

The References of Vietnamese States and the Mechanisms of World Formation¹

Alexander L Vuving

The article provides a method of exploring ideational polities, which proceeds through highlighting the networks of discursive reference, which are made to argue for the nature or existence or right to existence of a given polity. This method enables a comparative study of the state. As case studies, four paramount conceptions of Vietnamese states in the 11th, 15th, and 20th centuries are explored and compared. They show how similarly and differently geopolitical identity was defined by Vietnamese-speaking state-makers at four crucial junctures in Vietnam's history. They indicate that the state is cogenerated but nonidentical with the world. The generation and construction of the world imagined in human mind involves the mechanism of coreference. Coreference is a two-level process complex by which a world is united via semiotic universalization at the level of the codes but remains (or becomes) heterogeneous via semantic reorientation at the level of the contents.

1 The Image of Political Order

The state is a phenomenon that is pervading and dominating our public life and even penetrating our private life. Although the state is not in every time and every place the pervasive and dominant agent/process/structure in the public life, it certainly has the tendency of becoming that. From the moment history began to be written, the state has been an unavoidable category for understanding social life and human affairs.

The state matters, and it matters in two ways. On the one hand, it creates a practical problem for human beings in social life – e.g., it divides people into two camps: the one is trying to sustain a political order while the other is against that. On the other hand, it challenges the human mind with a theoretical problem as to how to adequately conceptualize that phenomenon. For example, is there a 'common denominator' for both a West European republic of the 20th century and a Southeast Asian kingdom of, say, the 11th century, and if there is, what is it? Or is the "state" merely a catch-all word to cover different forms of governance/ domination or, are there

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