Chapter 1

Approaching Civil Society in Vietnam

<u>**Recognizing Civil Society**</u>

On a hot muggy morning in Hanoi in the mid-1990s, several bus-loads of ethnic minority people, farmers from a village many hours away, emptied into the streets near Ba Dinh square in Hanoi, opposite Ho Chi Minh's mausoleum. These were not the normal crowds of out-of-town tourists that are seen daily in this part of the city, however. These villagers arrived with a mission and a message to their government. They needed help, and they had come to ask for it.

The hillside above their village, where these people had been awarded resource gathering rights, was being illegally logged off by the state logging company, under the authority of the provincial government. The local village authorities either could not or would not help in getting the logging stopped. These farmers lived in poverty,

and with the important forest resources being pillaged, their lives and their livelihoods were at stake.

Desperate, the villages turned to a Vietnamese NGO (VNGO) which was running poverty alleviation projects in this village at the time the logging started. This VNGO, based in Hanoi and run by well-educated urbanites, first tried to help the villagers resolve their conflict locally with the provincial authorities. When that did not work, they organized the bus caravan to Hanoi. Once in the capital, the villagers staged a peaceful demonstration outside government administrative offices to bring their plight to the attention of national authorities. Such demonstrations are extremely unusual in Vietnam[1], and are generally illegal. This was a desperate measure by the villagers, and a bold move by the local NGO.

This incident was highly unusual. It was reported to me by another Western researcher and shows a rare case of a VNGO participating in a form of action that would be readily recognized by Western scholars as the work of "civil society." When the term civil society is used by international actors in developing countries, though the definition is rarely articulated and never completely clear – perhaps even to the speaker – the image is often of organized resistance to state authority. Street demonstrations, boycotts, and similar activities are said to be the hallmarks of an active and strong civil society resisting the vagaries of an authoritarian state. These

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[1] Though this story dates from several years ago, I have included it for illustrative purposes. Reports from Vietnam at the time this dissertation is being written indicate that, while such demonstrations are still illegal without a permit, they may be tolerated to a greater degree than when this incident took place.

images frequently originate in historical "dramatic moments" in civil society (as

Alagappa, 2004, p. 4 terms them), such as the rise of Solidarity in Poland and similar

groups across Eastern Europe, credited with the fall of authoritarian Communist

regimes there. Civil society is seen to be both the harbinger and the catalyst of

democracy in undemocratic countries.[2]

But these dramatic moments of demonstrations and uprisings are rare in

communist countries (Ding, 1994, p. 297). Far more common – so common, I would

venture, as to be considered commonplace – are what Alagappa (2004, p. 5) calls the

"every day expressions" of civil society. Daily interactions between citizens and state

officials and agencies form the basis for a constant state-society relationship that is

played out on many simultaneous scales, from the individual to the interactions of

large groups and organizations. It is in these interactions, I propose, that we can see a

form of civil society that is easily overlooked using more conventional ways of

looking at civil society.

In this dissertation I join with a small number of scholars who are arguing for a

new approach to defining, identifying, and researching civil society, particularly in the

Third World (e.g., Hudson, 2003; Wischermann, 2005; Uphoff and Krishna, 2004).

This new approach attempts to capture the "every day" aspects of civil society,

foregrounding them and making them more recognizable, while retaining the

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[2] The number of scholars looking at civil society in communist and "transitional" states is quite large, particularly in Eastern European and (to a lesser degree) China studies. See for instance, Miller (1992), Alexander (1998), Cheek (1998); Fowler (1996), and Ding (1994). Marr (1994), Fforde (1994), Heng (2004) and Wischermann (2005) are among the few who have looked at civil society issues in Vietnam.

conceptual frame that includes the "dramatic moments" of civil society as well. By opening civil society theory to more possibilities, we can immediately see forms of civil society that were once obscured.

To achieve this goal, this dissertation reconceptualizes civil society in terms of a "logic of actions" rather than a "logic of domains" (quoted in Wischermann, 2005, p. 221). That is, I will define civil society in terms of the activities and roles of various social actors, rather than in terms of specific forms of organizations, associations, and institutions. I will argue against limiting the idea of civil society to only autonomous, intermediate organizations, which is common in writings on civil society, an approach that I believe limits our ability to observe civil society in non-Western contexts. I argue instead for looking for civil society activities and functions – civil society *process* – wherever it can be found in a society, even if that means looking in state or quasi-state organizations. By doing so, we become much more open to the possible forms civil society can take. We also become much more aware of relationships within which civil society operates – relationships between state actors and non-state actors, for instance, or, in the context of Vietnamese NGOs, the three-way relationships between state actors, VNGOs, and international donors. As civil society "works" within these relationships, the activities that can be construed as belonging to civil society can be undertaken by various actors, not just those that might be classified as "intermediate associations."

The idea of identifying civil society activity within state or quasi-state institutions runs against the argument that to be "effective," civil society must be autonomous from the state and therefore provide a buffering force against state excesses. In Chapter 6 I argue that the idea of autonomy can be important, but should not be seen as necessary when looking for civil society process. In the first place, the reality of most societies precludes any clear demarcation between "state" and "society." In the second, I argue (along with Heng, 2004 and Ding, 1994) that organizations that are less than autonomous can, especially in authoritarian regimes, influence state behavior to a great degree.

If civil society need not be embodied in autonomous organizations, but can exist in "every day activities," how can we describe those activities? In this dissertation I argue that looking at civil society process as a continuum of possible roles in society allows us to capture both the

Figure 1: Continuum of Civil Society Roles

mundane and the dramatic instances of civil society. (See Figure 1.) I discuss this
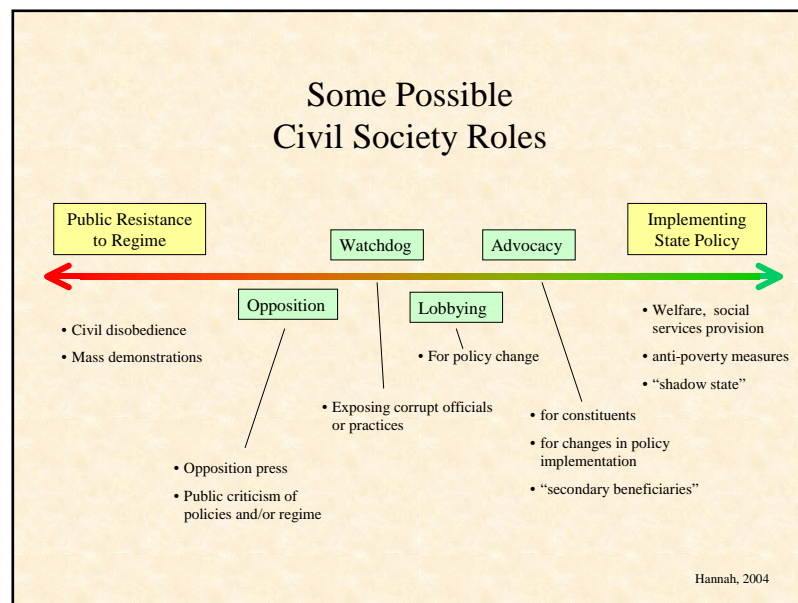
continuum more completely in Chapter 3.) Such a continuum, based on civil society process (actions and roles) rather than institutions and organizations, illustrates how civil society can exist in a variety of forms simultaneously in any given society. (See Chapter 3.) It also gives us a heuristic for describing contestation over what types of civil society activities are possible or "appropriate" in a given place. (See Chapter 7.)

The argument for reconceptualizing civil society that I have laid out in this dissertation is in three different but mutually reinforcing parts. The remainder of this chapter will summarize these three themes. My point of departure (in Chapter 3) is a discussion of civil society theory in general, and in development studies in particular. Since the early 1990s, large international donors have embraced civil society as a way forward after decades of development failure(Watts, 1995; Hart, 2002). It is my contention that the current state of civil society theory, both in academia and in the realm of international development, bolsters a Euro-centric view of state-society relations, and that a process-oriented approach can work to overcome that weakness.

In the second part of my argument, in Chapters 4 and 5, I set out to contextualize my approach to civil society theory by discussing the historical, political, and political-economic specificity of Vietnam and VNGOs. The Vietnamese state has been working to incorporate the idea of civil society into their state ideology and to make it relevant to the rapidly changing social, economic and political conditions of Vietnam under a comprehensive and wide ranging set of reforms. Simultaneously, the international donor community is pushing for more support of

VNGOs as a form of civil society, an idea that the Vietnamese state is ambivalent about. This political-economic context have made the adoption of the concept of civil society in the local regimes of knowledge problematic, which further influences the relationships between VNGOs and local state entities.

Finally (in Chapters 6 and 7), I draw from my empirical work among Vietnamese NGOs to argue for a more inclusive understanding of civil society that rejects the precondition of "autonomy" for defining civil society and embodies the idea of civil society action and process. I also look at how VNGO workers' identities as development professionals help define their relationships with state actors, enabling interactions that typify "every day expressions" of civil society. Through this analysis I expose how donor misunderstanding of these every day expressions underlies the contestation with the Vietnamese state to define the "appropriate" roles for VNGOs and for civil society in Vietnam.

Civil Society Theory and International Development

Most books and articles about civil society begin with a discussion about the origins and genealogy of the term itself, and this dissertation is no different in that regard. Chapter 3 begins with an overview of the current state of civil society theory, beginning with its antecedents in the ideas of the ancient Greek philosophers, through its early-modern incarnation in various Enlightenment writers' works, to the current academic debates and applications of the concept. From its several separate

beginnings, civil society persists as several distinct threads of thought, defying useful unitary definition.[3]

Despite the fact that attempts to define "civil society" are fraught with political positionality and contestation, the idea has become the darling of major actors in the international development system. Starting in the late 1980s, with the realization that development as had been practiced for the previous 40 years was failing to reduce poverty or make a more stable world, active support for civil society was touted as a necessary part of the development process. Critics from all sides of the raging debates on how best to "do" development began to embrace civil society as the best way forward. More progressive voices, often international NGOs, promoted civil society as a means to ensure participation and to include the "voices of the poor" (Abrahamsen, 2000; Mohan, 2002) Neo-liberal, neo-conservative, and more traditional development actors all embraced civil society as a means to greater democratization, good governance, and the strengthening of market forces (Watts, 1995; Hart, 2002). Suddenly, from an obscure concept buried in century-old social science writings, the concept of civil society landed dead-center in multi-billion-dollar aid and development packages to the Third World, typically without reference to its long and convoluted intellectual history (Fowler, 2000; Watts, 1995).[4] The fact that many of those donors

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[3] See Chapter 2 for a more complete discussion of the history of the concept of civil society.

[4] Civil society concepts appear regularly in international donor texts since the early 1990s. Examples are United Nations Development Program (2003), Asian Development Bank (2003), and Agrawal and Price-Thomas (2000). Many of these major donor texts often use the words "NGO," "informal institutions," "participation" and "democracy" to discuss aspects of civil society in international development theory and programs. A look at these large donor websites show that these terms are

are unclear about the meaning of the term or the ramifications of applying the concept in Third World societies (Watts, 1995; Hart, 2002; Carothers, 2005; Jenkins, 2001) has not deterred its deployment. It is for this reason – that the international donor community has put such a high premium on promoting civil society – that continued study of the concept is vital.

In my own empirical work in Vietnam I have found that the various historical Western perspectives on civil society, as well as international development's own deployment of the term, are too limited to capture the reality of what is happening there. Therefore, at the end of Chapter 3, I propose adopting what is becoming a new turn in civil society theory that privileges the process of civil society, not just its structural components. It is with this new way of looking *at* civil society that I can begin to look *for* civil society within the activities and roles of Vietnamese NGOs.

Civil Society, Development and Vietnamese NGOs

The second piece of my argument for reconceptualizing civil society in Vietnam comes from my desire to more completely contextualize the concept in the realities of Vietnam today. The adoption of civil society by the international

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closely linked (if not confused) with ideas of civil society. See for instance "The World Bank and Civil Society" (http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/CSO/0,,contentMDK:20092185~menuPK:220422~pagePK:220503~piPK:220476~theSitePK:228717,00.html), the Asian Development Bank's "Cooperation with Nongovernment Organizations and Civil Society" (http://www.adb.org/NGOs/), and the United Nations Development Program's "UNDP and Civil Society Organizations" (http://www.undp.org/partners/cso). (All websites accessed February 24, 2007.) In this dissertation I do not delve into the "participation" and "democratization" discourses in international development.

development community did not pass Vietnam by. Just as civil society began to come into its own in the international development world in the early 1990s, Vietnam was opening its doors to Western markets and the international donor community. In doing so, the Vietnamese state (both the Vietnamese Communist Party and the Vietnamese government) has had to come to grips with its own understandings of the concept of civil society and with its potential for shaping Vietnamese society in unexpected and/or uncontrollable ways.

First it is important to situate the idea of civil society within a regime of local knowledge. "Civil society" is a term that is difficult to translate and that is rarely heard in Vietnamese media or even in academic writing. It is almost never used in official writings, and few Vietnamese would know what the word means. In Chapter 3 of this dissertation I attempt look at civil society's place within Vietnamese regimes of knowledge through several avenues, including an exploration of historical encounters between Vietnam and the idea of civil society, translation issues from English and other languages, and a look at how Marxist-Leninist theory, the state ideology, unsuccessfully deals with the concept of civil society in its current deployment by international development aid projects. Understanding the precarious intellectual space the idea of civil society inhabits in local knowledge systems helps us to better grasp the political and legal problems encountered by the VNGOs that I studied. It also highlights the problem of "traveling theory" – that is, local encounters and attempts to make the theory comprehensible will inevitably change its various meanings.

The fact that "civil society" as a term and a concept are rarely encountered n

Vietnam might be interpreted as being indicative that the concept is not important – is

absent – in Vietnamese political and development discourse. This is not at all the case.

In fact the Vietnamese government and Communist Party have been engaged in an

ongoing project for more than a decade to define the term in a manner that is

consistent with the state ideology. The fact that this effort has not borne fruit, and yet

is continuing, is consistent with the idea that donor pressure to promote civil society is

creating a situation where the Vietnamese state must respond.

In this context of a donor community pressing for active governmental support

of civil society and a state apparatus attempting to define exactly what that civil

society will be, donors are at the same time promoting the formation of local

Vietnamese NGOs. These VNGOs undertake development projects, usually directly in

line with national development objectives, but typically with international funding.

Chapter 5 provides additional context for understanding both the contested nature of

the concept of civil society and the precarious position of local NGOs in Vietnam

today. It describes the socio-political context and the political economy of

development that VNGOs find themselves in.

Through this exercise of placing the concept of civil society in its social and

historical context in present day Vietnam – including the nature and position of

VNGOs *vis-à-vis* the Vietnamese state and the international donor community – I have

attempted to demonstrate two important ideas: First, civil society is truly a foreign

concept in Vietnam, one that the Vietnamese state is struggling to understand in the context of its political and ideological frameworks. Secondly, the reason the Vietnamese state feels compelled to address the concept of civil society is because the international donor community has adopted it in their development programs. VNGOs are, in some part, the result of the political economy of international aid which has supported their formation and development over the past more than 15 years.

In the next section, the third part of my argument, I continue to make the case for a more inclusive definition of civil society. I reject the criteria of "autonomy from the state," and I examine how the formation of a "professional" identity facilitates and embodies very interesting "every day expressions" of civil society in VNGO projects.

Autonomy, Professionalism, and Contestation

The third and final part of my argument for reconceptualizing civil society as a realm of process is based on my fieldwork among VNGOs and reflects my experience of their ideas and their operations. I approach this part of my argument in three parts. First I attempt to destabilize the notion that to be effective, civil society organizations must be absolutely autonomous from the state. In fact, I will show, some institutional connections is not only inevitable, it can be turned to advantage. Secondly, I explore how one form that the interaction between VNGOs and state actors takes is expressed through VNGO staff identification as "development professionals." This identity consists of a number attributes, maintained through conscious decisions, and practiced

though everyday activities. It facilitates relationships between VNGOs and both donors and state agencies while promoting specific forms of development practice. Lastly, this section of the dissertation looks at one result of the socio-political position of VNGOs as a form of civil society in Vietnam. Namely the "appropriate" range activities they are engaged in is defined by restrictions imosed by the Vietnamese state, but contested by international donors, which often desire VNGOs to take on additional civil society roles. This contestation can be captured using the civil society diagram introduced above.

The Question of Autonomy

It has only been in the last 20 years that VNGOs have appeared on the scene in Vietnam. They are a product of the *đổi mới* reform policies of the mid-1980s, which also set the stage for large numbers of international donors and NGOs to enter Vietnam. Yet VNGOs are still in a political and ideological limbo, without full acceptance or the protection of legal structures from the state, leading to a condition where virtually every VNGO is subordinated in some manner to a state agency or organization. In this context, with virtually no Vietnamese organization enjoying full autonomy from the state, what may be loosely called a "Vietnamese civil society" may not always be recognized as being "real" civil society. As an NGO consultant and later as a researcher, I have often heard international donors and foreign embassy personnel state categorically that there "is *no* civil society in Vietnam."

But this assertion misses the point. In Chapter 6 of this dissertation I argue for a more expansive and more nuanced look at what kinds of organizations can constitute civil society. To do so, I examine a specific variation in civil society theory that de-emphasizes the criterion that civil society organizations must be autonomous from the state. I specifically use Ding's (1994) concept of "amphibious organizations" that explores how oftentimes in communist systems an organization can maintain independent operations while having structural ties to the state.

In these conditions, the "border" between state and society is "fuzzy" and permeable, with actors moving between state agencies and non-state organizations, allowing organizations to "straddle" the state-society "divide." There is no firm line, in many cases, between the "state" and "society." (Ding, 1994; Fforde and Porter 1994; Wischermann and Vinh, 2003; Heng, 2004; Wischermann, 2005)

With organizations and actors straddling the (somewhat blurry) state-society divide, we can use the process approach to identifying civil society – an approach that does not depend on the notion of autonomy from the state – to foreground more subtle forms of state-society relations – what Ding (1994, pp. 297-298) calls (in the context of China) "precisely the most characteristic, dynamic, and intriguing phenomenon": the non-confrontational pressure for change that comes through cooperative and mutual-influencing activities involving state and non-state actors. Most change in policy or policy implementation, in fact, comes through direct interaction between state officials and interested citizens. NGOs play a role in catalyzing this kind of social

change in Vietnam through their collaboration with Vietnamese state officials in the

context of development projects. Lacking the human drama of bus-loads of farmers

marching in the capital city within sight of Ho Chi Minh's mortal remains, they are

certainly more common and more indicative of how Vietnamese NGOs attempt to

make social change through a cooperative approach with government officials. Heng

(2004) goes as far as to say that this kind of civil society activity succeeds not *in spite*

of Vietnamese organizations' ties to the state, but *because* of those ties.

The "Professionalism" of VNGO Staff

During my fieldwork in Vietnam among VNGOs, I found that maintaining

relationships with the various state "partner" agencies was a critical component of

VNGO operations. In order to be successful, VNGO workers adopt and promote an

identity as "professionals," an identity which enables them to interact both with state

officials and with international donors.

The idea of professionalism as an underlying factor in the creation of a post-

World War II system of development was introduced by Escobar (1988) and explored

further by Watts (1993). In these writings, the focus on "professionalism" in

international development is demonstrated to be a form of discursive practice that

establishes a specific regime of "development truth." Various trappings of

"professionalism" can be seen among VNGOs, including the use of English language,

the appearance and organization of their offices, the educational and professional

status of staff and officers, and even the legal status under which a given VNGO operates.

In Vietnam, a key aspect of development professionalism, and therefore of VNGO identity as professional organizations, is the idea that these organizations and their employees are "non-political." I argue that this idea of being non-political has two important aspects. The word "political" in Vietnamese means engaging with the higher state functions of foreign affairs, policy making, etc. – all of which are considered the prerogative of the Communist Party and the Government of Vietnam. Being charged with engaging in "politics" in Vietnam is extremely serious, marking one as being hostile to the regime. It implies that one is actively working to undermine the Marxist-Leninist ideology that underpins the state, and therefore to undermine the legitimacy of the state itself. The Vietnamese state reserves the right to formulate all policy based on its Marxist-Leninist ideology, and it interprets any challenge to that right as an act of subversion. On the other hand, working for social services or for the benefits of a constituency – as long as one is not promoting alternative *policy* in these regards – is not considered "political."

Secondly, being non-political feeds into the discourse of the international development donors as well. Donors are quick to avoid charges of meddling in local politics or otherwise challenging state sovereignty. In fact, international donors have great effects on local and national political situations, but these effects are not

acknowledged, and are actively obscured. (See Ferguson, 1995; Abrahamsen, 2000; Harris, 2001; and Norlund, 2003.)

An interesting aspect of the professionalization of VNGOs is the trend among several international NGOs to attempt to "localize," that is to convert themselves into VNGOs. It is felt that local development should be Vietnamese-led; foreign managers and program officers are not needed to direct Vietnamese development operations. This trend toward localization is meeting with a fair amount of bureaucratic resistance, but in general it fits with both state and donor ideal about development operations. New laws and bureaucratic procedures may help or hinder these conversions, exposing even more the difficulties the Vietnamese state is having coming to grips with the ideas of VNGOs and of the appropriate roles of civil society.

Contestation over "Appropriate" Roles in Civil Society

The issue of professionalism necessarily brings up questions about "appropriate" roles for civil society actors and organizations, a question which is normative in nature and fraught with political ramifications (in the Western social science sense). The state would prefer that VNGOs limit their activities to providing social services in line with official development policy.Under the Vietnamese state's development agenda, VNGOs are, for the most part, restricted in their activities to projects which are in line with these state development priorities, requiring the VNGOs to act as "shadow state" actors (Brown, 1997) and adopting the state's

development goals. These non-confrontational forms of engagement with the state can
certainly be considered forms of civil society as we saw in Figure 1, above.

But donors, too, have their own agendas which frequently include promoting
forms of civil society that may challenge the state's development policies. Many
donors would like to see VNGOs take on roles that challenge state behavior and
policy. VNGOs are at once beholden to donors for funding, and often eager to adopt
new practices and new forms of development projects that have been introduced by
international
development actors. They
are also subject to the
state for legitimacy,
bureaucratic registration,
and ultimately for their
very existence. Whether
VNGOs should be
contented with their role

Figure 2: Contestation over Civil Society Roles

as "shadow state" entities, or should be more active in promoting policy change, is a
conflict over the position of VNGOs, and ultimately about the meaning of civil society
in present day Vietnam. This conflict between the donors and the state has caught
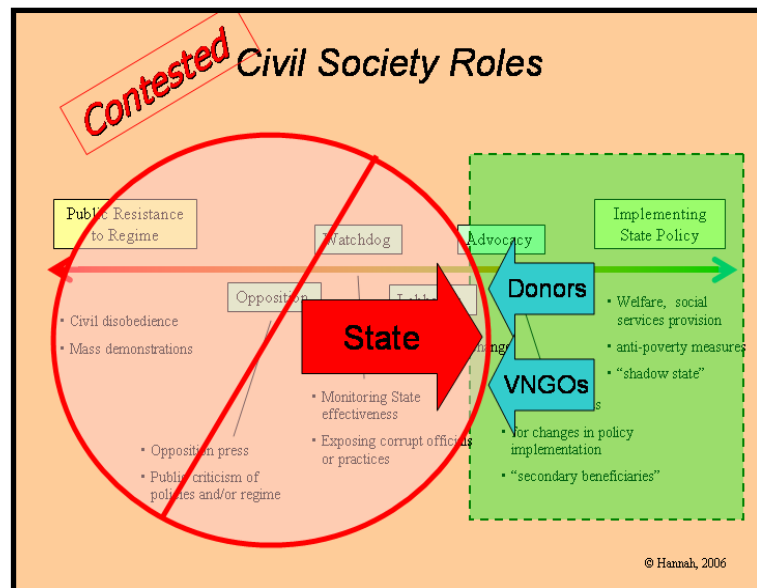VNGOs in the middle. It is illustrated on the civil society activities continuum in

Figure 2, where state-sanctioned civil society activities can be found within the box to the right, and proscribed activities in the circle to the left.

Currently there is pressure, mostly from international donors, but also some from local VNGOs and even some pressure from some sectors within the Vietnamese state to expand this realm of allowable civil society activities. But there is also a much larger force from within the state to maintain the current "line" between what is allowable and what is not and limit the roles civil society is allowed to play in Vietnam. I believe that this pressure to limit civil society activity is mostly a conservative reaction, an unwillingness to embrace change without a clear policy – a Party Line – clearly governing the roles and limits of VNGOs in Vietnamese society. This is the policy that the Vietnamese state has been working on for years, so far without result.

<u>Conclusion</u>

This dissertation explores the fascinating ways the concept of civil society is understood in Vietnam, its place in Vietnamese political ideology, the conflicts around its deployment by international donors, and particularly its daily manifestations through local, non-profit, non-government development organizations, the so-called Vietnamese NGOs. My goal is to challenge the dominant threads in current civil society theory, looking for understandings and insights that better explain the empirical data I collected in my fieldwork and arguing for a new manner of

characterizing civil society which will allow for a broader understanding of state-society relations in Vietnam and other places in the world.

Fundamental to my approach is a desire to look at the "every day expressions" rather than the "dramatic moments" of civil society (Alagappa, 2004, p. 5) in Vietnam. The image of several dozens of ethnic minority peasants marching in the morning sun outside government offices in Hanoi to demand their legal rights is compelling. Yet, as powerful as that image is, and as tempting as it is to pursue such moments as the heart and should of civil society, I think that they should not be allowed to mask the mundane but equally powerful daily activities that define state-society relations. To help me uncover some of these mundane civil society activities among Vietnamese NGOs, I have tried to allow the voices of my Vietnamese informants, colleagues and friends to guide me and help me understand their world.

In order to couch my new understandings in the Western social science term "civil society," I have found it useful to reconceive of civil society as a set of processes, activities, and roles. This reconceptualization does not discount "dramatic moments," but neither does it privilege them. Likewise, it does not preclude autonomous organizations as being part of civil society, but neither does my definition of civil society require autonomy from the state. Although I developed my approach to civil society by looking at Vietnam, its application goes beyond that country. Using this approach to understanding civil society will, I think, help us to overcome the Euro-centrism that is inherent in the theory (as it is usually discussed), and will allow

a better understanding of civil society in non-Western societies. Vietnam is a unique place in many ways, but the lessons we learn there can and should be applied to a broader appreciation of state-society relations.

In the following chapter I will discuss my approach to the research, including my methodology and the constraints I encountered. In Chapter 3 I will discuss the theoretical underpinnings of my study, including civil society theory, the use of civil society in international development, and my approach of looking at civil society as a set of activities and roles, rather than a set of institutions. Chapters 4 and 5 look at how the idea of civil society is understood (and not understood) in Vietnam and at development practice there. Chapters 6 and 7 discuss aspects of my fieldwork there, focusing on those parts of my experiences that highlight the idea of "everyday expressions" of civil society. Finally, in Chapter 8, I conclude and discuss some additional thoughts on civil society.