

MORAL ECONOMY AND THE MIDDLE PEASANT:  
THE DYNAMICS OF LAND PRIVATIZATION IN THE MEKONG DELTA

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Timothy M. Gorman

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis 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 land ownership, most notably in its population of middle peasants. I then detail the ways in which these middle 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 middle 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.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Timothy M. Gorman received a Bachelor of Science from the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. in 2002, and a Master of Arts in Southeast Asian Studies from the National University of Singapore in 2007. Before beginning his graduate studies at Cornell University, he lived in Hanoi, Vietnam, where he worked for international and local non-governmental organizations on issues of poverty alleviation and rural development. In the future, he plans to continue working towards a Ph.D. in Development Sociology and to focus his research on changing patterns of land tenure and land use in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam.

*For Pauline*

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## **Introduction**

Over the summer and fall of 1988, the Mekong Delta region of southern Vietnam was rocked by protest and social conflict. In the face of new reform policies, which called for the re-establishment of private land use rights, the region's middle peasants mobilized to demand the restitution of holdings that had been taken from them after reunification in 1975. These conflicts, which pitted middle peasants against both state actors and the rural poor, to whom their former property had been redistributed, were played out primarily on the local level in the form of land occupations, petition drives, and open protest at government offices. These forms of everyday protest, however, were remarkable both for the consistency with which middle peasant land claimants articulated their demands to land and alacrity with which these local conflicts were scaled up to the level of national politics, culminating in two marches on Ho Chi Minh City in August and November of 1988. In the end, this political mobilization by the Mekong Delta's middle peasantry 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 thesis seeks to explain why and how the Mekong Delta's middle peasants were 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 holdings. In the thesis, 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, which spans the 1950s to 1980s.

Peasant resistance, for Kerkvliet, is rooted in deeply-held “sentiments” on the part of the northern peasantry, who prefer family farming and individual ownership to the collectives, and who express 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 analyzed 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 northwestern 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 Ph.D. 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 thesis, is remarkable not just in that southerners resisted collectivization, but that they, especially relatively prosperous middle peasants in the Mekong Delta province of An Giang, *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 which 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-oriented forms of production that continue to predominate in northern and central Vietnam; in recent years, the Mekong Delta has produced more than half of Vietnam's total rice crop, and contributed more than 90% 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, or what exactly it is about the region which has made it such fertile ground for the re-emergence of capitalist relations of production in agriculture.

What this thesis does is to attempt 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 middle peasantry 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, the region's middle peasants shaped both the way in which land was eventually allocated and, ultimately, facilitated the rapid emergence of a distinctly market-oriented 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 Thesis*

In the first section of the thesis, I survey the modern history of the Mekong Delta, tracing the origins both of the middle peasantry as a class 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 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. I argue that the Mekong Delta's status as an agricultural frontier, the particular relations of production which predominated in the colonial and early republican periods, and the experience of political mobilization by insurgent and

state actors during the mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> century all helped to shape the middle peasantry's notions of distributive justice and the arguments with which they were articulated.

In the second section, I address the theoretical concepts of grievance and political opportunity, linking these concepts to the moral economy framework developed above. 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 middle peasantry. Second, I discuss the shifting opportunity structure which 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 the ambiguous policy environment during the early years of *Doi Moi* created a uniquely advantageous moment in which the middle peasants of the Mekong Delta could press their historical land claims and seek the redress of their perceived grievance.<sup>1</sup>

In the third 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 middle peasants, 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 claims land claims, both against the rural poor and against representatives of the local and national state.

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<sup>1</sup> *Doi Moi*, or “renovation,” refers to the series of market-oriented economic reforms implemented in Vietnam after the Sixth Party Congress in 1986.

In the fourth and final section, I describe the resolution and enduring legacy of these land conflicts and of the middle peasant moral economy around which they were articulated. What I argue is that the mobilization of the Mekong Delta's middle peasants around this particular moral economy helped to shape the distribution of land and other productive resources in a way which ultimately favored the development of commercial agriculture (from a middle peasant base), resulting in the sharp divergence between that region's political economy and that of Vietnam's other agricultural regions, using the Red River Delta as a counterexample.

#### *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 favorable to the party and its policies. Given the ambiguity as to what exactly the "party line" was regarding middle peasant land claims during the period of study, and the relatively 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 relatively 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 middle peasant 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 middle peasantry and its particular moral economy, my treatment of the rural poor, and of the way in which they either contested or acceded to the claims of the middle peasantry, 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 inquiry 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 more 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 inquiry 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 18<sup>th</sup> century formed a “pattern of social protest which derives from a consensus as to the moral economy of the commonweal” (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 middle peasantry was conditioned, first, by the human and physical geography of the delta, in particular by its pattern of settlement and by the persistence, into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, of an agricultural frontier; second, by the historical relations of agricultural production in the region and in particular by its dependence on a tenancy-based system of commercial rice cultivation during the French colonial period (1862-1954); and third, by the experience of political struggle during the middle and late 20<sup>th</sup> century, which helped to crystallize and articulate tenant land claims, leading eventually to a series of “land to the tiller” reforms which transformed tenants into middle peasant smallholders.

### *Geographies of Settlement and Cultivation*

The moral economy which arose among the Mekong Delta’s peasants and tenant farmers was strongly shaped by the particularities of the region’s geography, its history and patterns of settlement, and in particular, by the existence and persistence of an agricultural frontier. Until the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Mekong Delta was a sparsely inhabited region of swamps, forests, and inundated grasslands, politically integrated into the kingdom of Angkor and its successors in Cambodia. Over the course of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> 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 labor 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 virgin soil” (*khan hoang*), implying that “the land had hitherto been unused and therefore available” and that “a degree of hard work (to make the land viable) had to be involved before a sense of ownership could be conferred” (Ang *forthcoming*).

The settler society which 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.<sup>2</sup> Nor for that matter, did villagers in the Mekong Delta cluster in closed, corporate villagers, as 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 very different concepts 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 labor.

With the establishment, in 1862, of a colonial protectorate in southern Vietnam, dubbed “Cochinchina” by the French, came a massive extension of canals

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



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 which allowed for large land grants to elites, both Vietnamese and Western. These individuals, however, did “not to 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 1975:266-267). 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.

In most cases, the original settlers of such lands would become tenants under the concessionaires, many of whom held hundreds to thousands of hectares and who did not actively engage in any aspect of production, but rather hired managers to collect rents on their behalf. Facing expropriation and the crushing burdens of tenancy which then ensued, thousands instead sought a marginally better existence along the agricultural frontier to the west and south, where the gradual creep of French canalization projects and waterworks opened an ever greater swath of wilderness up to agricultural cultivation, and 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. Only then, as Gran (1975:314) notes, would the speculator act on his claim.

### *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" and which thus form the primary axis of inter-class tension within a given society and a given mode of production. 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 of tenancy and dispossession, which facilitated the extraction of surplus value but also fomented persistent social conflict around competing claims to land. The result of the French concession system was, by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, to sever 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 labor. A 1930-1931 survey conducted by colonial officials (Murray 1980:429-439) depicts this highly fractured social landscape: on one hand, landless tenant farmers comprised about 75% of households in the Mekong Delta, while a "floating surplus population" of landless laborers circulated about the countryside according to the rhythms of the agricultural calendar; on the other, a tiny minority of landlords (about 2% 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 labor 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 means of production from landlords (Murray 1980:433-434), 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 bare 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.

These tendencies came to a head in the late 1920s and early 1930s, culminating in a series of peasant protests, and even outright rebellions, across the Mekong Delta. One notable instance of peasant unrest was the Ninh Thanh Loi uprising of 1927, which united dispossessed Khmer and Vietnamese farmers in an attack against local concessionaries, who had laid claim to lands they had cleared and settled (Brocheux 1995:40; Biggs 2010:100-102). This uprising was followed in the 1930s by a wave of land occupations, through which tenant protestors appealed to the French colonial government to take ownership rights from landlords and transfer them back to peasant cultivators (Scott 1976:126-127; Murray 1980:465).

Neither rooted in a longstanding 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. 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 labor 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 catered an ideological message to the local, socially-situated moral economy of the tenant, promising to redress the historical grievance of dispossession through land reforms.

During the 1945-1954 struggle against the French, the communist-led Viet Minh initially encountered suspicion on the part of the tenants regarding its objectives and ideology. In the recollection of one former tenant, the people “didn’t like communism” and “were afraid because they heard that communism meant pooling all the property of the people in common,” which would mean that “the individual would lose all his personal property and his right to trade” (Elliott 2007:32). Instead of

calling for collective ownership, the Viet Minh instead positioned themselves as the protectors of the tenants' property claims against the underhanded and acquisitive landlord class (Elliott 2007:33). Where the Viet Minh were able to achieve political control, they distributed land from absentee landlords and pro-French collaborators to tenant farmers, transforming the beneficiaries into "new" middle peasants (Elliott 2007:67-69). After the end of hostilities in 1954 and the creation of an independent state in South Vietnam, led by the fiercely anti-communist Ngo Dinh Diem, the distribution of land in the Mekong Delta reverted to the pre-war status quo.

This dynamic of reform and reversal, however, helped fuel the emergence of a communist insurgency in the early 1960s, as the National Liberation Front (NLF) mobilized the region's tenants around their historical land claims and their attachment to private property, both as a means of self-reproduction and an object of struggle. Much like the Viet Minh in the First Indochina War, however, the NLF did not espouse an explicitly egalitarian or collectivist ideology (Race 2010:125), nor did it challenge the right of rural Vietnamese to own and rent land (Pike 1966:279). Instead, territories under NLF control were subject to "land to the tiller" (*nguoi cay co ruong*) reforms which transformed former tenants into "de facto owners of the land they worked" (Paige 1975:317). These reforms resonated with local conceptions of "social justice," offering tenants a means by which to ascend to the ranks of the middle peasantry through the acquisition of land ownership rights (Hunt 2008:42, 64). The effect of these reforms, however, was not to erase social differences, but to cement inequalities within the ranks of the former tenants. Not all tenants farmed equal plots, and since some had built up their tenancies over time to encompass up to 10 hectares, in the process achieving some measure of "political and social status" (Paige 1975:311), these larger tenants stood to gain much more than did small tenants or

landless laborers from the “land to the tiller” reforms of the NLF, and thus comprised the backbone of the movement in the Mekong Delta (Wiegersma 1988:191).

For most of the conflict, the South Vietnamese government reversed NLF reforms upon recapturing “liberated territories” and restored ownership rights to landlords (Hunt 2008:166). In 1970, however, the government of President Nguyen Van Thieu, with guidance from American experts, sought to undermine the appeal of its insurgent rival by launching a “land to the tiller” reform of its own, in the process extending and entrenching the legal claim of tenants to the land they farmed. Over the course of the early 1970s, the rights to some 1.1 million hectares were distributed to about 1 million households in southern Vietnam and the Mekong Delta, transforming them, in both practical and legal terms, into middle peasant smallholdings (Prosterman and Riedinger 1987:139).

The aim of these American-backed reforms was clear: to create a new class of “entrepreneurial small farmers” in the Mekong Delta, who “embraced liberal ideas of political and economic freedom,” as well as to introduce “capitalist relations” in agriculture (Porter 1993:28, 60). The creation of a newly landed class of middle peasants also invoked cultural norms to expand and improve production, since ownership status carried with it “a social responsibility to invest more and try harder, because a higher standard of living is expected of an owner-cultivator than of a lowly tenant” (Callison 1983:164). In conjunction with the relative weakness of the NLF insurgency in the rural Mekong Delta after the 1968 Tet Offensive, the Saigon government’s reforms helped to tie these new middle peasants into deepened relations of commercialization and market dependence. Significantly, 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, by the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, to bring the distribution of land and the organization of production into closer alignment with the moral economy of the Mekong Delta's former tenants, while at the same time transforming them into a class of landholding middle peasants who were deeply enmeshed in capitalist relations of agricultural production. For this reason, Elliott (2007:39) has characterized the communist insurgency as a "victim of its own success" in mobilizing tenants around a narrow vision of land reform rooted, as Hy Van Luong (1994:91) has noted, "in the premise of private ownership of land as a commodity, a premise constitutive of the capitalist mode of production that had been nurtured both through the French colonial incorporation of south Vietnam into the world market, and during the American war period." Upon reunification in 1975, the central authorities Hanoi found themselves tasked with the nearly impossible task of incorporating into an existing socialist system a region organized around the property relations of capitalist agriculture, and in which the dominant social formation, the new middle peasants, saw the world through a normative lens sharply at odds with the egalitarian and collectivist ideology of the party-state, itself largely the product of the historical and cultural 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, or a grievance which 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 tumult which characterized the post-war Mekong Delta.

With the end of the war and the reunification of Vietnam under the control of the communist government in Hanoi, the Mekong Delta's new middle peasants found that they were no longer the beneficiary, but now the target, of state land reforms, which prioritized their landholdings for redistribution to the poor and rural landless. This new policy, resting as it did on egalitarian principles alien to the moral economy of the delta's middle peasantry, lit a flame of resentment which smoldered 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.

### *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 Southeast Asia that first employs the concept in relation to the moral economy. In Scott's conceptualization, peasants in colonial Southeast Asia engaged in open rebellion only when a certain moral economic 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 which 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.

Shortly after establishing control over the region, the Hanoi government launched a new wave of land reforms – dubbed "adjustments," 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 a significant group of poor farmers with “no land or insufficient land” continued to live alongside the ranks of “rural capitalists and rich farmers” (Vu Oanh 1984:23). To redress these inequalities, the central government began a second wave of redistributive reforms in 1982, the aim of which was to force upper middle peasant households to “cede back that quantity of land which exceeds their household labor capacity” (Vu Oanh 1984:29) for redistribution to poor and landless households.

In total, more than 500,000 hectares were redistributed between 1976 and 1985, or about 25% of the total agricultural area in the Mekong Delta (Dang 2007:252). According to Lam Quang Huyen (1997:174), some 30% of rural households in the region were forced to surrender land in this period, ranging from rich and upper middle peasants capable of producing significant agricultural surplus on their “excess” land to “normal” middle peasants who produced little or no such surplus. A further 30%, mainly poor peasants and landless laborers, received land, which was distributed on a per capita basis.<sup>3</sup> As a result, inequalities in land ownership 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 1987:218-222).

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<sup>3</sup> 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 middle peasant households, or about 30% 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.

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*) which cut across former class lines, such attempts were continuously stymied by the persistence of peasant attachments to private property and market relations. In some cases, these extended to outright resistance to socialist reforms on the part of the middle 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 (Vo Nhan Tri 1990:79; Quang Truong 1987:267-268; Porter 1993:52-53). Some peasants even plotted assassinations of local officials, though such plots were generally disrupted before they reached fruition (Dang 2007:179; Luong 2003:7, 59).

It was not just the middle 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). Contemporary Vietnamese sources attributed such resistance to the “individualist” tendencies of the Mekong Delta peasantry (Quang Truong 1987:269) or to an ideology “heavily influenced by capitalist and feudal thoughts,” as one local cadre put it in an interview with Trung Dinh Dang (2007:120). What is clear, however, is that peasants in the Mekong Delta, both poor and non-poor, displayed strong normative attachments to notions of individual property and a deep-seated respect for ownership rights gained through a mix of revolutionary struggle and labor effort.

### *Political Opportunity*

Moving from such forms of small-scale, everyday resistance to the type of coordinated social action which might actually reverse the redistribution of land and restore ownership to the middle peasantry required, however, a moment of political opportunity. A confluence of circumstances in the late 1980s created such an opportunity, leading to an unprecedented opening for middle peasant mobilization within the normally rigid confines of Vietnam's one-party system. This moment of opportunity was rooted in three convergent developments: first, an economic and food security crisis which created the conditions for economic experimentation and deviations from socialist orthodoxy; second, shifts in the leadership of the Vietnamese state and Communist Party, which brought to the helm a new generation of cadres who were both amenable to market reforms and sympathetic to the interests of the Mekong Delta's middle peasants; and, third, an atmosphere of policy uncertainty which followed the announcement of *Doi Moi* reforms in the agricultural sector in early 1988.

By the mid-1980s, Vietnam was in the grip of a severe economic crisis. As the northern collectives collapsed from within and southern farmers fiercely resisted the Hanoi government's attempts to extract an agricultural surplus, grain procurement dropped. In the mid-1980s, some 40% 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 1993:976). Such conditions also raised the specter of political 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. To make matters worse, economic and political turmoil among Vietnam's benefactors in the Eastern Bloc brought drastic cuts in

foreign aid, forcing the communist leadership to look inward to resolve its growing food security crisis.

The 1980s were also, however, a time of profound leadership shifts within the Vietnamese Communist Party, as a new generation of reformers began to replace the dying old guard of revolutionary leaders. These reformers, the most notable of whom were 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), looked to the market mechanism for solutions to the problems of persistent under-production and social unrest. Significantly, both Linh and Kiet had significant links 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.

This cadre of reformists served, collectively, as the architects of a set of policies known as *Doi Moi*, or “renovation.” While the proceedings of the Sixth Party Congress in 1986 outlined the general thrust of *Doi Moi* and called special attention to the Mekong Delta as a region of untapped productive potential (Vo Tong Xuan 1995:192), a specific plan for the decollectivization of agriculture was not unveiled until the spring of 1988, when the Politburo released a document known as “Resolution 10.” What this new policy document called for was the complete 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

currently existing, and largely egalitarian, distribution of land in the Mekong Delta 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 5/18/1988). This uncertainty, in turn, created a moment of political opportunity readily seized upon by the middle peasantry, who took to the fields and streets of southern Vietnam to demand the return of their lost holdings.

### **Case Studies: The Politics of Land Privatization**

To an extent and scale never before seen in post-war Vietnam, middle peasant protestors engaged, over the summer and fall 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.<sup>4</sup> 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 4/15/1992). 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 in the summer of 1988 (BHG 8/10/1988), and farmers in Cuu Long province are reported to have marched on the provincial capital of Vinh Long to protest injustices in the allocation of land on October 11th (Hiebert 1989:19). In many other cases, former owners simply re-occupied disputed plots and forcibly displaced their current inhabitants.

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<sup>4</sup> As Trung Dinh Dang (2007:316-317) 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.

Using a mix of newspaper accounts and secondary sources, I have constructed below a series of case studies which illustrate the ways in which these middle peasant protestors drew upon and articulated a particular moral economy of property in order to press claims against the state and other social actors, including the rural poor now occupying their former holdings. Though these accounts differ in their particularities, they are linked, first, by the interlocking arguments which middle peasant 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 middle peasant land claimants, meanwhile, engage in the symbolic clearance and cultivation of disputed plots to shore up their claims. In addition, these same middle peasant land claimants frequently invoke their revolutionary service and labor in the pursuit of land claims, emphasizing the historical link between the land reforms of the NLF and the class aspirations of the "new" middle peasants. 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 middle peasants. First, though sources tell of conflict between middle peasant land claimants and the current occupiers of disputed parcels – namely 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 middle peasant land claims 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

middle peasants, in the process articulating a reformist, pro-market discourse which explicitly linked land ownership with the capacity of farmers to engage in “commodity production” (*san xuat hang hoa*) (FBIS 11/15/1988).

*Example 1: Tien Giang Province (Source: Agence France-Presse via FBIS)*

In a story carried by the AFP in November of 1988, a farmer in Tien Giang province by the name of Chu Duc Danh is interviewed by journalist Jean-Claude Chapon (FBIS 11/25/1988). Before 1975, Chu Duc Danh was relatively affluent, owning nine hectares of agricultural land. With the coming of communist rule in 1975, he distributed seven hectares to his children, keeping two for himself. In 1983, the local government took one hectare and distributed it to a landless household. In the summer of 1988, however, he re-occupied 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.”

*Example 2: Ben Tre Province (Source: Tuoi Tre Newspaper)*

An Hiep commune, Ben Tre province, as profiled in *Tuoi Tre* newspaper in the fall of 1988 (TT 11/26/1988), had initially been at the forefront of the

collectivization movement; when a collective farm was created there in 1979, 95% 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 favored 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 re-location to the province of Dong Thap, in the Plain of Reeds, where land could still be cleared and settled, promising them 5,000 to 7,000 square meters per person.

*Example 3: Binh Chanh, Ho Chi Minh City (Source: Tuo Tre Newspaper)*

Emboldened by news that the government in neighboring Long An province was returning land to its former owners, farmers in Binh Chanh, a rural commune on the southwestern edge of Ho Chi Minh City, began demanding the restitution of their former plots in the summer of 1988 (TT 7/12/1988). In total, 108 farmers filed petitions to reclaim land, while 19 former land owners 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 middle peasant 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 land ownership in the commune, he instead decided to re-occupy 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 a exemplar for others for quite some time, and always fulfills 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 6/25/1988).

*Example 4: Hau Giang Province (Source: Thanh Nien Newspaper)*

In the fall of 1988, reporters from *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 middle peasant land petitioners. Many in the area had been forced to surrender 75 to 80% 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 re-occupied their former holdings without waiting for a resolution of their claims (TN 11/21/1988).

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, the middle peasant petitioners “only had a few thousand square meters; there was no excess of land.” 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 middle peasants “just want to have our land returned to us. If we need to make allowances for the poor or for veterans and invalids, fine, but absolutely not for those people who sell the land” or fail to cultivate it.

*Example 5: An Giang Province (Source: Trung Dinh Dang)*

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 laborer, 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 nguai khac*) to make a living" (Dang 2007:309).

By the late summer and early fall 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 middle 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; Hiebert 1989:19; SGGP 11/11/88). These manifestations of middle peasant 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 the Mekong Delta’s middle 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 Nguoi Khang chien cu*). Comprised of NLF veterans from the former South Vietnam, the Club pushed for economic reforms and more political openness (Abuza 2001:161-182), making common cause with both party officials, including the reformer Vo Van Kiet, and with the middle peasant protesters, to whom they lent organizational and moral support (Wain 1989; Thayer 1992).

The mere fact that such open protests were not immediately suppressed itself points to the emergence of a tentative alliance between party reformers, organized veterans, and the restive middle peasantry, forming what Ravallion and van de Walle (2008:177) have dubbed a “pro-reform coalition.” The combination of middle peasant 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 11/15/1988).

In official rhetoric, this decision to side with the middle peasant was framed in a way which justified inequalities in both outcomes and in initial land endowments by reference to “hard work” and productive capacity. While General Secretary 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 4/20/88). 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” be allocated more than “those who are lazy” (BHG 4/12/1989).

### **Implications: From Moral Economy to Political-Economic Divergence**

As I have argued above, historical patterns of settlement, relations of production, and experiences of political struggle led to the formation and articulation of a distinct moral economy in the Mekong Delta, rooted in the experience of the Delta’s former tenants, or “new” middle peasants. This particular moral economy, and the restitutorial movement it engendered, was unique within Vietnam, leading to a far different process of land privatization than prevailed elsewhere in the country. This difference in the initial distribution had, in turn, profound implications for the

direction of economic and social development in the region during the 1990s and early 2000s, leading to sharp divergences between the Mekong Delta and similar agricultural areas, such as the Red River Delta in northern Vietnam.

Though the resolution of land disputes in the Mekong Delta took several years, concluding only in the mid-1990s, disputes were generally resolved in the favor of previous (pre-1975) owners (Lam Quang Huyen 1997:175), in line with official policies outlined in Decree 47. Field work 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 distribution which prevailed after the “land to the tiller” reforms of the early 1970s, while work by Luong Hong Quang (1997:116-122) in Tien Giang finds a similar pattern of restitution. As one upper-middle peasant in An Giang recalled to Trung Dinh Dang, “thanks to Mr. Linh, I could retrieve half of my land [or about 10 out of 20 hectares] 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 commercial 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 12/21/1988 and 1/18/89) and similar re-accumulation was reported as well 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 1992-1993 (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%, while the Gini index for agricultural land ownership was 0.51, among the highest in Vietnam (Brandt et al. 2006:Table 5).<sup>5</sup> Not only did the region demonstrate significant polarization in land ownership, but it also had the highest level of reported income inequality of any 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 it 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 middle and upper-middle peasants endowed with the “resources with which to respond to favorable market conditions” were able to expand and accumulate (Ngo Vinh Long 1993:184; Dang Phong 1995). As Beresford and Prota (2012) argue, access to land has been a necessary, but not sufficient, means of achieving upward social mobility among

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<sup>5</sup> 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.

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% of the rural population, and largely derived their income from precarious seasonal employment on commercial farms (Brandt et al. 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 which would favor 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 to adopt a more egalitarian, per capita distribution strategy (Dang Canh Khanh 1991:348). Ngo Vinh Long (1993:198), for example, describes how “peasants 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.’”

The consequence of such collective pressure was to create an egalitarian land distribution which entrenched within the agrarian social structure of northern Vietnam



a broad stratum of extremely small-scale, lower-middle peasant farmers, most of whom cultivated plots totaling half a hectare or less (Ngo Vinh Long 1993:183). Concerns over distributional equity so trumped questions of efficiency during the allocation process that land was classified and ranked by quality, proximity, and grade, with each household receiving an equivalent mix of land types. The end result of this process, however, was the extreme parcelization and dispersal of already small holdings, which thus constrained the mechanization and commercialization of agriculture over the 1990s and 2000s.

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). For example, a 1993 survey of several provinces in the region shows that the vast majority of peasant households (about 70%) were either producing at a subsistence level (that is, producing enough to meet household needs) or were slightly above the subsistence level and marketing a small surplus (Dao The Tuan 1997:158-159). The same survey data also shows minimal income inequality and extremely low food insecurity, demonstrating a low degree of social polarization in other aspects of production and distribution. 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 laborers has been virtually non-existent in the Red River Delta. For example, Luong (2010:223-224) reports that in his study site in Phu Tho province, no “villager had to rely exclusively or primarily on selling his/her labor 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 middle peasants, I have identified one of the key factors behind that region’s emergence as a center of commercial agriculture 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 (Hy Van Luong 2010; Sikor 2004; McElwee 2007) 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-oriented agriculture in this region, the existence of a very different moral

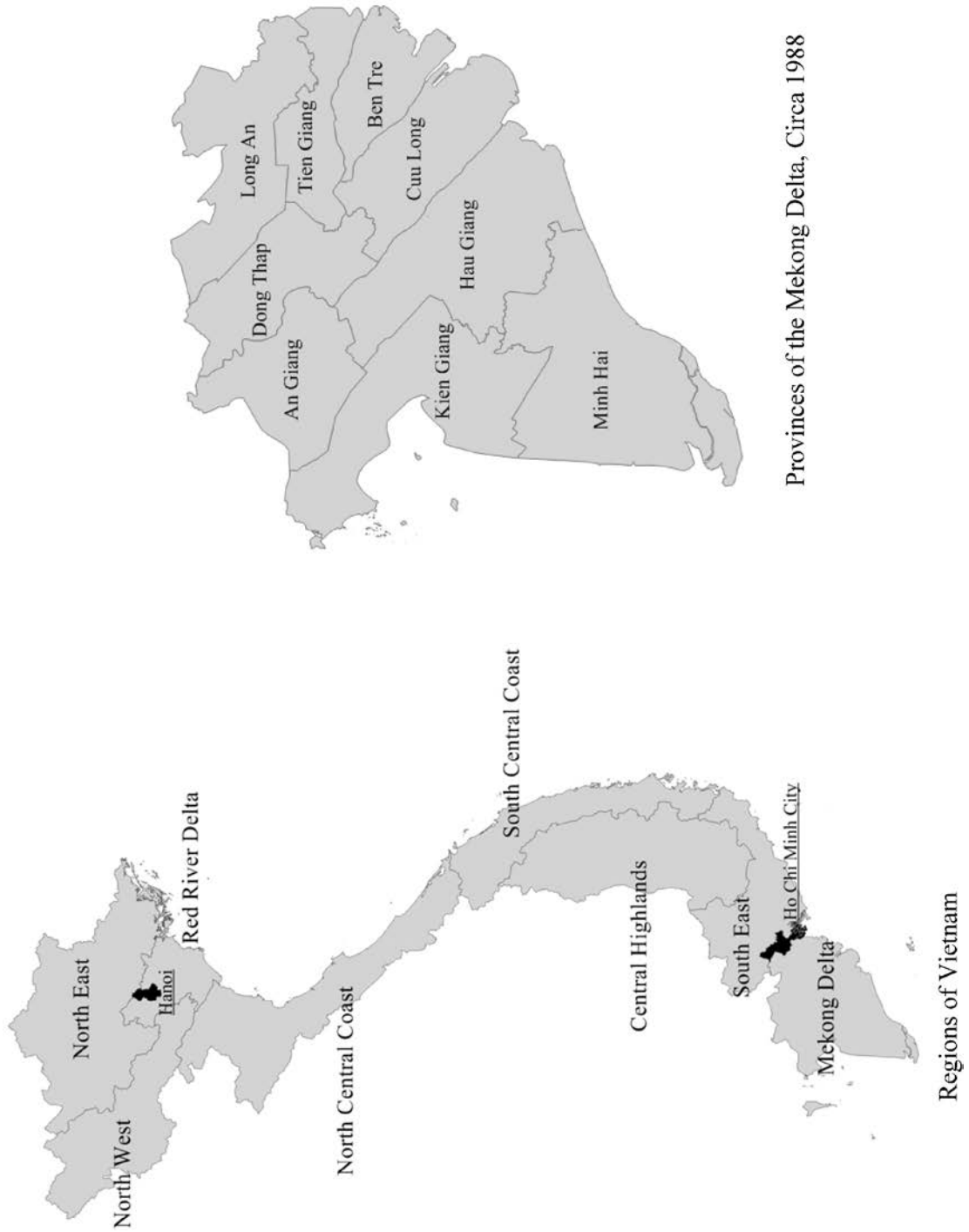
economy in the Mekong Delta has instead given rise to a more skewed distribution of land, and thus laid the groundwork for the rapid re-emergence of agrarian capitalism.

The divergence between north and south, and the particular path which 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 which 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, the middle peasants, and by cementing a particular moral economy of property within the political economy of the Mekong Delta, these conflicts helped to entrench neo-liberal 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. Thus, the moral economy of property which I have discussed above provided the foundation upon which a new set of neo-liberal economic relations have been articulated in the post-reform period.

Though this study has focused on the land conflicts of the late 1980s, the land question is as urgent now as it was then, and conflicting notions of distributive justice are once again being brought to the fore of Vietnamese politics. Titles to agricultural land in Vietnam are governed by the 1993 Land Law, but are valid only for 20 years, and thus will soon begin to expire. As of yet, the precise way in which this issue will be resolved remains unclear, but two outcomes are possible: either current land ownership rights will be extended, essentially converting them to permanent tenure, or the state will exercise its legal prerogative and attempt to alleviate growing inequalities through some form of land redistribution. The stage is thus set for a new

round of conflict and protest around land issues, and though much has changed in Vietnam over the past two decades, one can be certain that groups will mobilize around shared notions of distributive justice to make moral arguments about land ownership and use, just as they did in the 1980s. Then as now, moral economy will shape the terrain upon which new forms of political economy are contested and constructed, and significant regional differences in moral economy may once again lead to the uneven application of policy and to increasingly divergent trajectories of socio-economic development.

APPENDIX I: MAPS OF VIETNAM



## APPENDIX II: TIMELINE OF KEY EVENTS

- 1862: Establishment of French colony (Cochinchina) in Southern Vietnam.
- 1927: Ninh Thanh Loi uprising.
- 1930-1931: Depression-era protests and land occupations across the Mekong Delta.
- 1945-1954: First Indochina War pits the French against the Viet Minh insurgency. Land reforms carried out in areas of Viet Minh control.
- 1954: Independence and partition. Ngo Dinh Diem assumes presidency of South Vietnam.
- 1960: National Liberation Front formed to coordinate anti-Diem insurgency in South Vietnam. Land reform efforts in “liberated areas” begin and persist for the duration of the war.
- 1963: Diem assassinated.
- 1964: Tonkin Gulf Resolution, escalation of U.S. troop commitment.
- 1965: Nguyen Van Thieu assumes presidency of South Vietnam.
- 1968: Tet Offensive.
- 1970-1973: South Vietnamese government implements “Land to the Tiller” reforms.
- 1975: End of hostilities, reunification of Vietnam under communist control.
- 1976-1979: Vietnamese government launches first round of land redistribution in the south, targeting landlords and collaborators.
- 1982-1984: Second wave of redistributive reform targets land holdings of middle and upper peasants, which are allocated to the landless and rural poor.
- 1986: *Doi Moi* (“renovation”) policy of economic reform launched at the Sixth National Conference of the Vietnamese Communist Party. Nguyen Van Linh ascends to position of General Secretary.
- 03/1988: Vo Van Kiet becomes acting Prime Minister.

- 04/1988: “Resolution 10” reforms in the agricultural sector announced, marking the formal return of private land tenure.
- 04-08/1988: Protests over land erupt in the Mekong Delta, culminating in march of middle peasants on Ho Chi Minh City in mid-August.
- 08/1988: Central Committee issues “Directive 47” in late August, calling for restitution of land to former owners in the Mekong Delta.
- 11/1988: Second march of middle peasants on Ho Chi Minh City. Party leadership chides local officials for slow pace of land restitution in the Mekong Delta.
- 1993: New land law cements the long-term rights of those allocated land in the decollectivization process. These rights are re-affirmed and broadened by revisions to the land law in 2003.

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