

JONATHAN WARREN

Cultures of Development: Vietnam, Brazil, and the Unsung Vanguard of Prosperity.

London: Routledge, 2017. 202 pages. \$160 (cloth), \$49.95 (paper), also available as an e-book.

Vietnam and Brazil do not generate much comparative scholarly attention. Sometimes the two countries occupy spots on a spectrum outlining “developing countries in the world,” or massive financial institutions like the World Bank relate their respective development paths to one another, but for specialists on Vietnam, Brazil often seems like a distant, unknown polity. Jonathan Warren’s new book tackles the challenge of comparing Vietnam and Brazil through a development lens but adds a social-cultural twist to his contribution’s remit. He argues that development sociologists fixate too much on economic indicators when evaluating national growth and correspondingly neglect the important cultural angles shaping markets. Warren corrects this problem through an interpretive economic framing that he contends addresses the hybridity of the cultural-economic in the two societies. He couples this framing with a suite of theorizations from renowned scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu, John Maynard Keynes, and David Harvey, to connect and contrast the two disparate countries.

Vietnamese society comes off looking much more culturally savvy, generous, community-oriented, and less blinkered than Brazil’s. If on the surface Brazil is a development “success story,” Warren convincingly states that this is a mirage masking deep inequalities between rich and poor. In Vietnam, on the other hand, racial and class-based hierarchies are not as deep, with important ramifications for the high levels of trust and solidarity that

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Warren sees in the country's social capital quotient. If you want to read a book showing Vietnam in a sunny development light, this book is for you.

Warren is trained as a sociologist of Brazil who has come to study Vietnam later in his career, so much of the comparison we read in the book emerges not from a calculated decision to associate the two places but from a serendipitous urge to test them against one another. In this sense Warren's scholarly motivation comes off like an anthropologist following his or her intellectual gut. This is conveyed in the case studies and respondent voices he draws from; many are friends, very few are contextualized, and their occupations and lives are only vaguely touched upon. Fair enough, but one question I was left asking is why the reader should believe that the participants Warren has chosen are vital people to illustrate contemporary Brazilian and Vietnamese societies, and why they deserve to be represented in a comparative analysis of Brazil and Vietnam as well.

This is a breezy book that makes development theories palatable, especially to the nonspecialist. Each chapter includes one or two development theories that are woven into culturally inflected case studies from each country. The penultimate chapter is an outlier, because it leaves out Vietnam and challenges the myth of rural underdevelopment by presenting an appreciation of growth from a Brazilian social-cultural standpoint. The conclusion is a unique methodological intervention called "trade tips" that helps development professionals and students operationalize knowledge gained from the book.

I think Warren's decision to compare two countries that do not seem to have a lot in common with each other is a brave and long overdue feat. Far too often Vietnam is forgotten as scholars explore the development miracles of other parts of Asia (mostly China but also South Korea, Japan, Indonesia, and Thailand) to say nothing of Vietnam's absence in many development studies of nations in the non-Western world. Similarly, pulling Vietnam out of Asia and showcasing its development strengths vis-à-vis one of the BRICS nations (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) is novel. The comparative development context in this book makes Vietnam look strong, healthy, harmonious, and perhaps punching above its weight as a development success story.

If I had one wish for a future version of this book, it would be for Warren to dive more deeply into the various uses and meanings of culture in

Vietnam and to exercise each of them as they relate to the market. Vietnamese culture is extraordinarily complex and is used (variously) as a way of life, as rules, as language, as a set of activities, as a set of values and meanings, and as a material representation of Vietnamese “essence.” Exploring how these interact to form something we call the Vietnamese marketplace would be a fascinating exercise to undertake. Nevertheless, bringing culture to the development picture in Vietnam as Warren has, and using these dimensions to affirm Vietnam’s growth compared to purported development juggernauts like Brazil, are important additions for any comprehensive analysis of Vietnam’s place in the world today.

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