The theory and practice of frontier development: Vietnam’s contribution

Rodolphe De Koninck

Abstract: This paper presents examples of agricultural expansion and frontier development throughout world history. Following a preliminary appraisal of the immense literature devoted to the topic, some key ideas and interpretations concerning the foundations, processes and consequences of frontier development are presented. These are drawn from a broad spectrum of European, American and Asian experiences and refer to geopolitical, demographic and ethnic issues. A brief survey of Vietnam’s own historical and contemporary experience both confirms and enriches these interpretations while raising questions about the intensity of the process and the country’s capacity to maintain it in high gear.

Keywords: geopolitical strategies, agricultural expansion, population distribution, ethnic minorities.

The intention of this paper is to summarise and interpret major historical episodes of frontier development and to apply these to the current frontier scene in Vietnam. There are a multiplicity of influences on the development of agricultural expansion and of experiences of migrants and these are evident in the numerous occasions throughout classical, medieval and modern history where a technologically powerful people have been able to effect a transformation of both nature and less evolved populations in areas peripheral to their cultural “core”. The paper starts with an examination of the major driving forces behind frontier formation – in demographic, social and geopolitical terms – and the effects of this process on the environment and the indigenous populations of the areas involved. This historical experience draws on case studies in China, Europe and America and is used to interpret the very active frontier which observed in the highlands of Vietnam.
THE MULTIPLE PURPOSES OF THE FRONTIER

Historical experience in certain contexts highlights the spontaneous nature of the migration process. Greek expansion into the coastal regions of the Mediterranean demonstrates this clearly, as noted by Mosssé who offered a typology of frontier development in these areas. He distinguished an “early period” (second millennium BC to 8th century BC), during which individual and unorganised land pioneering was the key mode of expansion, from a “late period” (8th–6th century BC), during which agriculture was organised ‘collectively’ and increasingly tied to the expansion of trade. Commercial interests, backed up by policies of population redistribution, led to the establishment of urban settlements, forming the key elements of the “classical colonisation period”, during which even military colonies were founded (6th–4th century BC) (Mosssé, 1970: 27).

This evolution – from spontaneous migration to state promotion of frontier development contrasts with the experience in China, where agricultural expansion was subject from the outset to extensive organisation by the state. In his classic study of China’s March towards the Tropics, Wiens showed how “Han-Chinese colonisation was a follower, not a forerunner of Han-Chinese political and military successes” (Wiens, 1954: 194). However “in order to keep the tribesmen under control” soldier-settlers were sent into the conquered areas to carry out “military agricultural colonisation” (ibid.). Military agricultural settlements were established throughout southern and south-western China, in provinces now known as Guangdong, Guangxi, Guizhou, Yunnan and Sichuan, so that by the beginning of the Ming Dynasty (late 14th century) the cultivated agricultural land “amounted to a total of [...] 4,441,903 acres” (ibid.: 197). In many areas, this was followed by “commercial colonisation”, whereby “merchants found it profitable to develop new farmlands in the frontiers themselves” (ibid.: 199). Lattimore further emphasised the bulldozer effect of frontier development on ethnic minorities, particularly along the Siberian borderlands (1940: 138).

The diversity of agricultural expansion has been amply documented with regards to more recent European history, and some of the most insightful research has come from Georges Duby. Territorial expansion of European agriculture was, in his analysis, primarily the result of land pioneering by peasants. Operating under the direction of landlords as well as spontaneously and even illegally, many gained a significant measure of autonomy (Duby, 1973: 239). This process culminated, however, in the enlargement – by the 12th century – of the land under seigniorial control. As new settlements multiplied, becoming nuclei of further expansion at the expense of forest lands, formal administration was gradually established, contributing to the territorial consolidation of feudal domains (Duby, 1977: 162). As modern states were formed throughout Europe, state control over agricultural borderlands became an intrinsic component of national territorial integrity (Tilly, 1975).
THE ROLE OF THE FRONTIER IN REDUCING DEMOGRAPHIC PRESSURE

A common feature of agricultural frontiers is their role in relieving demographic pressure in the areas from which the settlers originate. In places like Attica, the lower basins of Yellow and Yangtze rivers, the Japanese island of Honshu, the Brazilian Nordeste and the Indonesian island of Java, population pressure had to be relieved. Population pressure can defined as a deteriorating ratio of cultivable land to population but it may also stem from specifically social and political factors: excessive exactions from landlords, agrarian crises (which may or may not be directly linked to population growth), or environment disasters linked to agrarian crises, leading to civil unrest, war or famine. In these circumstances, a safety valve is required. The frontier, a region where land is available or is perceived as such by people under pressure, often takes on this role. How the decision to migrate is made becomes a complex and diverse issue. In some contexts, as Duby pointed out (1973 and 1977), land colonisation is induced by landlords, rallying their serfs to open up new land for agriculture. Elsewhere, however, it stems from the decisions of individuals, families and small groups of landless peasants, or even urban dwellers determined to move away from the points of ‘pressure’. It may also result, as is increasingly the case nowadays, from formal state policies aimed at the relief of social and demographic pressure in the heavily populated area.

The Indonesian transmigration programme is a case in point (Hardjono, 1988). The state sponsored out-migration of peasants from the densely populated island of Java, towards the Outer islands of the Indonesian archipelago, aims to reduce the rate of population growth in the country’s core area. Other factors are also involved, particularly geopolitical ones (De Koninck and Déry, 1997). This is a particularly interesting modern example of state induced migration, as elements unrelated to state polices are also intimately involved. The areas of in-migration also attract illegal settlers, known as spontaneous migrants (Benoit et al., 1989). In some instances, these people precede the official establishment of the new migration sites, although they more frequently arrive once schemes are established, settling on their fringes, and benefiting from their infrastructure.

Such ‘spontaneous’ migration raises the question of who really initiates agricultural pioneering? Is the state responsible? What is the role of private interests and entrepreneurial agriculturalists? Or are the peasants themselves the main motor of agricultural expansion? The history of land pioneering indicates that one or the other may be responsible, and that we should look, more often than not, to a combination of several agents. In Thailand, for example, agricultural expansion was not strongly linked to any large migration plan; rather it relied primarily on land being opened up spontaneously by individual peasant families (Uhlig, 1988: 13) The state, however, provided infrastructure, thus playing an essential role in consolidating precarious and marginal settlements, while private commercial interests offered capital and markets to the pioneering peasants (Lohman, 1993: 207).
THE GEOPOlITICAL FUNCTION OF THE AGRICULTURAL FRONTIER

The geopolitical function of agricultural colonisation is a well-understood feature of frontier development (see De Koninck, 1986 and 1996). Explicit research into this issue can be found in Berque (1980: 63–64), who examined Japanese colonisation of the island of Hokkaido during the late 19th century. Berque referred to the reliance on soldier-settlers as an Asian invention, having originated in China, under the Han dynasty (*ibid.*). Whether or not this was the case, reliance on the peasantry as the territorial spearhead of the state has flourished throughout the ages, notably in Europe during the Middle Ages and Russia during the 18th and 19th centuries (Blum, 1961; Le Glay, 1975). It was also crucial in the history of Latin America, as Hennessy (1981: 9) noted: “It is not entirely coincidental that official interest in colonisation schemes has coincided with the role of military governments concerned with geopolitical considerations and the security of exposed political frontiers”. More recently, other authors have emphasised that, again with reference to Latin America: “…government policies and programmes to colonise frontier areas, particularly those along international borders, have often stemmed from a desire to secure remote regions in the face of real and perceived threats to national security through foreign intrusion” (Mahar and Schneider, 1994: 164).

The relationship between national territorial consolidation and agricultural expansion has also been documented in Southeast Asia (De Koninck and Déry, 1997). The pioneering of new lands by poor families, often the result of individual attempts to escape from poverty, generally becomes part of a more general scheme: “Farmers, particularly young farmers and their families, have moved outwards […] frequently acting as agents of political expansion” (Manshard and Morgan, 1988: 1).

What have been the effects of this expansion? Historical experience allows us to make the following generalisations. On the one hand, in the areas settled by agricultural migrants, there were significant impacts on indigenous populations and on the environment. The existence of the frontier, on the other hand, had consequences for social and political life in the areas from which settlers departed.

THE INTEGRATION OF ETHNIC MINORITIES

Agricultural expansion by politically and technologically dominant groups has frequently been achieved at the expense of groups at the margins. In the context of modern nation states these people are now often called ethnic minorities. Such ethnic minorities rely on less intensive land use, on less stable, sometimes nomadic forms of settlement, and almost invariably on respectful methods of dealing with the environment, notably with forests (Boulbet, 1975). Fruitful relations of contact may have been achieved between members of these groups and the dominant peoples on the move. Yet, the prevailing historical trend has been the retreat of ethnic minorities who have everywhere
given way, moved back, or been sedentarised and integrated into mainstream societies, generally with dire consequences to their identities.

This marginalisation and/or integration of peripheral peoples, living far from the major centres of state power, frequently involved the state’s reliance on the peasantry as a territorial spearhead. As peasants moved out to the margins of the national territory, with or without the initial support of the state, the minorities were pressured into flight or submission. History is full of stories of ethnic minorities retreating behind the advance of the frontier: examples abound in South America, particularly Brazil (Aubertin, 1988; Dean, 1995), and in Southeast Asia, such as the Philippine island of Mindanao or peripheral areas of the Indonesian archipelago (Pelzer, 1945; Colchester and Lohman, 1993).

As Sauer put it, with reference to the Americas: “The expansion was due principally to the invasion of lands of lower and weakly resistant cultures by overflow from higher aggressive cultures” (1937: 8). As for the consequences of this ‘invasion’, Lattimore (1940, 138), researching the Tungus of Siberia, who faced both Chinese and Russian expansion, was particularly explicit:

Such tribes in the world of today are faced with two sharp alternatives; revolution, which really means abrupt transposition – not transition – from one world into another and totally unconnected world, or victimisation – like that of the American Indians – through being subjected to a civilisation whose history does not gear into that of their own society.

Later in his life, Lattimore (1962: 470) added laconically: “It is not surprising that the ambivalent loyalties of frontier peoples are often conspicuous and historically important”.

ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION AND OTHER CONTRADICTIONS OF THE FRONTIER

Throughout history there has been a tendency, as Harrison (1992) has shown, to consider forests as forbidden realms, places of devils and evil spirits. Such lands had to be tamed and domesticated (if necessary through destruction), and then followed by reconstruction or reforestation. The taming of forested and mountainous borderlands also involved the taming of forest people, the transformation of their realm being instrumental to their submission. For this process to be pursued efficiently, a discourse was elaborated, particularly over the last two or three decades, by state authorities and international agencies (such as the World Bank) accusing ethnic minorities of responsibility for deforestation. This has been particularly prominent in Southeast Asia (Bernard and De Koninck, 1996). This discourse has survived numerous studies demonstrating the non-destructive nature of most traditional methods of shifting cultivation (Condominas, 1957; Spencer, 1966; Boulbet, 1975 and 1984; Thrupp et al., 1997).

This discourse, evidently intended to shift blame from export-orientated agricultural expansion, appears less and less convincing. Even the Food and
Agriculture Organisation (FAO) recognises that the main reason behind the destruction of large tracts of forest in Sumatra and Borneo has been and remains uncontrolled fires lit, not by ethnic minorities, but rather by agricultural pioneers, including those working for large plantation concerns (Durand, 1999; FAO, 1999).

In fact, the causal link between agricultural expansion and deforestation has been extensively documented for almost every country of Southeast Asia. With reference to the overall Southeast Asian scene, Uhlig made the following observations in 1988 (7–8):

The aim of replacing the shifting cultivation of the hill tribes with permanent settlement and marketable crops is matched by the massive revival of uncontrolled swiddening by lowlanders and by the encroaching ‘commercial shifting cultivation’ […] The land hunger of smallholder pioneers, as well as agricultural entrepreneurs growing crops for vital export earnings, clash with the legal and fiscal interests of government land and forestry authorities, whereas other official agencies are bound to follow the settlement expansion by providing the needed infrastructure, such as school, health stations, public transport, etc. Social justice may be upset by land conflicts at the pioneer front and by the dependence of smallholders on middlemen, contractors or moneylenders. Labour migration from poor regions may be stimulated by the new opportunities but with uncertain socio-economic prospects.

More recently it was recognised that: “The main force behind deforestation in Indonesia is the need for land for agriculture to feed a quickly growing population” (Osgood, 1994: 219). This is common in developing countries where: “Subsidies […] will tend to encourage extensification of agriculture into forested areas” (Pearce and Brown, 1994: 15). Finally, as a cause of deforestation, agricultural expansion is often associated with practices such as logging and road development: “Colonization schemes, which generally accompany or follow road construction, can be an important factor of deforestation” (Mahar and Schneider, 1994: 164).

THE FRONTIER’S INFLUENCE ON A COUNTRY’S CENTRE OF GRAVITY

These effects on frontier areas have been well documented, as noted above. But what of the effects on the sending communities themselves? One of the most influential theoreticians of the frontier was Frederick Jackson Turner who pointed out the role of the frontier in the nation building process of the United State of America. He expressed his argument in statements such as: “The frontier individualism has from the beginning promoted democracy” (Turner, 1894: 222) and, “Steadily, the frontier of settlement advanced and carried with it individualism, democracy, and nationalism…” (ibid.: 225). Turner was widely criticised, including by Lattimore, who wrote: “In large measure, when he (Turner) thought he saw what the frontier did to society, he was really seeing what society did to the frontier” (Lattimore, 1962: 490). But good grounds may
be found for his argument, at least over the issue of ‘liberty’. This is evident in much of the literature, some of which was referred to earlier on, concerning land opening by ‘liberated serfs’ in Europe during the Middle Ages, and in Russia during the 18th and 19th centuries (Blum, 1961; Duby, 1973 and 1977).

The concept of a “centre of gravity” has been invoked in explanation of this. Frontier development has an obvious influence on the geographical distribution of population. In Southeast Asia, as recently demonstrated by De Koninck and Déry (1997), it has played a key role in decongesting or at least reducing the relative demographic pressure in several core areas, shifting some of it to peripheral areas. Lattimore (1962: 499) himself pointed out the importance of this process, with reference to China:

If this graph be laid on a map […] it will emphasise that the centre of gravity corresponds closely to the centre of population density, that historically, it has shifted from north and west to east and south […] The general principle, however, remains valid and is of great importance in distinguishing a number of definite characteristics of the past from a number of inevitable developments in the future.

The existence of a frontier may thus play a key role in the development – in social, economic and political terms – of the core.

THE CASE OF VIETNAM

The purpose of the above survey of the literature on historical frontier experiences is to provide a point of comparison with the situation in Vietnam, in order to establish commonality and identify originality. Indeed, parallels have occurred with a number of early 20th century French observers, who frequently associated the lower Mekong Delta with the American frontier, referring to it as the ‘Far West Cochinchinois’. In his three-volume study of Vietnamese civilisation, Camille Briffaut noted an organic similarity of settlement process between Vietnam and other ancient frontier scenes. His conclusion, in 1909, was as follows:

However social norms evolved thereafter, the clans once installed developed their laws and political economy on the same peasant bases which had been adopted, only on the basis of inspiration from local necessity, by the ancient inhabitants of the great alluvial plains, the Nile, the Euphrates, the Ganges, the Po, the Yangtse (Briffaut, 1909: 22).

We now have the benefit of a further hundred years of hindsight onto Vietnam’s still evolving frontier scene. Let us examine and interpret this, then, in the light of the preceding general observations.

The multiple purposes of agricultural expansion in Vietnam

Vietnam’s history is that of a nation having established its territorial domain through agricultural expansion. This is a major theme in the literature, and is
explored notably by Le Thanh Khoi, who suggested that the Nam Tien, the march to the South, constitutes the central thread of their history (Le Thanh Khoi, 1981: 163). This southward advance, which originated from the Red River Delta in the 10th century, led Vietnam’s majority population, the Kinh, as far south as the Mekong, which was integrated into their domain from the end of the 17th century onwards. The advance was the work of colonists and soldiers, who seized land from existing inhabitants, such as the Chams and the Khmers, or opened up new lands, through the establishment of irrigation for rice cultivation. This conquest followed the coast of the South China Sea and confined itself to the lowlands, staying away from the uplands to the west, for reasons including the inhospitable character of the forest and the presence of malaria.

The French administration (1859–1954) instituted policies aimed at fostering the agricultural colonisation of the Mekong Delta. The late 19th century saw considerable investment by the authorities in infrastructure such as roads and drainage. This project achieved a degree of success (Brocheux, 1995). However, the colonial power was less successful in its attempts to encourage Kinh migration towards the mountainous interior, particularly the Tay Nguyen (western plateaus) region, or Central Highlands. By the mid 1940s there were still less than 25,000 Kinh people residing in these uplands (Hardy, 1998: 137). After 1945, as the country was divided by war, Vietnamese authorities promoted population redistribution schemes, both in the North and in the South, towards either the Northern Highlands or the Central Plateaus. These invariably involved new agricultural settlements. Finally, following the 1975 reunification, organisation of migration was intensified towards the Central Plateaus, a region which has since become a full-scale frontier. We may conclude that a westward march (Tay Tien) has succeeded the southward march (Nam Tien) of the Kinh people.

By the 1990s, it had become obvious that in Vietnam agricultural expansion, notably towards the Central Plateaus, was pursued for multiple reasons – demographic, social, geopolitical and economic – and demonstrated many features related to frontier development – spontaneous land opening, environmental degradation and the taming of ethnic minorities.

The Vietnamese frontier as a demographic safety valve

Key features of the frontier formation process stand out strongly in the case of Vietnam. Foremost among these is the demographic factor, and it is worth examining the influence of this over the last hundred years. By the early 20th century, population pressure in the Red River Delta had become a major preoccupation of colonial authorities, giving rise to a number of critical analyses by administrators, scholars and even businesspeople (Hardy, 1998: 81). Among these was Pierre Gourou, a leading geographer, who, in Les paysans du delta Tonkinois (1936), discussed the relationship between irrigated rice cultivation and high population densities. In later works, such as La terre et l’homme en Extrême-Orient (1940), Les pays tropicaux (1947) and Riz et
civilisation (1984), he developed a theory asserting the superiority of irrigated rice cultivating societies. In the 1930s, however, Gourou was pessimistic about the future of the peasants of the Red River Delta, emphasising, along with the agronomist René Dumont, the need for solutions to overpopulation there (Dumont, 1935: 32). Among the solutions most favoured by Dumont was out-migration (ibid.: 33). Colonial administrators did initiate some population transfers, to the Northern Highlands, the Mekong Delta and even the Central Plateaus (Hardy, 1998: 95), but these transfers remained very limited.

Large-scale out-migration had to wait for the departure of the French. After 1954, in the South, the Ngo Dinh Diem administration established ‘land development centres’, for the resettlement of refugees from the North. In the North, massive population transfers were implemented, with the development of New Economic Zones in the mountainous provinces surrounding the Red River Delta, particularly between 1961 and 1966. During that period, one million migrants were sent to “sparsely populated upland areas of Bac Thai, Son La and Lai Chau provinces” (Jones and Fraser, 1982: 115). After reunification in 1975, migration policies targeted the Central Plateaus, to such an extent that their entire ethnic structure has been transformed. Estimates of the number of migrants having moved to the Central Plateaus between 1976 and the late 1980s vary considerably, between two to five million. Since then, at least one additional million have arrived in the uplands. There are several reasons for the variations in these the figures. First, the geopolitical nature of frontier formation in Vietnam has meant that the Vietnamese authorities release as little information as possible about the New Economic Zones. Second, the authorities do not have as much of control over the frontier scene as they would like to, as forms of unofficial migration have developed. Spontaneous or at least non-state sponsored migration is currently very active (Hardy, 1998; Déry, 1999), as is illegal clearing of forest, by official and illegal settlers.

The impact on sending areas, which include the Red River Delta and regions of coastal central Vietnam, is very noticeable. For example, while in 1926 the population of the Red River Delta accounted for nearly 34 per cent of the national total, by 1991, that proportion had declined to 20 per cent (De Koninck and Déry, 1997: 12). Of course, that has only reduced the rate of increase of the population growth in the delta; actual population density has continued to rise, albeit less rapidly than if there had not been out-migration. Consequently, over the same period, the provinces belonging to the crescent of foothills and mountains which surround the delta have nearly doubled their relative demographic weight, from 9 per cent to 17 per cent; in the Central Plateaus, where the influx is recent, the increase has been from 2.5 per cent to 4.1 per cent. The continuing in-migration into the area has probably brought that proportion to over 5 per cent by now (ibid.).

The crucial geopolitical function of the Vietnamese frontier

This brief survey of frontier formation in 20th century Vietnam serves to highlight the importance of a second factor in the process: the role of the state.
There is no doubt that: “Revolution and war gave the uplands a new geopolitical importance” (Hardy, 1998: 361). Under Ho Chi Minh, planned population displacements towards the Northern Highlands were definitely intended, among other things, to secure the nation’s borders, primarily with China, but also with Laos. As Hardy puts it, “Viet settlers who moved there were relied upon to make a contribution not only to their own economic well-being, but also to the security of the ‘Fatherland’” (ibid.: 362). As for the formation of the Central Plateaus frontier, it was initiated at a time when the Communist authorities, having just established their control over the entire country, meant to crush any possible opposition, notably from the representatives of ethnic minorities grouped under the Front Unifié pour la Libération des Races Opprimées or FULRO (Hickey, 1993: 40). In addition, the current four Central Plateaus provinces are contiguous to Cambodia, with Kon Tum province also bordering the southern Laotian province of Attapeu. As a result, many settlers in the first New Economic Zones in the Central Plateaus were actually demobilised soldiers; this is somewhat reminiscent of strategies adopted during the southward advance of the Vietnamese people.

The geopolitical objectives of agricultural colonisation in the Central Plateaus concern border security and, more fundamentally, overall territorial control. This means sedentarising and controlling the ethnic minorities.

The integration of Vietnam’s ethnic minorities

One of the immediate consequences of the influx of Kinh settlers has been the dilution of the non-Kinh character of the highlands, and in the examination of this third factor, let us take a closer look at the dynamics prevailing in the Central Plateaus, currently Vietnam’s most active frontier scene. In the province of Lam Dong, between 1976 and 1989, as the total population of the province more than doubled (from 233,000 to 488,000) the proportion of Kinh grew from 65 per cent to 76 per cent (De Koninck, 1999: 56). Since then, the rate of increase of this proportion has probably accelerated, both in Lam Dong and in the even larger province of Dak Lak, where agricultural expansion is currently particularly intense.

As the lowland settlers move in, and as commercial agriculture (especially coffee cultivation) expands, ethnic minorities either settle down and adapt to the new situation, or, as is often the case, simply retreat back into the mountainous and forested interior. This is what seemed to be taking place in June 1999, in the Dak Nung district of southern Dak Lak province. On the one hand, Kinh settlers were moving in, burning the forest on either side of highway Number 14, in order to plant coffee. Meanwhile, minority people, who had still been living in the area a year earlier, were nowhere to be seen. According to Kinh pioneers interviewed on the spot, they had moved into forested areas to the west, in the direction of the border with Cambodia.

Those who choose to remain within the pioneer front areas are encouraged to participate in commercial cropping. This was the case with small groups of Ko Ho people interviewed by myself in the commune of Loc Nam, in the Lam...
Dong district of Bao Lam. I was told that all the Ko Ho families involved had been unable to cultivate their coffee plants adequately and had lost them. They were now reduced to working as labourers on the surrounding coffee plots cultivated by Kinh settlers and, occasionally, to taking long walks to the now distant forests in order to collect food plants.

Overall, the ethnic composition of the Central Plateaus population is being modified in several ways, with the frontier having become a favoured destination for ethnic minorities migrating southward from the six northern provinces bordering on China. These provinces are currently suffering from severe environmental deterioration (Rambo et al., 1995), largely linked to excessive cropping on steep slopes. This unfortunate practice is due to ethnic minorities having been pushed back into more precarious areas by the advance of the Kinh agricultural front. In other words, the cumulative linkages between the various phases of the various national frontiers are exerting increasing pressure on the environment.

Agricultural expansion and environmental degradation

It is no longer a secret that for at least a decade, Vietnam has been sliding towards a serious environmental crisis. As forests are burned down, giving way to export-orientated commercial agriculture, the discourse about the responsibility of ethnic minorities for forest depletion sounds more and more hollow. The main cause of forest depletion is agricultural expansion, much of which is carried out illegally at the periphery of the ‘official’ pioneer fronts (De Koninck, 1999). As Rambo (1995: 22) put it: “Instead of being a bright new frontier, Vietnam’s highlands increasingly seem to be a development cul-de-sac”. In Dak Lak province, for example, the rapid advance of coffee fronts is causing serious problems, including a drop in the water table. The authorities are obviously taking note, as evidenced by the increasing number of articles in the Vietnamese press, noting that the government is taking measures to reduce the damage. But time is running out: to all observers, the floods and landslides which devastated lowland areas of central Vietnam in late 1999, although caused by exceptional rainfall, were also closely linked to the declining capacity of the reduced forest cover to slow down water run-off. Is the ‘logic of deforestation’, which I recently wrote was spinning out of control in Indonesia, also running loose in Vietnam (De Koninck, 1998)?

The interactions between Vietnam’s frontier and Vietnamese society

Is the Vietnamese government, which has seen in the development of the frontier a tool of geopolitical management as well as a tool of economic growth (given the impressive rise in the national revenue from the exports of commercial crops), loosing control of the ‘golden hen’?

During the initial stages of its formation, the frontier contributed to the increase and consolidation of the physical presence of the state in formerly remote areas and therefore to an increase in the ‘subjugation’ of the formerly
untamed areas and people. However, since then: “Frontier formation [in Vietnam has] found a momentum of its own” (Hardy, 1998: 362), with the consequence that state control has in fact become less efficient. This involves land consolidation by more successful settlers, who circumvent the official interdiction of private land ownership. Whether or not that vindicates Turner’s (1894) theory of the liberating influence of the frontier is certainly open to debate. One thing is certain however: the expansion of the agricultural frontier introduces an element of ‘free choice’ now enjoyed by an increasing number of pioneers. By causing, through illegal land opening, further environmental degradation, including the loss of large biodiversity resources, (hence a reduction of options available to Vietnamese society), they are in fact jeopardising the potential of the frontier to contribute further to the modernisation and to the democratisation of the country.

CONCLUSION

The above brief survey is insufficient to render justice to Vietnam’s complex frontier experience. It does however confirm some of the basic theories and propositions derived from the interpretations of several other major instances of frontier development. It also poses a number of questions concerning the intensity of the process and its capacity to be maintained in high gear. On the other hand, it shows that predictions about the end of the frontier, particularly those of Sauer (1937: 9 and 23), were false. Frontier expansion is still very active not only in Vietnam but also in several other countries of Southeast Asia (De Koninck, 2000) as well as in some South American ones, particularly Brazil. Yet about none of these, can the following question be asked: What is the specificity of frontier development in a socialist country and to what extent can that development contribute to the transformation of that country and its political regime?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the joint conference of the Canadian Council for Southeast Asian Studies and the Northwest Consortium for Southeast Asian Studies held at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, 22–24 October 1999. I wish to thank those present for their questions and comments. Thanks are also due to the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA).

NOTES

1 Evans mentions that two million people were displaced during the 1980s, with only a quarter of them heading for the Central Plateaus (1992: 281).
2. Given the Vietnamese government’s tendency to constantly ‘redraw’ the administrative map of the country, by regrouping and, much more frequently, dividing up provinces, it is likely that the large Central Plateaus provinces will soon be broken up into smaller ones (on this issue, see Déry, 1999: 127).


4. On 9 and 13 June 1999. It should be remembered that, in Vietnam, the pioneer fronts are advancing and hence transforming the landscape at a very rapid pace.


6. See, for example, the weekly Vietnam Investment Review issue of 31 May–6 June 1999.

7. This raises an issue that we cannot deal with here, namely the process by which, on several of the world’s agricultural frontiers (Philippines, Brazil, etc.), land-grabbing by large owners has been very common, while in socialist Vietnam, it is, in theory, not possible.

REFERENCES


