

Introduction

I begin with a confession: I have never liked the concept of “civil society.” In fact, my decision to base my dissertation on that idea came about, in a convoluted way, from my suspicion of the term. To me it seems to be so variously defined, so “conceptually fuzzy,” as to be meaningless. McIlwaine (1998, p. 417) quotes Fine (1977) saying that you either love the openness and potential of the term, or you find it so vacuous as to be useless. I have always come down in the latter category.

From my rejection of the concept, ironically enough, comes my fascination with the power it has garnered in the world of international development. In the void of an agreed-upon definition, the idea of civil society has jumped to become a top item on major development agencies' agendas. Its presence or absence is used to explain positive and negative changes in societies and economies. Its nurturing has become the focus of development projects and a condition upon governments for receiving additional aid money. Vast sums are being spent on identifying, evaluating, and supporting it all over the world -- all without anyone being able to define exactly what "it" is. I may not "like" civil society, but I decided I had to know more about it.

A note about my use of diacritical marks

Vietnamese is written using the Latin alphabet with a series of diacritical marks over certain letters to indicate vowel sounds and tones. Vietnamese words or

names without these diacritics are incomplete. Sometimes words without diacritics are intelligible to a Vietnamese speaker in context, but they are essentially “misspelled.” Like many (or most) scholars writing about Vietnam, I have had to compromise between being “correct” in Vietnamese and having the text easily read by my audience. Therefore, I have chosen to a compromise wherein I render certain Vietnamese terms and names without their diacritical marks while retaining the marks on other words. My own, purely arbitrary “rules” for deciding which words get diacritics are: Vietnamese phrases that are included whole (and then translated into English) are written with the diacritics; place names that are familiar to English language readers, such as “Hanoi” and “Vietnam,” are written without diacritics, as they would be in an American newspaper; authors’ names are rendered with or without diacritics as they were published. Therefore you will see in this dissertation a mix of words, phrases and names with and without the proper Vietnamese diacritical marks. For this unhappy compromise, I apologize in advance.

Required Note

My research was conducted under a strict and carefully crafted plan to protect all of my informants’ identities. This plan was formally submitted to the Internal Review Board. However, due to my own oversight, I did not receive final approval before undertaking this research.