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**AMERICAN NEO-COLONIALISM
IN SOUTH VIETNAM (1954 – 1975)
SOCIO – CULTURAL ASPECTS**

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The Cultural and Ideological Front in Ho Chi Minh City

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put their signatures on bombs to be dropped on "Vietcong" heads. Fashions in clothing and hairstyle appeared and disappeared, as well as in cinematographic or literary themes. One finished by rejecting the "existentialist" coat, and falling into outright depravity, without any concern for justification. After the dollar, sex. It was the "sexual revolution" which was to dethrone the political and social revolution. Dance halls, massage parlours and nightclubs mushroomed. One threw overboard all marital conventions and obligations, refused to condemn incest and advocated "collective" sexual relations before spectators; the value of a person was estimated on the number of his or her sexual relations or partners. All humanization of sexuality was denied and condemned as anachronistic. Sexual bestiality was inevitably accompanied by violence; in life as in the films account-squarings and killings followed sexual profligacy. "Love beasts" became the beasts who killed one another and were easily turned into professional killers at the service of the American masters. Uprooting, terror, consumption fever, unbridled sexuality, violence, and ideological veneers spelt out in simple formulae, particularly in images, finished by transforming honest peasants into mercenaries ready for any base act.

The fault certainly did not lie with the philosopher founders of personalism or existentialism; however the use of these doctrines by the promoters of psywar in South Vietnam raises a historical problem which remains to be cleared up.

The Educational Apparatus

Unlike colonialism, which carried out an essentially obscurantist policy, the neo-colonial regime, which also had to "win hearts and minds", sought to develop an educational system aimed at:

- training administrative, technical, military and political cadres within the framework of setting up a "nationalist" regime;
- diffusing neo-colonial ideology as well as all philosophical or religious trends purporting to fight "communism".

Particular attention had to be paid to establishing an educational network whose content, pedagogical methods and structures were elaborated under the guidance of US advisers attached to South Vietnamese government organisations, *Prime Minister's Office and Education Ministry*. Vietnamese educational specialists were sent for training to the United States; then on their return took in hand the educational system, gradually doing away with the French influence.

Moreover, many US academic missions came to South Vietnam at different periods:

- for the 1954-60 period, the Michigan State University group (MSU), especially entrusted with the formation of administrative, police, banking cadres for the newly-installed government;
- starting in 1961, the South Illinois University mission, charged with the reform of primary

and professional education, within the framework of "rural pacification";

— starting in 1962, the Ohio State University mission, mainly responsible for colleges and secondary schools;

— the summer mission of the North Dakota Institute of Linguistics carried out ethnological research in the Central Highlands for the CIA (1964—1968);

— The Wisconsin University mission for the reform of higher learning and the restructuring of the general-education system (1967—1974);

— The Florida State University mission for agricultural training;

— The Missouri-Rolla University mission for technical education;

— The missions of the American Medical Association and of the American Dental Association for medical and odontological instruction.

Among the 729 Vietnamese cadres sent for training in the United States between 1954 and 1960 there were: 222 for educational sciences, 114 for public administration, against 55 for agriculture, 7 for industry. This shows the importance Washington placed on educational problems (Yearly Reports of USOM for 1961). The Michigan University group, which in 1956 comprised 109 people, only a few of them academics, actually supervised the Prime Minister's Office of Diem's government; it took in hand the management and the teaching at the National School of Administration, helped draw up the Constitution, train police officers, elaborate agrarian

reform plans and set up the bank and judiciary systems. Between 1958 and 1973 MSUG trained 1,778 high-ranking officials for the Saigon government. Thus the State apparatus came totally under American influence.

The resistance put up by the people, particularly the peasant masses, compelled Washington to draw up the strategy of the "special war", the most important part of which consisted in regrouping most of the population into several thousand "strategic hamlets." To set up in these strategic hamlets an educational network capable of rallying the peasant masses to the Saigon government, such was the task of the South Illinois University group (SIUG), a task regarded as fundamental in the programme of US aid. In these "strategic hamlets" US aid was used for the building of classrooms while SIUG was concerned with the training of primary education teachers, agriculture and handicraft instructors, the elaboration of programmes and the setting up of pedagogical methods and school material. It closely cooperated with the Ministry of Rural Pacification and Construction; the teachers of the lower classes were recruited from among the pacification paramilitary cadres; the others were trained in teachers' training schools controlled by SIUG.

While MSUG tackled the top administration, SIUG took charge of village life, the country's infrastructure; many preliminary studies on the Vietnamese

village had been made by US ethnologists, anthropologists and sociologists to work out an appropriate pedagogy. A promising term was initiated: the "communal school" which aimed at promoting an education

— linked to the local situation and the people's needs;

— linked to practice; and

— with a renovating mission: through the pupils the school would change the society; and

— forming the spirit of freedom and democracy.

The affirmation of these fine principles, and a more or less abundant material assistance formed the baits used to try to win over the population in a hard and fierce struggle against the national and popular movement. No wonder that in many cases teachers applying the above-mentioned principles asked their pupils to sketch a Vietcong underground network.

Of course, so long as the Diem regime lasted the school had to propagate the truths of official "spiritualist personalism".

* * *

The Ohio University group (OUG) was entrusted with the training of middle-level ranks through the reform of secondary education. "Comprehensive schools" inspired by Dewey's principles were to form a new generation of pragmatic men, freed from all bookish, solely academic instruction. Theorfre

French-inspired education was sternly criticised before being replaced by a system which often used audio-visual resources, "montage-discussions", tests, practical training in agriculture, domestic skills, handicrafts, mechanics... Practical training would have priority over general culture and the handling of great ideas, the ideal being the practical man, a career man in the new society.

In 1964 two pilot schools were founded at Thu Duc and Hue, controlled by US specialists who were to work out the methods and programmes to be diffused later on. In 1965 a first attempt at a generalised introduction of the new programme failed. It took several more years for SIUG to train new teachers in the Faculties of Pedagogy of Saigon, Hue and Can Tho, and have more high-level specialists trained in the United States. One can say that by 1965 education in South Vietnam had entered the US orbit after eliminating French influence.

In connection with rural pacification and projects of agricultural development, special importance was given to agronomic education for which the Florida University mission was responsible; agriculture in the US-controlled areas had taken a new look with the introduction of new varieties of rice, machines, chemical fertilisers, pesticides, novelties which made it completely dependent on multinational firms. For its part, the Missouri-Rolla University assisted the Phu Tho National Centre of Technology which trained engineers in public works, electrical engineering, electronics, chemistry, maritime navigation and industrial skills. The general orientation programmes were planned entirely by US experts. The Saigon

Faculty of Medicine was the last bastion of French influence; after 1965 it could not resist the massive intervention of US missions.

Education was completely Americanised by 1967 with the drawing up of a post-war economic project named after Lilienthal. Within the framework of the implementation of this project, a special mission of the University of Wisconsin came to South Vietnam to try to promote a remoulding of the educational system to "preserve human resources by training them according to suitable methods and distributing them equally in the various fields of war, industry and peace". (Proposal for Reorganisation by the University of Wisconsin). Later, this mission was charged with the restructuring of higher education, and supplying experts to assist the Education Minister and Rectors of South Vietnamese universities. Graduates from US universities replaced the professors trained by the French, particularly the Rectors, Deans and Secretaries-general of faculties. Scholarships, fellowships, missions and delegations of South Vietnamese students and intellectuals to the United States, increased in number; all those responsible for primary, secondary and higher education paid visits to the United States.

The Americans also financed private and religious universities: that of the Hoa Hao, the Minh Duc Catholic University, and the Van Hanh Buddhist University.

In 1972 "community colleges" were created, modelled after the US "community junior colleges", in two years to train technicians to university level,

with instruction adapted to the needs of the local community.

From 1956 to 1974 financial aid for education amounted to 76 million dollars against 19 billion for military aid and 9 billion for economic aid. More than 40% of this aid went to strategic hamlet schools ("new life" hamlets), which stressed the importance given to the problem of rural pacification; 60% of the budget, comprising experts' salaries, travelling expenses and grants, was therefore spent in the United States. Textbooks were printed in the United States, South Korea or the Philippines.

US university missions and experts planned projects for the structuralization of education according to their idea of its shortcomings, goals and economy, and supervised the education planning board, created in 1970 at the Ministry of Education. The introduction of educational technology, conceived after the US model, was carried out by the Center for Technological Innovation (INNOTECH) and the Center for Pedagogical Documentation. The diffusion of audio-visual methods meant increased technological and ideological dependence upon the United States which supplied the major part of the equipment and films. (In 1974 the test-method was used for the *baccalauréat* school-leaving certificate).

In 1965 a programme of "summer activities" was inaugurated, with the participation of young Americans from International Voluntary Service, to mobilise South Vietnamese schoolchildren and students in social activities and manual work. US aid also financed an ambitious programme to "develop the activities of young scholars outside school hours"

Under the cover of pompous statements, fundamentally these operations aimed at making the youth participate in "pacification" work.

* * *

The intervention of US university missions in South Vietnam showed to what extent these universities were implicated in Washington's Vietnam policy. It is a fundamental characteristic of US universities to be closely linked to large firms and to the State apparatus, on the financial as well as on the ideological level. University professors devised the outlines of the strategy adopted in Vietnam by the White House and the Pentagon:

- Wesley Fishel from the University of Michigan
- Eugen Staley from the Stanford Research Institute,
- Milton Sacks from the University of South Illinois,
- David Lilienthal from the Stanford Research Institute,
- Samuel Huntington from Harvard,
- Walt Rostow from Harvard,
- Henry Kissinger from Harvard.

All the fundamental policies and strategies applied by the US forces in South Vietnam originated in US universities: administrative reform, agrarian policy, pacification, strategic hamlets, forced urbanization, manipulation of religious and inter-ethnic dissensions, methods of torture and of psychological warfare

Many theses, monographs, on-the-spot investigations made by university teams combined in order to supply US strategists with the maximum information on which to construct their policy. The studies on the Vietnamese village—its institutions, customs and morals—constituted the basis for the policy of rural pacification.

A particular role was played by the "Summer Institute of Linguistics" group of the University of Dakota, whose members lived among the ethnic groups of the Highlands of Tay Nguyen, a very important strategic region; their ethnographic studies helped the US command in its strategy for this region. While the special forces trained the armed forces of the ethnic minorities which were to cooperate with the US troops the university mission trained the political cadres. US aid highly favoured the Catholic Church and the Protestant missions in their effort to convert and form cadres. Thus the so-called United Front for the Struggle of the Oppressed Races (FULRO), originally organised by the French, rapidly became a CIA tool aimed at creating an autonomous State of Tay Nguyen, separated from the Vietnamese nation.

In the United States Vietnamese studies increased in importance, particularly with the creation of the Center for Vietnamese Studies at the University of South Illinois, which was to become the nursery for advisers and technicians working in South Vietnam; these advisers had to possess a solid knowledge of economics, ethnology, anthropology and military strategy to work effectively on government policy.

This deep commitment of the universities in the war policy produced a fairly strong reaction from opposition students and professors

* *

The system drawn up by the US experts was officially adopted in 1969, after Nguyen Van Thieu proclaimed the fundamental principles of reform to the National Assembly: a "pragmatic" and "popular" spirit, a 12-year system of general education with the suppression of the Baccalaureat, first part. In 1972 the management of secondary, technical and agricultural education was transferred to provincial authorities, as suggested by the mission of the University of Tennessee. By leaving secondary and technical schools to the discretion of provincial governors, military men for the most part, the Thieu government mainly sought to eliminate the opposition and repress the political struggle by teachers and students: Well trained agents, recruited from the teaching profession, denounced to the police teachers and pupils suspected of sympathizing with the revolutionary movement: they also tried to mobilise young scholars for psywar activities or to recruit members for Nguyen Van Thieu's "Democratic" party.

* *

In the South Vietnamese educational system a particular place had to be given to private education. The shortcomings of the State system had led to the

proliferation of private institutions, mainly for infant and secondary classes. Many of these establishments were only commercial enterprises while some of them hid fairly well camouflaged patriotic activities. The majority consisted of denominational schools which received considerable aid from the US services. The Hoa (people of Chinese descent) had their own schools. In 1973 private secondary schools numbered 471,000 pupils as against 539,000 in public schools. Catholic private schools, favoured by the French colonial administration, became very active under US domination. In 1969-70 there were 1,030 primary and elementary schools with 350,000 pupils and 226 secondary schools with 100,000 pupils. Many teachers were priests. In 1958 Archbishop Ngo Dinh Thuc founded the Catholic University of Dalat with direct State aid. By 1972 it numbered more than 4,000 students. In 1956, a State University was also founded in Hue, the management of which was entrusted to a strongly pro-US and anti-communist priest, Cao Van Luan. It should be noted that most of the administrative posts, chairs of philosophy and even, in certain cases, of biology, went to Catholics.

For its part the Buddhist Church had also created its school network and the Van Hanh University in Saigon. Unlike the Catholic school which was directly linked to US aid, the Buddhist school often constituted a hotbed of opposition, but US services sought to influence it through the granting of material assistance or scholarships in the United States.

The Cao Dai and Hoa Hao Universities, founded respectively in 1971 and 1973, were smaller (500 and 2,000 students) but also strongly pro-US and anti-communist.

The US experts who inspired the South Vietnamese educational system tried to give teaching a content adapted to the goals aimed at by Washington's policy. The teaching content and pedagogical methods sought to :

- inculcate an anti-communist ideology opposed to the Vietnamese people's patriotic tradition and revolutionary aspirations;
- train members of the neo-colonial society, a dependent society integrated into the world capitalist system; to train in particular technicians with skills but without much culture, equipped with a certain know-how and capable of operating the neo-colonial economic machine;
- inculcate a way of life, teach "good manners" to the 'elite', that is a comprador bourgeoisie and middle classes which exerted themselves to imitate the Western way of life.

Textbooks on morals and civic education presented South Vietnam as a separate independent state, and "President Ngo's (Ngo Dinh Diem)" statements as gospel truth to study in depth and meditate upon. Of course, in these textbooks North Vietnam was presented as a hell and communists as traitors to the Fatherland, who, moreover, had liquidated all family and religious life. Not only was the entire modern history of the country, the main feature of which was the struggle for national liberation, completely falsified, but even past history was interpreted in such a way as to rehabilitate some reactionary people like the Emperor Gia Long, who called upon the French to ensure his power, thus opening the way to colonial conquest. Attempts were made to

deny the millenary origins of Vietnamese civilization.

Scientific and technical studies tried particularly to teach a certain know-how, avoiding all systematisation of knowledge, all general theory, under the pretext of struggling against academic culture; what mattered was to train workers and employees needed by neo-colonial enterprises; in the agricultural field education had to apply itself to forming a new class of rich peasants able to use modern cultivation techniques. Donald Knox, an expert from the University of Ohio, indicated that one had to increase the category of specialised workers and secondary technicians in a society in which the socio-economic structures still remained traditional.

In secondary schools, the teaching of household skills and good manners taught the pupils, particularly the young girls, how to do the housekeeping in the Western middle class way, how to arrange flowers, receive guests, invest one's money... Textbooks and other books also showed the way to succeed in life by following the example of US businessmen (Carnegie, Rockefeller).

A summary analysis of some educational textbooks, on civic education in particular, gives us a glimpse of the orientation the US experts wanted to impress on South Vietnamese education. This is clearly shown by the following excerpts :

The civic education textbook for the fourth form (*Song Moi* Pub. 1967) states :

"The communists stand for the abolition of the family, the fatherland, and religion."

"In communist countries man is reduced to the level of a beast."

(Textbook edited by the Ministry of Education, 1960)

The civic education textbook of the same Ministry for the second form states:

"The nature of capitalism has completely changed and has nothing in common with that of capitalism in the 19th century",

and sings the praises of the Japanese and West German "miracles"...

A geography textbook for the seventh form published in 1970, peremptorily declares that the "US leadership will go on for a long time."

One finds similar statements in other textbooks:

"Private property is man's fundamental right, the main motive power for development."

"Communism destroys freedom by attacking the fundamental guarantees of this freedom: private property and religion."

"Free competition generates technical progress and a spirit of initiative... The abolition of private property and free competition suppresses all desire to work well."

The rich peasant who amasses money to enlarge his estate was presented as a model, like the trader who "receives benefits four times as great as the invested capital" Crowning this "philosophy was a simplistic deism reducing the evolution of the world to the omnipotent will of a Creator God.

"The orderly and harmonious movements of the heavenly bodies are due to the action of an invisible hand which guides them, that of the Creator."

"God is the Being per se, the beginning of everything... He has created the universe and man" (Selected extracts of literature for the 12th form, 1974).

"Each man believes in a religion; without this belief man lives like a beast"

"A little science alienates one from God much science draws one closer to God." (Course of Philosophy, 12th form, 1960).

* * *

Obviously, the school could only supply the referential framework for a behaviour already conditioned by social upheavals brought about by the war and the neo-colonial policy. It is in the framework of this society that one has to examine the pedagogical statements and methods, as well as the content of educational textbooks. In the South Vietnamese context, in particular after 1965, school and university were to lead almost inevitably to enlistment in the puppet army, the total strength of which amounted to over a million. Educational institutions prepared the youths to provide the quota of officers, non-commissioned officers and specialists necessary for this huge army. Thus military physicians, for instance, accounted for two-thirds of the medical corps; the same went for the

other branches. Also worthy of note was the prevalence of legal studies in the university which trained cadres for "business."

Moved by a profound national feeling and guided by revolutionary organs students and professors carried out a vigorous struggle against the educational system. The analysis of this struggle is not the object of our study, but one has to keep it in mind to realise the true situation in the schools and universities of this period

Cultural Activities and Psychological Warfare

A fundamental factor of US strategy and one of the most outstanding innovations of neo-colonialism, was to use culture as a tool of its policy of military and political aggression, to do its utmost to win "the other war", that of hearts and minds. Cultural resources — newspapers, books, films — matter as much as the most sophisticated war machine, cultural and information centres abroad have as much value as military bases, cultural advisers play a role as effective as their military or economist colleagues, the training and maintenance of a contingent of zealous agents in the cultural field is as necessary as the training of competent officers or administrators

In this field, the direct action of US services had to combine with that of the puppet cultural organisations which were apparently independent like the political power, but were in fact financed and directed by a complex network of US institutions, offices or American advisers. Here the dollar was mighty, but the Washington leaders often knew how to use it with discretion, without asking from their agents a too conspicuous loyalty which would rapidly discredit them and make them totally ineffective.

Directly financed by US funds the puppet cultural organisations, official or private, could set up a dense network of mass media — radio, TV, newspapers, publishing houses, film studios, literary or artistic clubs, exhibitions — the density and size of which