, he instead decided to reoccupy an additional 1.3 hectares, now cultivated by three families. With the intervention of the commune authorities, it was decided to split the disputed land between Hai and its current cultivators; special consideration was given to Hai’s claim, the newspaper states, because he ‘is a good farmer, and has served as an exemplar for others for quite some time, and always fulfils his obligation to the nation in a straightforward manner’.

In a separate interview, a local official explains that, ‘if we continue to distribute the land in an equal manner, like we did before, everyone will be poor, everyone will lack work’. A ‘household that can farm well can, by itself, cultivate 2–3 hectares of double-cropped rice per year’, and thus the policy of the local government is to ‘encourage those who are not skilled at rice farming to transfer their land back to those who know how to farm’ (TT 25 June 1988).

Source: *Tuoi Tre* newspaper.

Example 4: Hau Giang Province

In the autumn of 1988, reporters from the *Thanh Nien* newspaper accompanied Party Secretary Le Phuoc Tho, a top government official tasked with resolving land disputes in the Mekong Delta, to Phuoc Thoi commune in Hau Giang province, where they gathered the stories of land petitioners. Many in the area had been forced to surrender 75–80 per cent of

their land holdings in the redistribution campaigns of the late 1970s and early 1980s, and many were now demanding their return; by November 1988, 285 petitions had been submitted by former owners, 95 of whom had directly reoccupied their former holdings without waiting for a resolution of their claims (TN 21 November 1988).

One farmer, a Mr Nguyen Van Du, cited revolutionary service in support of his petition for land restitution, arguing that his 'family sacrificed two people and our home was destroyed in the war, and once liberation was accomplished we stood at the head of every campaign'. Now, however, his 2.1 hectare holding had been whittled down in successive redistributions to only 0.88 hectares, which was 'not enough even to eat'. Another farmer, Mr Nguyen Van Thong, lost a little over a half a hectare of land, which was redistributed to a 'drunk', whose harvests failed and who eventually fell behind in his quota obligations before (informally) renting the land to another person.

As farmer Tran Van Hai explains, those middle and upper-middle peasants who lost land 'only had a few thousand square metres; there was no excess'. While 'capitalists in the cities have big houses and cars', he argues, 'farmers just have land, the means of production'. He goes on to explain that he and his fellow protestors 'just want to have our land returned to us', even if doing so entails the displacement of others.

Source: *Thanh Nien* newspaper.

Example 5: An Giang Province

In Trung Dinh Dang's (2007) case study area of Cho Moi district, An Giang province, the late 1980s are still known as the 'great turmoil' (*dao lon*); after Resolution 10 was issued in 1988, former owners rushed to claim their old lands, some negotiating with current cultivators, others simply seizing land and sowing new rice crops on it, and others gathering at the commune and district offices to make their case to local officials. As one former owner, who had cultivated 6 hectares before 1975, recalled, 'after reunification, revolutionary authorities took all my land to redistribute to others. They took my land right out of my hands' (Dang 2007, 308). Now, however, he had the 'chance to take it back'. After the authorities rejected his initial request for land restitution, he explains, 'I decided to break the law; my two brothers and I brought them machetes to the field to work. I said that if he [the hamlet chief] came to the field, we would kill him. I said that it was right for the authorities to take abandoned land but not right to steal land from people' (Dang 2007, 308). With the intervention of the hamlet chief, he soon regained his former holdings.

Despite the threat of violence, however, many land-reform beneficiaries whom Trung Dinh Dang interviewed returned land out of an apparent deference to the 'rights of individual land ownership and values of justice' (2007, 308). In the words of one landless labourer, who returned a parcel of land to its former owner in 1988, 'the land had to be returned to its owner. It was odd to take another person's land. Everyone did the same. If we were poor, we accepted that; we should not steal someone else's land (*giut dat nguoi khac*) to make a living' (Dang 2007, 309).

Source: Dang (2007).

By the late summer and early autumn of 1988, these local conflicts over land had been scaled up to the level of national politics, culminating in two marches in Ho Chi Minh City, in which hundreds of upper-peasant protestors from the Mekong Delta engaged in an unprecedented display of overt political protest, aimed at pressuring representatives of the central government into intervening on their behalf in local land disputes (Doan Ket 1988, 44; SGGP

11 November 1988; Hiebert 1989, 19). These manifestations of agrarian discontent, moreover, came at a time of similarly unprecedented contestation and mobilization within the Vietnamese political sphere, as a 'creeping pluralism' pushed the boundaries of the one-party model (Porter 1993). At the same time as the Mekong Delta's middle and rich peasants were taking to the street, an intra-party battle over the direction and pace of reform was breaking into the public realm, leading to the emergence of external pressure groups, independent of the communist establishment, which aimed to influence the policy debate. The most notable of these (ultimately short-lived) groups was the 'Club of Former Resistance Fighters' (*Cau lac bo Nhung Ngươi Khang chien cu*); comprised of NLF veterans from the former South Vietnam, the Club pushed for economic reforms and more political openness (Abuza 2001, 161–82).

The mere fact that such open protests were not immediately suppressed speaks to both the relative weakness of the central state in the late 1980s and to the emergence of affinities between reform-orientated politicians and organized pressure groups, such as the veterans and upper peasants (Wain 1989; Thayer 1992). In the case of the upper peasantry, this combination of external pressure and converging political interests resulted, eventually, in the promulgation of a specific set of reforms, contained within a policy document known as Directive 47, which was applicable only to the Mekong Delta and which called for the restitution of land, in most cases, to its former owners. Such a move, in the language of the decree, would form the first step towards the ultimate reorganization of agricultural production in the Mekong Delta 'along the line of intensive cultivation, multicropping' and 'comprehensive business development' (FBIS 15 November 1988).

In official rhetoric, this decision to side with the semi-commercial upper peasant was framed in a way that justified inequalities in both outcomes and in initial land endowments by reference to 'hard work' and productive capacity. While General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh described agricultural reform as encouraging 'farmers to make full use of their capacity . . . to develop production and to both increase output for society and raise their own incomes', he acknowledged that doing so would produce 'some households that are well-off, and which have a standard of living which is higher than other households' (BHG 20 April 1988). In the spring of 1989, a local newspaper in the Mekong Delta articulated a similar argument in relation to land allocation, editorializing that there was no need to 'jealously guard equality between households', since it was only fair for households that were 'diligent in their work' to be allocated more than 'those who are lazy' (BHG 12 April 1989).

Although the resolution of land disputes in the Mekong Delta took several years, concluding only in the mid-1990s, disputes were generally resolved in the favour of previous (pre-1975) owners (Lam Quang Huyen 1997, 175), in line with official policies outlined in Decree 47. Fieldwork by Le Coq and Trebuil (2005, 537) in Hau Giang province confirms that 'land was redistributed to farmers according to the land ownership situation before collectivization', conforming roughly to the distribution that prevailed after the 'land to the tiller' reforms of the early 1970s, while work by Luong Hong Quang (1997, 116–22) in Tien Giang finds a similar pattern of restitution. As one farmer in An Giang recalled to Trung Dinh Dang, 'thanks to Mr. Linh, I could retrieve half of my land and a plowing machine. I was very happy when I took it back. People should worship Mr. Linh!' (2007, 309).

In the Mekong Delta, the consequence of restitutorial policies – in conjunction with the loosening of restraints on the private ownership and trade of not just land, but other agricultural inputs and outputs – was to prompt the rapid re-emergence of a stratum of capitalist farmers, setting the scene for a new wave of accumulation within the agricultural sector. In An Giang and Hau Giang provinces, it was reported that, by late 1988 'many farmers' were farming plots of 10 hectares or more (BHG 21 December 1988 and 18 January 1989), and

similar re-accumulation was also reported in Long An, where some farmers received up to 9 hectares of restituted land (Luong 1994, 102). Many of these larger farmers already had substantial mechanized inputs at their disposal, and in the areas where the means of production had been collectivized, the dissolution of agricultural cooperatives often meant that their productive stock – tractors and other farm implements – were sold at auction to the highest bidder, allowing the relatively well-off to complement their land holdings with other factors of production and to cement their social and economic position.

By 1993, nearly half of farming households in the Mekong Delta were producing exclusively (or almost exclusively) for the market (Dao The Tuan 1997). The process of land privatization led, however, not only led to the creation of a new class of upwardly mobile owner–operators, but also to the rapid re-emergence of a stratum of landless and land-poor rural workers (Nguyen Dinh Huong 1999, 130). Survey data collected in 1992–3 (as part of the first iteration of the Vietnam Living Standards Survey), shows that the rate of landlessness in the Mekong Delta already stood at approximately 16 per cent, while the Gini index for agricultural landownership was 0.51, much higher than anywhere else in Vietnam (Brandt 2006, table 5).⁶ Not only did the region demonstrate significant polarization in landownership, but it also had the highest level of reported income inequality in Vietnam, and the highest level of food insecurity (Dao The Tuan 1997). Thus, social polarization is evident even at a very early stage after the resolution of land disputes, a sign that such polarization derived not from the unleashing of ‘market forces’, but from the process by which land and other assets were allocated.

These inequalities intensified in the post-reform period, as those landowning farmers endowed with the ‘resources with which to respond to favourable market conditions’ were able to expand and accumulate (Ngo Vinh Long 1993, 184; Dang Phong 1995). As Protá and Beresford (2012) argue, access to land has been a necessary, but not sufficient, means of achieving upward social mobility among peasant producers in the Mekong Delta; those who were not allocated land in the privatization process (or had their holdings taken away from them for restitution to former owners), they find, were far more likely than their counterparts to experience negative social mobility. Among those who experienced partial, but not complete dispossession as a result of the restitution process, the results have been similar. As Le Coq and Trebuil (2005, 539) find, those who entered the 1990s with very small holdings encountered difficulties in achieving financial viability and in competing with their larger counterparts, eventually leading to a spiral of debt and distress sale, thus accelerating the trend of accumulation and swelling the ranks of the landless. By the 2000s, the landless accounted for over 25 per cent of the rural population, and largely derived their income from precarious seasonal employment on commercial farms (Brandt 2006, table 5).

In other regions of Vietnam, most notably the Red River Delta in the north, the land privatization process was instead much more highly egalitarian, due in part to the mobilization of peasants around a very different moral economy of property. In the Red River Delta, local authorities initially attempted, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, to induce greater productivity in agriculture through an auction-based land allocation process that would favour better-off households. Such efforts, however, were resisted by the ranks of the poor and lower-middle peasants, who through complaints and collective pressure induced local cadres

⁶ These figures do not, moreover, capture the large number of poor peasants dispossessed in their villages of origin and relocated by provincial governments to remote areas on the agricultural frontier, namely the Plain of Reeds in Dong Thap province. According to Hy Van Luong (1994, 102), as many of 400 landless households were relocated to Dong Thap from one small area of Long An province.

to adopt a more egalitarian, per capita distribution strategy (Dang Canh Khanh 1991, 348). Ngo Vinh Long (1993, 198), for example, describes how peasants in the Red River Delta ‘refused to allow wealthy households to bid for contracts on even the most infertile land on the grounds that doing so would aid the rich and thereby “violate the principles of social justice”’.

Rather than being thrust into increasingly capitalist relations of agricultural production, as were their counterparts in the south, nearly all farming households in the Red River Delta thus entered the post-reform period with at least a small amount of agricultural land ‘capable of providing even the poorest with a modicum of economic security and a sort of subsistence safety net’ during a time of upheaval and uncertainty (Watts 1998, 483). As Rambo and Le (1991, 88–91) put it, ‘farmers will not get rich from these lands, but at least they are guaranteed a source of livelihood that more or less adequately provides for their family’s sustenance’. In sharp contrast to the Mekong Delta, the bifurcation of agrarian classes into large-scale producers and agrarian wage labourers has been virtually non-existent in the Red River Delta. For example, Luong (2010, 223–4) reports that in his study site in Phu Tho province, no ‘villager had to rely exclusively or primarily on selling his/her labour to agricultural employers’, since farmers were instead ‘guaranteed some land for their livelihood’.

CONCLUSION

What I have provided above is an account of how particular moral economies are shaped by historical relations of settlement, production and political struggle, and how these moral economies in turn foster collective social action, rendering it meaningful to individual participants and directing it towards certain ends. In doing so, I have hewn closely to Thompson’s original formulation of the ‘moral economy’, drawing as well on Wolford’s examination of moral economy in its relation to agrarian movements in contemporary Brazil. In particular, I have followed Wolford in conceptualizing ‘moral economy’ as the ‘moral arguments’, embedded in particular histories and social relations, that are used by groups to make claims to productive resources and outline the ideal distribution of those resources.

By tracing the origins and articulation of a particular moral economy of property, one situated within the experiences of the Mekong Delta’s emergent class of capitalist farmers, I have identified one of the key factors behind that region’s rapid resumption of commercial agriculture in the post-reform period and its divergence from other regions, such as the Red River Delta. In drawing this comparison between the process of land privatization in the Mekong and Red River Deltas, I have also highlighted the interplay between moral economy and political economy. While research (Sikor 2004; McElwee 2007; Hy Van Luong 2010) suggests that normative commitments to egalitarianism, risk minimization and reciprocal obligation are widely held in northern Vietnamese communities, and that these commitments have helped re-create a peasant form of subsistence-orientated agriculture in this region, the existence of a very different moral economy in the Mekong Delta has instead given rise to a more skewed distribution of land, and thus laid the groundwork for the rapid re-emergence of agrarian capitalism.

The divergence between north and south, and the particular path that the Mekong Delta has taken towards technologically intensive, large-scale export agriculture, are thus rooted not in the imposition of ‘markets’ *per se*, but in the structural and normative landscape in which market reforms have been interpreted, contested and implemented. In this way, the conflicts over land that occurred in the Mekong Delta during the late 1980s did not just help to create the material conditions for agrarian capitalism, but the normative and ideational conditions

under which it could thrive. By ensuring the restitution of land to its former owners and by cementing a particular moral economy of property within the political economy of the Mekong Delta, these conflicts helped to entrench neoliberal notions that land rightly belongs to those who can most effectively till it, and to shape the state's role as the protector of property rights, rather than the guarantor of a subsistence minimum. In this way, the moral economy of the upper peasantry provided the foundation upon which a new set of economic and political relations were constructed in the post-socialist period.

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