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## NOTES & TOPICS

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### A Nice Place to Visit



AMERICANS, as Tocqueville and others have pointed out, are too busy finding solutions for the future to have much patience with the past—especially, one might add, the recent past. The distant past may be viewed through heroic or nostalgic lenses, but the recent past is too close for comfort. It's embarrassing because it's about us. Perhaps that is one reason why very little has been said or

written by politicians or journalists about the recently deceased but unlamented war in Viet Nam. The tragedy over, Americans are calm of mind, all passion spent. Or perhaps they are merely bored with it all, sated by 10 years of news from a country that surely cannot be of much interest to most Americans.

Because no one wants to talk or think about Viet Nam any more, many Americans will gladly assent to the notion that what finally happened there is all for the best. They will be eager to accept benign new portraits of their former enemy, in this way reassuring themselves that dread Necessity—the ignominious defeat by a minor Asian power—was really in the best interests of all concerned. Such portraits will take the form of exercises in demystification, attempts to exorcise the old demon of the communist menace by providing us with the long historical view of an “expert” on South-east Asian culture.

Such a portrait has already been painted by Frances FitzGerald in an article entitled “Journey to North Vietnam”, which appeared in a recent issue of *The New Yorker*. Ms FitzGerald clearly has the right credentials for undertaking such a

commission. She is the author of *Fire in the Lake* (1972), a book about Viet Nam that won several awards in the United States. She has also written pieces on Cuba and Iran for several influential American journals.

One may wonder about such *expert* visiting journalists, for her article, which was actually written a short time before the war ended, panders to our need to find some good in all endings—evoking as it does a North Viet Nam of order, harmony, and decency. Ms FitzGerald of course isn't prevaricating. She reports what she saw and heard—that is, what she wanted to see and hear, like the believers who went to Russia in the 1930s, those enthusiasts whom David Caute surveyed in his book, *The Fellow-Travelers* (1973).<sup>1</sup>

One has no way of knowing whether the picture FitzGerald paints of North Viet Nam and its citizens is an accurate one, but the very language of her celebrations evokes the language of those celebrants of 40 years ago. As we now know, the gap between their tales and the reality of life in the Soviet Union at the time was enormous. Though the gap between what FitzGerald reports and the reality of life in North Viet Nam is probably not as great, since North Viet Nam lacks a Stalin, it still behooves us to be sceptical of any “tale” that smacks of the tales of the Thirties.

THE COMPLACENT RHETORIC of her piece deserves, I think, close analysis. She begins by suggesting that Hanoi is in some ways similar to Saigon: a hotel in Hanoi has an air of decayed elegance, just like a hotel she knows in Saigon. The comparison is reassuring; the world we are entering is not very different from the world we have left. But if Hanoi looks a bit like Saigon, the atmosphere of Hanoi is quite different from Saigon's: there are no whores, street sellers, or transvestites. Instead of hysterical children begging for money, she sees groups of well-behaved boys wearing red neckerchiefs. Chaos reigns in decadent Saigon, ruined by instant Americanisation, whereas in orderly Hanoi “they have kept up many of the old customs.”

Hanoi, FitzGerald implies, is the kind of city that no longer exists in the United States—a pleasant, medium-sized city, clean and safe.

“In the afternoons, Hanoians drink beer on the terrace of the little restaurant next to the lake; they rent rowing shells or go for a ride in the motorboats that putter back and forth between its islands.”

In the evenings lovers sit on benches in the small, dark place near the lake. The police, tolerant and understanding, don't bother the lovers, nor do they bother “the little boys who illegally fish in the lake with home-made spinning rods.”

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<sup>1</sup> See also, in *ENCOUNTER*, Paul Hollander, “The Ideological Pilgrim: Looking for Utopia, Then and Now” (November 1973), and George Watson, “Were the Intellectuals Duped? The 1930s Revisited” (December 1973).

After the introductory tableau, with its home-made spinning rods, we are treated to cameos of the people—at least the people whom Ms FitzGerald was allowed to meet. North Vietnamese officials, she stresses, have “an undercurrent of irony that is completely subversive to high-flown rhetoric and doctrinaire rigidity.” This is especially true of the more important officials. “The higher up or the more sophisticated the official, the less rhetoric there would be.” Very few windy bores spouting Marxism-Leninism, just as there were very few windy bores to greet those intellectuals who visited Russia in the '30s.

We first meet an economist, someone whom Sidney and Beatrice Webb would have liked, since he seems more of a Fabian Socialist than a Marxist-Leninist:

“His presentation was matter-of-fact, unpolemical, and rather more lucid than that of most economists. . . . What he talked about mostly was building factories, getting things done.”

Then, as if to show that there are thinkers in North Viet Nam as well as doers, we meet an intellectual, someone who sees himself as part of the French intellectual tradition, the resident J.-P. Sartre, his Marxism “of the philosophical

sort, his theoretical work elegant and literary.” We also meet a more commonsensical type, an official who is down-to-earth and extremely informative. . . .” Then a university student, who was “one of the least self-conscious people I’ve ever met.” Although she has suffered a great deal, she “seemed to have no emotional scars from the war. . . .” She is “a good student, a responsible girl. . . .” The tour of officials ends with a humanist—an editor who, in talking of the war, conveyed “the human scale of the whole enterprise: the sorrow of it, and the exhaustion and the difficulty that the leaders had undergone in making some of their decisions.” Disturbed about the economic problems of the United States, “he expressed sympathy for the five or six million Americans unemployed.” His reaction, FitzGerald assures us, “was sincere.”

Our sense of *déjà vu* deepens as FitzGerald gives us snapshots of the good folk of North Viet Nam at work, the heroes of the soil, while she lectures to us about the country’s economic development. North Viet Nam, it seems, is charmingly underdeveloped, unlike the Americanised parts of South-east Asia. There are no “superhighways, gas stations, and movie theaters.” Even the industrial centres have a rural touch to them, as “workers grow vegetables in factory yards. . . .” The description appeals to America’s current nostalgia for rural life, for small-town simplicities. North Viet Nam could be a turn-of-the-century America. . . .

## The Interpreter's House

A Critical Assessment of the Work of John Buchan

David Daniell

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THE ARTICLE NOW moves into the pastoral mode, the social-realist version. FitzGerald speaks of the country’s agricultural co-ops, which own the land they farm and its produce. No problems with kulaks here: “civil law protects their title to the land and their rights vis-à-vis the state.” At one of these co-ops, FitzGerald hears a discussion where everyone voices his opinion, though “at one point the chairman said that the tension of the meeting had given him a headache, and that it would be better to take a break with a few songs.” Which they did. Though FitzGerald supplies us with no direct quotations from *The People*, she assures us that they are grateful for a “government that provides a system of social security for all”, a government that has an excellent health-care system as well as an educational network “that is open to all, including adults.”

Naturally the North Vietnamese officials are modest about their utopia. “The North Vietnamese officials we met hardly mentioned their country’s social achievements. . . .” As practical and judicious men, they above all want “to be frank”, as one official said, about their country’s problems when they are talking to a journalist whom they have honoured with an invitation to

tour their country. Decent, modest, and reasonable, the North Vietnamese leaders want business as usual; they seek investments from all governments, even from private companies. These leaders, Ms FitzGerald says, "are clearly taking a gradualist, pragmatic approach to the reorganisation of the economy." Nevertheless these pragmatic officials do emphasise that they are also ardent nationalists who yearn for a reintegration of their country, though they bear no malice towards the United States and hope "for an eventual mending of relations. . . ." All they want in the South is "peace, democracy, national concord, and a new government in Saigon." But they are patient, these leaders, and they realise that in order to eventually reunify the country they will need "a fairly long period of transition, in which they could do the necessary political work in the cities."

"NECESSARY POLITICAL WORK." Three innocuous words. I imagine that FitzGerald batted them out on her typewriter without giving them a second thought. Yet can someone, at this point in the 20th century, really use such a phrase and not be aware of all that it implies? Not be aware—to quote Orwell's "Politics and the English Language"—that such euphemistic language "is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind?"

As Orwell said in the same essay: "words of this kind are often used in a consciously dishonest way." But I doubt that Ms FitzGerald was consciously dishonest; she was merely entranced by her vision of all the good things the new order will bring to those in the South who have no choice but to accept it. History repeats itself, but with some difference. The fellow-travellers of the '30s were innocent; they had no idea of the extraordinary duplicity of the leaders of the Soviet Union. Moreover, beset as they were by a world-wide depression and by the menace of Nazi Germany, they desperately needed to believe that some country in the world at least embodied the idea of the good, even if the reality was not quite up to the idea. One would think that an intellectual nowadays should know better.

It's one thing to accept Necessity, and to be relieved, moreover, that the ghastly war in Viet Nam is over. It's another thing complacently to obey the weight of this sad time by walking away from the bloody stage reassured that all is for the best. We should remember, though we can do nothing about it, that some people will have to endure the "necessary political work."

*Stephen Miller*

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## Sociology

# The Kathmandu Option

*Patrimony & Bureaucracy—By ERNEST GELLNER*

KATHMANDU, like Timbuctoo, has become a code-word of ordinary speech. Timbuctoo stands for a city located on the border between fiction and inaccessibility; in reality it happens to be a fascinating centre of scholarship, today as in the past, only mildly cut off by marshes to the South and, in conformity with image, by the desert to the North. The Tuareg still walk through it, veiled and with sword and hand-in-hand, but today they are more likely to be raided by the central government than vice versa. Such is progress. Kathmandu, on the other hand, is known to stand at the end of a viable road, literally and morally. It stands for an option, or rather an opting-out. Europeans no longer inquire of each other, are you Catholic or Protestant?—are you monarchist or republican?—but rather, are you for Economic Growth, or for Kathmandu?

This, if they ever think about it, must be somewhat offensive and irritating for the citizens of Kathmandu and adjoining areas, who after all possess an intrinsic reality which is quite independent of, if not contrary to, whatever symbolic meaning their habitation may have for others. The Kathmandu option, if taken literally, would contain some surprises for those who flirt with it. Here is a distinctive, fascinating, half-explored and quarter-understood society—the last great patrimonial state or oriental despotism; the one pure bit of India unconquered by Muslim or British; the only state in the world in which Hinduism is the established religion, where astrology (under the title “Predictive Aspects of Culture”) discreetly figures on the university curriculum; the only surviving princely state of British India, from whose citizens the sad news of Queen Victoria’s death has been tactfully withheld; where government is referred to as HMG; where Indian money can still be called the *Company* rupee; an amazing Himalayan patchwork of diverse cultures and faiths with a merely nominal unity; an experiment in something called Panchayat Democracy.

Systematic scholarship, as opposed to mere by-products of restricted diplomatic, military or commercial dealing, has only been possible for outsiders since 1951. Till then, if this was, as many would hold, a patrimonial society, it was an uncommonly well insulated one.

THE FASHIONABLE NOTION of the patrimonial state owes a great deal to Max Weber. The starting point is the idea of a state which is like a household, and is run for the benefit of its master:

In the patrimonial state the most fundamental obligation of the subjects is the material maintenance of the ruler, just as is the case in a patrimonial household; . . . the difference is only one of degree.

Yet, as in the household, the authority, though not legally circumscribed, is not wholly tyrannical:

As a rule . . . the political patrimonial ruler is linked with the ruled through a consensual community which also exists apart from his independent military force and which is rooted in the belief that the ruler’s powers are legitimate in so far as they are *traditional*.

Though possessing this consensual element, yet

The continuous struggle of the central power with the various centrifugal local powers creates a specific problem for patrimonialism when the patrimonial ruler . . . confronts not a mere mass of subject . . . but when he stands as one landlord above other landlords, who . . . wield an autonomous authority of their own. . . . Some Roman emperors, Nero, for example, went far in wiping out private large landowners, especially in Africa. However, if the ruler intends to eliminate the autonomous *honoratiros*, he must have an administrative organisation of his own . . . .

All these observations find echoes in the history of Nepal as it was until very recently, with perhaps one qualification:

Even under purely bureaucratic patrimonialism no administrative technique could prevent that, as a rule, the individual parts of the realm evaded the ruler’s influence the more, the farther away they