



# H-Environment

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## H-Environment Roundtable Reviews

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Jacob Darwin Hamblin

**David Biggs, *Quagmire: Nation-Building and Nature in the Mekong Delta*** (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010). ISBN: 978-0-295-99067-5. Hardback. 300 pp.

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**Introduction by Jacob Darwin Hamblin, Oregon State University**

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**V**ietnam and “the environment” seem to go hand in hand. After all, the experience of the Vietnam War is a fundamental chapter in most narratives of the rise of global environmental consciousness. The environmental movement of the 1960s and early 1970s shared many of the same participants with the movement against the Vietnam War. Some of the most egregious widespread damage to the natural environment (and human health) took place during the decade-long American herbicide campaigns of the war. Even the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, a precursor to the UN Environment Programme, was widely perceived as a reaction to American activities in Vietnam. In charting the past, our attention often focuses on those years of immense ecological transformation and heightened awareness.

An almost entirely separate literature exists on “modernization” schemes of economic development, the failures of which have been subjects of high-profile books such as James C. Scott’s *Seeing Like a State*.<sup>1</sup> In Vietnam, French colonial administrators and over-confident American nation-builders tried to bulldoze and engineer Vietnam’s way to economic prosperity. Their shortcomings have been traced to many causes, such as inattention to local knowledge, desires, and capabilities. Rarely has the natural world itself featured in a starring role. That is, until now.

In *Quagmire*, **David Biggs** has written a book that, on the face of it, requires no introduction. For most Americans, the word “Quagmire” is already associated with the war in Vietnam. Why not take a metaphor and make it literal? It seems to be an ideal vehicle for exploring the actual uses of land and water in Vietnam through its troubled history. However, the book is not specifically about the American war in Vietnam, but rather takes a longer view, trying to understand the role of pre- and post-colonial experts, Vietnamese people, and the landscape itself, in making or breaking economic schemes.

To comment on this roundtable, I solicited scholars with a range of historical and anthropological interests, all of whom have written about environmental change in Southeast Asia. **Greg Bankoff**’s work has focused primarily on the Philippines. His recent research has focused on the idea of natural disasters, and the ways in which human societies denote them as such.<sup>2</sup> In the Philippines, he writes, disasters are simply a fact of life, but we assess their effects through a very narrow lens. By contrasting the impacts of events (such as floods) on humans and on livestock, he has shown how “natural disasters” were constructed almost entirely in relation to

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<sup>1</sup> James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Greg Bankoff, *Cultures of Disaster: Society and Natural Hazard in the Philippines* (London: RoutledgeCurzon Press, 2003).

effects on human communities, rendering the animals' roles (and their vulnerabilities) virtually invisible to the historian.<sup>3</sup>

**David Zierler** shares with David Biggs the distinction of having recently written a book that blends environmental history, history of science, and the history of Vietnam. Their approaches differ in that Zierler's work addresses the influence of the Agent Orange controversy—part of the massive herbicide spraying program conducted by the U.S. Air Force during the American war—on American scientists and the environmental movement. Zierler's *The Invention of Ecocide* was the subject of *H-Environment Roundtable Reviews* 2:1 (2012).<sup>4</sup>

**Holly High**'s research also focuses on Southeast Asia, specifically on Laos. High brings an anthropologist's perspective to this roundtable, reflecting her work on concepts of desire in everyday politics and economy. Her past work has shown how changes in landscape are inscriptions of science, planning, politics, and often violent intervention, and that these changes continue to influence people's outlooks. "To be in Vieng Say today," she writes of a village in Laos, thirty years after the end of American bombing, "to walk among the caves, gardens, fields and homesteads, is to walk in a violent landscape."<sup>5</sup>

**John Kleinen** is a historian and anthropologist with a keen interest in Vietnam's history. He began his career by studying anti-colonial peasant movements, and in recent years he has looked more closely at global and regional changes in climate, water levels, and land use.<sup>6</sup> His study of Pierre Gourou, the French colonial geographer who penned a 1936 study of the Red River Delta of northern Vietnam, underlines the persistence of certain geographic ideas, despite enormous political and social changes since the 1940s.<sup>7</sup>

Before turning to the first set of comments, I would like to pause here and thank all the roundtable participants for taking part. In addition, I would like to remind readers that as an open-access forum, *H-Environment Roundtable Reviews* is available to scholars and non-scholars alike, around the world, free of charge. Please circulate.

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<sup>3</sup> Greg Bankoff, "Bodies on the Beach: Domesticates and Disasters in the Spanish Philippines, 1750-1898," *Environment and History* 13:3 (2007), 285-306.

<sup>4</sup> David Zierler, *The Invention of Ecocide: Agent Orange, Vietnam, and the Scientists Who Changed the Way We Think About the Environment* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Holly High, "Violent Landscape: Global Explosions and Lao Life-Worlds," *Global Environment* 1:1 (2005), 58-81.

<sup>6</sup> John Kleinen, *Facing the Future, Reviving the Past: A Study of Social Change in a Northern Vietnamese Village* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> John Kleinen, "Tropicality and Topicality: Pierre Gourou and the Genealogy of French Colonial Scholarship on Rural Vietnam," *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 26 (2005), 339-58.

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**Comments by Greg Bankoff, University of Hull**

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**I**n many respects, David Biggs has written "an epic". It is one about an enduring landscape upon which has been wrought any number of misbegotten and ill-advised "improvements" and an equally steadfast and long-suffering peasantry who have continued to cultivate the land despite all the vicissitudes placed upon them by Nature and the State. No, this is not another history of the parched moonscapes of the United States' Midwestern Dust Bowl but rather one about the waterlogged marshes and swamps of South Vietnam's Mekong Delta. If Biggs has one message to impart it is about the constancy of the land in the face of repeated efforts at subjugation and incorporation by the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial state. *Quagmire* is an environmental history that sketches in the "invisible map" of the terrain upon which the history of this deltaic region is etched. The quagmires that are the focus of this book are more than simply the political and military ones that readers with an interest in Indochina are more accustomed to and include, as well, the literal ones that constitute a large proportion of the landscape.

The terrain is the principal protagonist in this story. Brooding, threatening and volatile, it underpins the entire narrative putting paid to the ambitions of Nguyen emperors, French colonialists, and American engineers alike. The endeavours of these outsiders, only really differentiated in terms of the increasing technology at their disposal, are shown to be abortive, their triumphs short-lived as the relentless "enemy", water, soon reclaims its lost domains. After a brief introduction that deals with the delta's troubled pre-colonial past, the two first chapters chart colonial alterations to the water landscape. Biggs shows how colonial expansion was less dependent on locomotives, gunboats and machine guns than elsewhere. In this aqueous world, the steam dredge was the instrument of colonial pacification *par excellence* and the French were intent on "turning the region into a vast, hydroagricultural machine" (p.58). Dredging, draining and digging their way across the landscape, they tried to convert the marshes and swamps of the Delta into a mathematical grid of rectangular fields where settlers, some from as far away as the North, might transform the land into productive farms. The end result of French failures is described in Chapter Three. What these projects created were "schizophrenic spaces": on the one hand, a colonial world built upon a floating infrastructure of railways and roads and a native one that continued to occupy an older landscape of creeks and footpaths. Running parallel to this ecological narrative is another story of rising resentment and anger at deteriorating social conditions fuelled by the Great Depression, the floods of 1937 and 1938, and World War II. The environmental effects of protracted warfare begin to commandeer the narrative from this point on. The rise of the Viet Minh and the French attempt to re-impose their colonial rule constitutes Chapter Four. The first Indochina War led to what Biggs calls the "Balkanisation" of the delta region as both farmers and political leaders renegotiated the terms of land tenure, taxation, and the purview of the state. Many of the United States-initiated development plans detailed in Chapters Five and

Six expand on the ideas of colonial-era engineers. Supplementing the dredge as an icon of modernisation, the boat engine, radio and motor pump came to play a larger role in the delta's history. While the former increasingly became a target for Viet Minh and Vietcong attacks as repressive symbols of the new U.S. imperialism, the latter proved readily adaptable to both the environment and the manner of resistance. Even the boom that accompanied peace and unification has posed its own problems with ever-expanding population and flood threatening to overwhelm river- and sea-dikes and drowning much of the reclaimed farmland. Biggs's narrative is one about the failure of state-building and the resilience of the environment.

"Water cultures" have been characteristic of many societies from the Middle East to Europe, the Americas to Eastern Asia. The technical and social demands of water control have been linked to the emergence of centralising bureaucracies, unitary empires and despotic rule.<sup>8</sup> More recently, too, scholars have begun to talk about "amphibious states" or *civilisations d'eau*, hydraulic societies such as the Venetian Republic and the United Provinces, whose wealth and prosperity in the early modern period dependent upon their management and control over water and what was transported upon it.<sup>9</sup> Surprisingly little has been written about the historical role of water management and "state-building" in South East Asian societies, with the important exception of Stephen Lansing's work on Balinese Water Temples.<sup>10</sup> But then environmental histories of the region are still fairly scarce on the ground. Biggs's contribution to historiography is twofold. On the one hand, the environmental aspects of the study can obscure its overall contribution to the history of the region: *Quagmire*, first and foremost, significantly adds to an understanding of how difficult it proved to incorporate Cochinchina into the Vietnamese state regardless of the ethnic origins of those who sat in power at Hanoi. The significant division in the region's historiography has always been between Mainland and Maritime Southeast Asia with Vietnam firmly placed in the former. Biggs shows how this division, at least in some parts, is more perceptual than real with the swamps, marshes and waterways of the Mekong Delta having, perhaps, more in common with the islands of the Indonesian and Philippine Archipelagos – and posing the same kinds of problems for those wishing to bend the land and its peoples to their authority.

However, it is as a work of environmental history that the study makes such a major contribution. What is most interesting here is not so much the focus on the environment and its various ecologies *per se* but the way in which this is linked to

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<sup>8</sup> Karl Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (New Haven,: Yale University Press, 1957; Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* New York: Bedminster Press, 1968); Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (Harmsworth: Penguin, 1976).

<sup>9</sup> Salvatore Ciriaco, *Building on Water: Venice, Holland and the Construction of the European Landscape in Early Modern Times* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> J. Stephen Lansing, *Priests and Programmers: Technology of Power in the Engineered Landscape of Bali* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

the political structures of the state. Nature is not just something that lies out there, in the boondocks so to speak of forests, mountains and marshes. Rather, Biggs places the landscape at the heart of the nation-building process: French and American steam dredges were not simply carving out the land into a pattern of rectilinear deep-water channels but they were equally constructing the colonial state. And just as the foundations of this "floating state" (p.50) were only precariously supported by the ground beneath it, extending little beyond the narrow confines of the edge of rivers, canals and highways, so its structure was being continuously undermined not only by the actions of local people but by the reassertion of pre-colonial drainage patterns. Nation-building, concludes Biggs, failed not only politically but also ecologically (p.195). This perspective provides an important new dimension to understanding the history of southern Vietnam and of the French and American endeavours there from the mid-nineteenth to the late twentieth century.

Returning to the notion of epic – that the land and the people endure despite all the vicissitudes of an uncompromising nature and intractable colonial administration – what is strangely lacking in this tale is the latter. While the deltaic ecosystem is bequeathed an unrelenting sense of purpose, its denizens are largely two-dimensional figures that never really emerge from the marshes, swamps and forests in which they dwell. They remain in the background: nameless farmers, faceless bureaucrats, colonial engineers or fighters in the shadows. It is the land that is endowed with a sense of agency rather than its peoples. In foregrounding the environment, Biggs has rather lost sight of its inhabitants, at least as individuals. The state clearly has agency but the people seem to be more pawns moved hither and thither about the landscape's checkerboard of waterways. It is not only a question of human society affecting the environment but of the environment acting on society or what Anthony Oliver-Smith calls the "mutuality" between the two that is the very essence of environmental history.<sup>11</sup> The shadowy nature of the human presence is no more perfectly shown than in Biggs's rather "bland" treatment of flood, surely one of the most dramatic interactions between "Man", State and Nature. Tropical cyclones, storm surges, floods and saltwater intrusion occur with regularity in the Mekong Delta. Vietnam is often struck by ten or more typhoons each year: eighteen, for instance, in 1964, twelve in 1973, twelve again in 1978 and ten in 1989. These floods are sometimes beneficial, restoring fishery resources, improving navigation, depositing silt to restore soil fertility and flushing out contaminated waters but they also inflict a heavy economic cost, damaging infrastructure and destroying people's livelihoods.<sup>12</sup> Floods, of course, do get a mention in the text but their relative absence from the narrative is hard to fathom.

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<sup>11</sup> Anthony Oliver-Smith, *Theorizing Disasters: Nature, Power, and Culture* in Anthony Oliver-Smith and by Susanna M. Hoffman eds., *Catastrophe and Culture: The Anthropology of Disaster* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 2002), 23–47.

<sup>12</sup> Huu Ninh Nguyen, *Flooding in Mekong River Delta, Viet Nam* (UNDP Human Development Report Office: Occasional Paper 53, 2007).

All in all, however, this book is an important contribution both to the historiography of Southeast Asia and to environmental history. By focusing on the relationship between what Erik van der Vleuten and Cornelis Disco have termed the “manipulation of wet nature” and state-building,<sup>13</sup> Biggs is able to provide an environmental history of Vietnam that for once is not dominated by Agent Orange, bomb craters and war. In fact, one of the refreshing aspects of this history is how relatively little the First and Second Indochina Wars figure in the narrative. Instead, this is a story about the continuity of the landscape and its resistance to change and how many of today's problems in the delta are currently "newer versions of much older problems and tensions in the region" (p.231).

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<sup>13</sup> Erik van der Vleuten and Cornelis Disco, “Water Wizards: Reshaping Wet Nature and Society”, *History and Technology* 20, 3 (2004): 291-309.



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**Comments by David Zierler, U.S. Department of State**

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Please pardon the immediate hydro-cliché, but it must be said: David Biggs's *Quagmire* is a watershed in the thirty-some-odd-year maturation process of the environmental history sub-field. The narrative's sharp and sustained focus on the agency of environmental factors in shaping human history recalls the early, arguably "pure" environmental history epitomized by William Cronon's *Changes in the Land* and Richard White's *Land Use, Environment, and Social Change*. Like these landmark studies, Biggs eschews much of the political and social context that would explain how a given group of people found themselves in a given area of land. As in Cronon's colonial New England and White's pioneer Northwest, Biggs takes on his subject at the point of interaction between people and terrain. From this literary pedigree the fundamental purpose of *Quagmire* is not surprising: the ebb and flow of the Mekong Delta in South Vietnam has exerted a far greater role in the colonial and neo-colonial history of Southeast Asia than historians have heretofore recognized.

What this idea lacks in historiographic novelty it more than makes up in geographic scope. For at least the first twenty years in the environmental history sub-field, a casual observer might note that the agency of the natural environment in human history was strictly a North American phenomenon. Of course this bias had nothing to do with any uniqueness of the United States and Canada, but instead reflected area expertise and language competencies in extant graduate history programs. Interestingly, some of the most cogent arguments in favor of "globalizing" environmental history came not from the "pure" school but from historians with diplomatic interests who understood that the natural environment could not be understood strictly within the confines of political boundaries.<sup>14</sup>

*Quagmire* is by no means the first book to take the standard environmental history framework out of its North American comfort zone. But it is easily one of the best. This is true for two reasons. First, Biggs demonstrates powerfully that the Mekong Delta system is among the planet's most dynamic and spectacular phenomena. His case is not that of an historian's armchair observation: Biggs delves into hydrology, cartography, and aquaculture to give the reader a vivid and fulsome understanding of the Delta. The author moves the narrative along with a lively and easy style—one that would lend itself well should Biggs find himself as the talking head historian for a *National Geographic* special on the Mekong. Second, Biggs's ability to transport the reader to the Delta region sets the stage for the inevitable civilizational clash—first the French, then the Japanese, then the French again, and then finally the Americans—which takes up the bulk of the narrative.

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<sup>14</sup> Kurk Dorsey, "Dealing with the Dinosaur (and Its Swamp): Putting the Environment In Diplomatic History," (Bernath Lecture) *Diplomatic History* 29:4 (September 2005): 573-587.



It is a masterful pairing, for the history of colonialism and neo-colonialism in Indochina is at least as intense and unpredictable as the natural environs on which it plays out. Biggs moves effortlessly between silt and alluvial flooding to colonial naval strategy, and that is precisely the point: one cannot understand the history of foreign conquest and indigenous resistance as if this struggle played out on solid ground. Biggs never makes clear if his decision not to explain the pre-history of colonial interests in Indochina is based on an assumption of contextual knowledge brought by readers, an act of emulating the classic works of environmental history, or simply his lack of interest in the topic. It is a fair question, especially for a book titled *Quagmire*. The ease with which the Delta repeatedly stymied the goals of its occupiers makes one wonder: what was it about this boggy land that compelled outside powers to attempt to tame it, seemingly against all odds?

Nevertheless, Biggs's clear explication of the human-nature dynamic is certain to illuminate even the most well-read scholars from any number of diverse fields covered in this book. I would wager that few experts have ever appreciated the role of dredging in France's *mission civilisatrice*, or how the Kohler Company of Wisconsin unwittingly—and quite literally—helped turn the tide of the American War (please excuse this second and final cliché).

These are just two of the many vignettes that speak to Biggs's accomplishment. Indeed, one of the delights in reading *Quagmire* is to experience the author's total immersion in his topic. This is not the work of a scholar who gained language proficiency for the sake of reading a few documents in a foreign archive. Biggs's passion for his topic comes across both in the minor details and in the way he peppers the narrative with Vietnamese terms and definitions. In lesser hands, this tendency would have become a tedious distraction, even unnecessarily boastful. But for Biggs, it had the effect of rooting the narrative in a very particular time and place, which is, after all, precisely the point.

*Quagmire's* keen sense of space does leave one major question lingering, although any attempt to answer it is well out of Biggs's purview. The book unequivocally demonstrates the magnitude of both the natural and human drama that has gone on in the Delta since the mid nineteenth century. Perhaps the scale of this interaction has no rival anywhere else during the West's five hundred year project of colonial domination. But what does this new history of the Mekong Delta tell us about the broader history of colonialism and neo-colonialism? Was what happened in Indochina truly unique or merely similar on a grander scale than any number of colonial adventures in Latin America, Africa, and elsewhere in Asia? The onus of providing an answer certainly does not rest squarely on Biggs; still, the question is sure to come up in comparative graduate history seminars. Given the interactive nature of this roundtable, and the unique opportunities it gives to reviewers, I conclude eager to read the author's response.

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**Comments by Holly High, University of Sidney and University of Cambridge**

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**I**n *Quagmire*, David Biggs skillfully builds up the layers of insight and information needed to view the Mekong Delta as a composite. The Delta bears the imprint of colonial projects, wars, ambitious modernization schemes, modest initiatives, and particular personalities. And always and everywhere Biggs draws our attention to insistent environmental factors: the unique Delta landscape mixes freshwater with sea, peat with clay, and enormous fertility with devastating floods and fire. It is the interplay between individuals, institutions, technologies and environments that Biggs sets out to track. Each has left traces on the others, and together their meshing, conflict and compromise over time presents us with the Delta as we see it today.

Biggs is particularly interested in institutional attempts to transform this landscape. He begins with the scene of a French gunboat entering a decayed canal in the Delta, attempting to chart a waterway. This soon gave way to ambitious plans to restore canals, dredge new ones, drain swampy areas and control flooding so that the area could be more densely settled and cultivated, and thus more firmly entrenched in the nation. Biggs notes that these grand schemes often had a haphazard character and failed to meet their explicit objectives, although he also emphasizes that not all did: there were sometimes unexpected successes. And even when schemes failed, they nonetheless had important effects, even if unintended. The intensification of warfare in the region during the first and second Indochina wars, for instance, entailed some restoration of “wilderness” as fledging settlements, waterways and fields were abandoned or destroyed (p150). Biggs also notes that successive administrators – from the colonial to the contemporary state – have faced remarkably similar problems in the region, and responses to these have also been remarkably similar. More than once he refers to the attempts to tame the Delta as “works of Penelope”: they are unending because they cannot find a sure footing in the muddy and shifting soils of the Delta.

This is a landscape that lends itself to metaphors, and Biggs exploits these often. The title of the book is only the most obvious example: the quagmire of the landscape reflects the quagmire of policy. He also speaks of the U.S. dredges that became so inactive during the war as symbolic of U.S. paralysis more generally in Vietnam (203). A bridge that collapsed into the water, killing hundreds, is a symbol of the uncertain terrain of so many development schemes in the region. These ecologically-inspired metaphors are difficult to resist: they are numerous and apt for the story that Biggs wants to tell.

At times, this account is a sobering one of immense suffering. One can't help but feel for the women forced to clear productive fields and orchards to make way for the barren “agrovilles” of the Diem era, for instance. But there are moments of triumph in Biggs's account, too: the Kohler engine emerges as an unlikely hero. It was used as

an outboard motor and then as an irrigation pump to such an extent that it transformed the Delta hydrology, where the larger grand schemes had failed (p209). Ordinary farmers emerge as hero figures, too: with their adept negotiation of environments and administrations they displayed “a kind of postmodern, pioneering ethic that required innovation... as well as constant readiness to pay off the local tax authorities regardless of affiliation” (p221).

However, I was left wondering what such locals might say of this landscape. Has the landscape entered their language to provide metaphors such as those Biggs employs? Does the Vietnamese word for “quagmire,” for instance, indicate the same kind of entanglement of effort and failure as it does in the English language? Has the long bureaucratic and written tradition of this area produced a similarly rich vocabulary for speaking of the difficulties and pitfalls of governing? What, if anything, would be the Vietnamese version of the phrase a “work of Penelope”? What mythological references from the area pepper the language and tell us about local environments and the attempt to govern them? I imagine the parallels and differences between a Vietnamese metaphorical vocabulary and the one Biggs employs would be illuminating. My question, essentially, is this: is there a way of making a *Vietnamese* environmental history, rather than just an environmental history that refers to a part of Vietnam but is based on conventions from elsewhere? What would it look like if we drew on Vietnamese concepts, mythological references and metaphors to chart environmental history? This is a question about the theoretical grounding of environmental history.

In general, Biggs steers clear of theoretical discussions. The exception is an intriguing few pages (p122-125) where he mentions Deleuze and Guattari, using their ideas of “schizophrenic flows” from their, now classic, *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Yet in other areas, where it might seem more obvious to use Deleuzian concepts such as smooth and striated space, or territorialization, deterritorialization and reterritorialization (such as on page 129) Biggs does not. Likewise, the references to the time-space compression brought about by new technologies, discussed in the final chapter, put me in mind of David Harvey, although Biggs did not provide an explicit discussion of that author. This now-you-see-it, now-you-don’t theoretical deployment suggests a certain discomfort. Perhaps the author wanted to use theory without being beholden to it. Or perhaps it has become a convention in environmental history to eschew the excesses of theory that have so burdened other parts of academia, where it seems at times that theory is received from continental philosophers and then applied, subserviently, to real-world studies. My thoughts on this point are not meant as a critique of Biggs, but are rather the observations of an outsider: my own discipline is anthropology, and I was struck by the very subdued role theory took in this book by comparison to my usual reading.

The author presented me instead with details of the Delta: details upon details, a swamp of detail it seemed at times. The author dealt with a complex ecology and history, and at points it seemed a struggle to make an engaging story from this that

would be of interest to a wider audience. But here, again, theory plays a role because as much as they divide academics, they also unite us in a common field of debate. If I can be forgiven for pushing the metaphor of quagmire a little further, let me suggest that theories, too, lie submerged in the flows of our writing, whether we like it or not. Dredging up unexamined assumptions that may otherwise run our thoughts aground is the work of theory, when done well. Without a clear theoretical grounding, unsure footings may lead to immanent collapse, or indeed works without end. My sense is that one need not edit out theory, or let it sink into the background, in order to escape the dreaded theoretical over-burden that has become so widely despised, and increasingly ridiculed, in many parts of the arts and humanities. Rather, one might simply refuse to be dazzled by theory by acknowledging that theory is already there: not only in the writings of English and French philosophers, but also in the structure of a myth, or the turn of phrase of Delta farmer. Furthermore, even if we do take inspiration from famed philosophers, it is important to note that they too have their own histories. Deleuze and Guattari published the first volume of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* just as the American War that Biggs described was coming to a close. One wonders how the various quagmires of Vietnam that Biggs discusses informed the philosophical theories of the day.

Again, what I am suggesting is that we view places like Vietnam as sources of theory, rather than places where it can be applied, and rather than attempting to submerge theory altogether. To the interplay between individuals, institutions, technologies and environments that Biggs so skillfully presents, we might add theory, understood in this sense.

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**Comments by John Kleinen, University of Amsterdam**


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**T**his award-winning book about the multi-ethnic Mekong delta is a fine contribution to the development history and nation-state building literature. Praised by competent reviewers like James C. Scott and Pierre Brocheux, this monograph deserves not only serious reading by anyone interested in colonial and post-colonial Vietnam, but also by students of development issues.<sup>15</sup>

The book takes us, to borrow Pierre Brocheux's sentence, from "big aerial and amphibious operations to literally trudge into the quagmire, navigate canals and arroyos, and meet the people of Nam Bo."<sup>16</sup>

My contribution to this forum is not meant as an overall review of the book, which I read with great pleasure and growing enthusiasm. David Biggs grasps in essence an important aspect of the southern part of Vietnam and fills in a dearly missed gap in the new historiography of Vietnam, which is mainly oriented towards the cradle of the Viet/Kinh civilization located in the Red River Delta. Given the recent attention for the dynamics of the southern part of the Indochinese peninsula and its importance for a rewritten maritime history, Biggs' study is a much-welcomed contribution to a growing body of literature.

The ironic title *Quagmire* refers to David Halberstam's famous book *The Making of the Quagmire*, and both are taken, be it in different sense of the term, as a metaphor for what William Cronon described as "stories that the French and Americans told to explain their activities in Vietnam" with the exception that Biggs takes it further and adds to it more literally a physical underground upon which nation-building in the delta took place.

Instead of "Nation-building and nature in the Mekong Delta", another, more plain and sobering subtitle could have been *The engineers and the (post)-colonial system*,<sup>17</sup> which I borrow from the Dutch sociologist J.A.A. van Doorn (1925-2008), who was one of the founding-fathers of Dutch sociology. He was also a widely acclaimed expert on the colonial history of the Dutch East Indies, including its bloody aftermath in the 1945—1949 period when the Dutch fought their own colonial war in the Indonesian Archipelago. Of course, dealing with Vietnam, Biggs goes much further beyond this. He shows how the restructuring of the Mekong Delta created a grid that enabled the pre- and the (post)-colonial state to see how local people and resources could be controlled and taxed. That the state's view was myopic and

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<sup>15</sup> Scott in the *Journal of Regional Science*, Vol.52, no 1, 2012, pp.155 -156; Brocheux in the *Journal of Environmental History* 17(1): 2012, pp.170-172.

<sup>16</sup> Brocheux, 170.

<sup>17</sup> J. van Doorn, *The engineers and the colonial system, Technocratic tendencies in the Dutch East Indies. Comparative Asian Studies Programme* (Rotterdam). paper presented to the "second Anglo-Dutch conference on comparative colonial history", 23 - 25 September 1981, Leiden.

sometimes as blind as a bat did not matter for the objects of this “social gardening” as Scott described it, because the effects for the local population had many, and sometimes unintended and serious consequences.

Historians of the Dutch colonial experience, including Van Doorn, often used instead of “system” the term “colonial project” in which a number of players tried zealously to make the colony “work” in terms of development. That is exactly what Biggs shows us eloquently in *Quagmire: French and the American social engineering* tried to transform the southern delta into a laboratory of a “highly modernist” agricultural economy which ironically was finished by their adversaries of the Vietnamese socialist regime. “‘Building the nation’ (...) has remained a central priority for the Vietnamese government in the delta since 1975. As with many new projects, however, older environmental and legal problems persist. Today, as in past eras, there is still one fundamental problem in the delta: finding solid ground” (227). The wobbling ground on which this all was projected, however, resisted literally and socially. The time span taken in this book brings us back to the frontier society the delta was before the French arrived, shows us the fierce resistance during French rule, makes us aware of the failed war that was fought between “Saigon” and the “VC” and ends with the nearly complete disaster of the collectivization policy that forced the peasants to vote with their feet.

What Biggs has in common with most of the authors who published about the (pre)-colonial period and its aftermath is the attention for production-factors like capital, labor, and water, but he, Biggs, adds institutions and institutional change to his economic and environmental history of the Mekong delta. Furthermore, he also shows that the peculiarities of the Vietnamese political economy are not assumed to derive from a particular period, in this case the French colonial one or the American interval. The land reform strategies after 1945 by “all groups struggled with the basic issue of rebuilding the agricultural economy to provide much needed revenues and they utilized either socialist or colonial legal precedents as well as existing, colonial-era maps and property records to govern parts of the water landscape” (141).

Turning a PhD into a book is not only Biggs’s great merit, but he made it also impressive and readable. Scott (2012) points to some missed opportunities like the comparative study of estuaries in other parts of Asia and the lack of “local voices”. I would add the absence of any reference to maritime fisheries. This is partly understandable due to the lack of clear policies of the French regarding this sector during the colonial period and the devastating effect of the war after shipping became a strategic target when the maritime Ho Chi Minh-route was cut in 1965. My own findings about the blue water fisheries in the southern parts of the Vietnamese peninsula, including the area’s III and IV, encompassing the harbors of Vung Tau and Rach Gia/Phu Quoc, showed a remarkable growth in fish landings between 1956



and 1975.<sup>18</sup> This begs the question whether water management, fishing rights (as a variation of land rights) and political access was different from what Biggs' analyses for the agricultural sector.

That said, the only reservations one can have against the book, is that the reader has to take some statements or references to names or events for granted. Sometimes discussions about theoretical concepts are too short to understand the impact on what the author meant with it. Let me give an example of each.

An individual that figures prominently in *Quagmire* is the provincial (not district) mandarin Emmanuel Tran Ba Loc (Tổng đốc Trần Bá Lộc, 1839 -1899). This Catholic Vietnamese administrator acquired in 1892 a 2000-hectare concession in the Dong Thap region for his services to the French (2011: 72-73). The Tran Ba Loc estate, north of My Tho, was one of the first development areas acquired by a nationalized Vietnamese. Biggs qualifies correctly him as one of 'Vietnam's most infamous colonial collaborators' because of his role in the military campaigns against the Nguyen forces. The Vietnamese historian Son Nam describes him as the "most efficient" of those who help the French to "pacify" the country, a description that borders on irony. An often-cited non-communist nationalist historian labeled him anachronistically as "a Quisling" together with Huynh Cong Tan and Do Huu Phuong.<sup>19</sup> Why and how he got this reputation remains unclear in Biggs's description of Loc. Loc's activities as a 'collaboré' are already described in Milton Osborne's 1967 book about the conquest of Cochinchina that curiously isn't mentioned in *Quagmire*, though it deals with Cochinchina and Cambodia (66-71).<sup>20</sup> Marr qualifies him in his *Vietnamese Anticolonialism* (1971) as "an infamous pacification expert" (1971: 70). For my own dissertation on Central Vietnam (1988) I described his activities at length, based upon French archival documents, for his severe treatment of the Can Vuong movement in the three provinces Quang Nam, Quang Ngai and Binh Dinh. Loc headed a 700 strong militia that behaved like a Tiger Force *avant-la-lettre* in an area that later would be haunted by similar events during the Vietnam War. Even Loc's biographer George Dürwell had trouble to disguise his disgust about Loc's scorched earth policies.<sup>21</sup> He received the degree of Provincial Governor or Tong Doc of Thuan Khanh (named after the twin provinces Binh Thuan and Khanh Hoa), a position that he never fulfilled, not even at the district level as Biggs suggests. In the local memory, it happens that the same man is still remembered as a wise administrator and as one of the worst traitors of the colonial

<sup>18</sup> John Kleinen, 2007, "Stealing from the Gods", fisheries and local use of natural resources in Vietnam 1800-2000', in Greg Bankoff and Peter Boomgaard, *A history of natural resources in Asia: the wealth of nature*, Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 244-263.

<sup>19</sup> Nguyen Phut Tan, *A Modern History of Viet-Nam*. Saigon: Khai Tri, 1964.

<sup>20</sup> Milton Osborne, *The French Presence in Cochinchina and Cambodia. Rule and Response 1859 -1905*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969

<sup>21</sup> G.Dürwell, Tran ba Loc. Tong Doc de Thuan-Khanh. Sa Vie et son oeuvre. Notice biographique d'après les documents de famille. *Bulletin de la Société des Etudes Indochinoises de Saigon*, BSEI 60, 1900: 27-60. Reprinted in Dürwell, *Ma chère Cochinchine*, 1910. See also , R.B. Smith, The Vietnamese Élite of French Cochinchina, *Modern Asian Studies* (1972), 6 : pp 459-482.



contest, as Biggs remarks (2011: 73). Loc's recently restored tomb in Cai Be town at least doesn't make any reference to the dark side of his past.<sup>22</sup>

More relevant for further discussion about the political ecology of the Mekong delta is Biggs' competent treatment of discourses behind the chosen development models even if one can disagree with every aspect. Biggs takes the polder or *casier* as an important representation of the change in policies in the 1930s to transform the southern delta into an ideal landscape for economic development. The Dutch word "polder" refers to an area surrounded by dikes, which is kept dry by way of a sluice and drainage canals. The 'casier' is technically the translation of this term in French, but its meanings include pigeonhole or a set of pigeonholes, a filing cabinet, a rack, a compartment, and a locker.<sup>23</sup> The Dutch polder derives his attractiveness from the existence of a water board, a regional organization that has very different functions, ranging from flood control, water resources management, water charging and financing, and bulk water supply. In addition to it, the existence of these functions ranges from one country to another. The larger question is whether there is a causal relationship between the struggle against water and the consensus model that is derived from it. In the Dutch case this is affirmative and Biggs seems to assume that this was the case in Vietnam when he refers to the *casier* that had his origins in the Ly dynasty whose cradle was in the Red River Delta (11<sup>th</sup> century). But does it mean that it survived "the tyranny of time"?

Biggs devotes a number of pages to a fascinating discussion about the role of French and Vietnamese social scientists in the colonial discourse of the transformation of the delta in the 1930s. According to him, the French geography professor Pierre Gourou played an important role in this discourse as a result of his influential study about the peasants of the Red River delta, which became the scientific foundation of a number of development schemes that French and (even later) American officials undertook in various parts of Vietnam. Though Biggs refers elsewhere to my article about Gourou, he doesn't mention the special issue the *Singaporean Journal of Tropical Geography* devoted to Gourou's role and influence upon generations of social scientists and planners. From this discussion by British, French and Dutch scholars arises a more sophisticated picture than Biggs paints in his book.<sup>24</sup>

Although Gourou was working with Vietnamese assistants from the EFEO, he never became a permanent member, though the EFEO published his thesis. The institution's colonial and Orientalist worldview on Vietnamese society and economy was not wasted on him. His contemporaries like Robert Robequain, who was a personal friend, and of course the archeologist J.Y.Claes, whom Biggs quotes at length, can be taken more responsible than Gourou for the apprehension of the ideas of the current school of thought at the time headed by the geographer Paul

<sup>22</sup> <http://wikimapia.org/6405923/Mộ-Tổng-Đốc-Trần-Bá-Lộc-Nằm-trong-đất-thánh-Cái-bè>.

<sup>23</sup> <http://dictionary.reverso.net/french-english/casier>.

<sup>24</sup> Gavin Bowd & Daniel Clayton, (eds.), (Special Issue) French tropical geographies. *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 2005 (26)3, pp. 271–374.

Vidal de la Blache. Robequain and Gourou were his students, but they differentiated in many aspects among themselves, but also from their master. Gourou even dismissed another scholar and colonial planner, Yves Henry, right away for his belief in statistics. Neither *Les Paysans* nor his *Utilisation du sol en Indochine française*, published in 1940, were policy studies commissioned or explicitly used by the French administration, but the dividing line between these studies and those written on contract remained quite thin.

I am also not convinced that the *casier* or polder landscape was Gourou's pre-occupation in spite of the use in his (non-commissioned work) of aerial photographs which he extensively used, next to maps and documents from local archives (and not to forget his fieldwork that did not encompass the alienation that Malinowski felt when he studied the Trobrianders). Briggs is right when he asserts that Gourou believed in the human factor and that he admired the "Tonkinese peasant" for his human-made transformation of the soil of the Red River. To support his argument, he translates wrongly Gourou's expression of the delta as "*ce pays petri d'humanite*" as a "petri-dish-like landscape", suggesting the form instead of the process. This is based upon a misunderstanding of the term *pétrin* that means a trough in which a baker mixes the dough for his bread. Gourou meant "a landscape saturated with humanity" profoundly changed by man, irrelevant whether this became a rectangular ricefield or a *casier* surrounded by dikes. This is confirmed by the following statement of Gourou in *Les Paysans*:

*Through the work of thousands, the peasant has constructed this considerable network; he **has moulded the soil** with his hand; he has determined the relief of the country as we could see it nowadays; he has made productive a territory which given over to itself would only be swamps. In its actual aspect, the Delta is the work of Man. (pp.82-83).<sup>25</sup>*

According to me Gourou reversed the logic of causal relationships between the natural and the social environment, distancing himself from Vidal de la Blache's 'possibilism', i.e. that humans (or "Man") can select from nature a number of possibilities. Gourou added to it a cultural dimension that surely was lost upon the policy makers that proposed a transplant of the Tonkinese *casier* to the Mekong delta. That doesn't mean that Gourou was not interested in "landscape moulding techniques and systems of spatial organization" (*techniques d'encadrement*) or in migration from Tonkin to Cochinchina to alleviate poverty, but his views and works, sometimes full of ambiguities, are too complex to reduce it to a nexus between population density and a petri dish.

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<sup>25</sup> "Au cours d' un travail millénaire, le paysan a construit ce réseau considérable; **il a pétri le sol de ses mains**; il a déterminé le relief du pays tel que nous le voyons aujourd' hui; il a rendu productif un territoire qui livré à lui-même n' aurait été que marécages. Dans son aspect actuel, le delta est l' oeuvre de l' homme."

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**Author's Response by David Biggs, University of California, Riverside**

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I send sincere thanks to all four colleagues for their insightful reviews of the book. I take all of their critiques to heart. They point out most of the main questions I grappled with in writing it. I accept full responsibility for writing what, in the words of another pun-friendly reviewer, was at times a “slough.” Turning this dissertation into a book required a lot of cutting, rearranging, filling in and patching up of prose, and I’m afraid that despite heroic copyediting, some of the seams still show. I hope that my writing will improve in the next book. Also, I am not a native speaker of French, and I concede corrections raised by Kleinen and others such as my interpretation of “*ce pays petri d’humanite.*”

About the book’s treatment of people in the Mekong Delta, I chose as my subject of study a motley set of people, those most involved in designing the delta’s water infrastructure. This included engineers but also extended to Vietnamese insurgents, French civil servants, and wherever possible farmers. In carrying out interviews, I waited many months before finally receiving permission in 2002 to conduct a series of taped oral history interviews with octogenarians born and raised on the canals. Unfortunately, the regulations controlling how much foreigners could do with interviews in the countryside severely limited my ability to spend more intensive time with farmers. Were it possible, I would have spent months recording the stories of these old-timers. As I hope comes out in excerpts of interviews, their experiences and views more often than not contradicted or complicated common academic notions about peasant experiences. The context of the interviews was interesting, too. When conversations drifted to the devastating years of the “American War,” the elderly men and women for the most part used a pejorative term, “thành Mỹ,” (American guys/kids) and some referred to American soldiers and advisors simply as “they/it” (nó). Some even used the term “the American invaders” (giặc Mỹ) repeatedly. At times, they addressed me, too, as “thành Mỹ.” I was a 32-year-old westerner with short-cropped hair, a clipboard, a tape recorder, and speaking passable Vietnamese. So, I know that my identity was limiting, especially in the parts of the delta where I traveled. In those interviews, farmers talked about so many things –from different crops and soils to survival strategies such as using mouse-fat and resinous woods for lamp fuel at night or coconut juice in lieu of plasma at makeshift hospitals. Were I to start this project now, I would push to gather more of these stories, especially from the rapidly disappearing, elderly generation.

I became especially fascinated with colonial and post-colonial “experts,” individuals such as Pierre Gourou and the American architect of river basin management, David E. Lilienthal. John Kleinen knows far more than me about the life of this prolific French geographer. What I found interesting about Gourou and others was how they were situated within colonial or nation-building programs. There is often, I think, a tendency to see such individuals as cogs in the greater wheel, carrying out the

designs of empire. However, when one takes the time to read the notes and diaries of such individuals, one finds a far more nuanced, sensitive appraisal of intersections between problems of nature, technology and politics. Gourou may not have fully believed in the viability of the mechanistic approach to building *casiers* in the Mekong Delta; nevertheless, others, especially policymakers, took his ideas and ran with them – perhaps wrongly – to design vast, high modernist settlement schemes. Far less studied but perhaps more important in the long-term with regard to development politics in the Mekong Delta were the scores of Vietnamese engineers and experts trained alongside these foreigners. Were I to continue writing this book, I think I'd spend more time with such characters as surveyor and writer Nguyễn Hiến Lê. Vietnamese “experts” had the challenge of navigating between the worlds of foreign aid agencies and their own domestic societies. Another individual, rice scientist Dr. Vo Tong Xuan, journeyed for years outside Vietnam in foreign universities and international research institutes; however, when the war ended in 1975 he returned and worked in post-war Vietnam. Such individuals provided important links to western agencies after 1986 as Vietnamese universities and government agencies sought assistance to “continue the work of civilization” started by a generation earlier. (That term I quoted from a French hydrographer in 1879 who was referring to efforts to expand upon earlier, pre-colonial Vietnamese projects.)

If I could extend the quagmire metaphor further, it might be to theorize, per Holly High's advice, a different view about the social landscape of power in a development frontier. What I repeatedly found in my research was that understanding the actions and views of an individual such as the famous “traitor” Trần Ba Lộc required first knowing how such a person fit within various actor-networks or webs connecting them to place of origin, religious affiliation, educational training, childhood, political experiences, etc. Lộc as a young boy witnessed his father, a Catholic teacher, being imprisoned and pushed out of the school where he worked by Nguyen officials. This, perhaps more than anything, cemented the young man's opposition to the Vietnamese royal government. Were I to explore theory further, I might consider how such actor-networks informed the hydro-bureaucracies that persisted despite regime change. (I do address this more squarely in an essay in an edited volume by Nevins and Peluso, *Taking Southeast Asia to Market*.) That I did not take my theoretical questionings further, especially with respect to Deleuze and Guattari's ideas and another in a nod to Heidegger, was a stylistic decision given the audience that I wanted to reach. I am grateful to the theorists, philosophers, and others who produce such powerful analytical tools, however I think whether one chooses to make theory a central topic of a book or use it more suggestively is a choice that will vary from one person to another. I've always been a fan of trying tools before reading the manual, and my short allusions to theorists may reflect that sort of reckless abandon. I'd be delighted if others might someday take small threads intentionally left hanging in the notes and fashion new studies in the future.

Let me again thank the reviewers for their thoughtful treatment of the book. As colonial engineers were fond of discussing about their projects in the delta, I think they contribute to its "*mise en valeur*." Books, in the best cases, are claimed and reclaimed many times over. I think of *Quagmire* as an initial foray, transporting a set of ideas developed, as Greg Bankoff notes, in studies such as Worster's on the Dust Bowl of the American Midwest. I hope that the venture may pay off for readers and especially other scholars. There is so much more to learn about the Mekong Delta and Southeast Asia more broadly, so many books yet to be written. I look forward to future scholarship that might extend, revise, or otherwise move the thing we call environmental history in new directions, especially in Asian contexts.

### About the Contributors

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**Greg Bankoff** is Professor of Modern History at the University of Hull. His interests are in the role of disasters in human societies, resources and risk management, the environmental consequences of modern conflict, human-animal relations, and the development of colonial science. His publications include *Cultures of Disaster: Society and Natural Hazard in the Philippines* (RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), and *A History of Natural Resources in Asia: The Wealth of Nature*, co-edited with Peter Boomgaard (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

**David Biggs** is Associate Professor of History at the University of California, Riverside. *Quagmire* is his first book, and it won the 2012 George Perkins Marsh Prize for Best Book in Environmental History. His current project focuses on military bases and military-impacted landscapes in central Vietnam.

**Jacob Darwin Hamblin** is Associate Professor of History at Oregon State University. He is the author of *Oceanographers and the Cold War* (University of Washington Press, 2005) and *Poison in the Well: Radioactive Waste in the Oceans at the Dawn of the Nuclear Age* (Rutgers, 2008).

**Holly High** is Lecturer in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Sydney, and Research Fellow at Clare Hall, Cambridge University. Her work focuses on everyday politics and economy, the politics of poverty, and resource contestation. Her work has appeared in *Global Environment*, *Critical Asian Studies*, *Focaal: Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology*, and *American Ethnologist*.

**John Kleinen** is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. His research interests are in the environmental history of Southeast Asia, especially Vietnam, and the institutional dynamics of French colonial expansion. He is the author of *Facing the Future, Reviving the Past: A Study of Social Change in a Northern Vietnamese Village* (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1999).

**David Zierler** conducts research at the Office of the Historian, United States Department of State. His current research for the Department of State focuses on the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, and he also is writing a history of public opinion amidst national security crises. He is the author of *The Invention of Ecocide: Agent Orange, Vietnam, and the Scientists Who Changed the Way We Think About the Environment* (Georgia, 2011).

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