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**Michael G. Vann and Liz Clarke, *The Great Hanoi Rat Hunt: Empire, Disease, and Modernity in French Colonial Vietnam*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.**

The European colonial impulse is Janus-faced. On one side, there is a yearning to explore the great unknown in search of lands and fortune. On the other is fear, which manifests over time as a tendency to “fortify” itself, like an insecure traveler. This was certainly the case for French colonials in Indochina, where the French *mission civilisatrice* reflected an overweening faith in thought and achievement paired with an attitude of white supremacy. Authorities such as French Indochina Governor-General Paul Doumer (1897-1902) planned a “modern,” state-of-the-art Hanoi for Frenchmen to inhabit, rich with Beaux-Arts architecture and a network of sewers. Its purpose was to separate Frenchmen from the much larger local Vietnamese population, which colonials, guided by bogus racial theories of the day, regarded as unclean and backward. But what happened when a major infestation of plague-bearing rats in the French quarter required local manpower to resolve it? Irish statesman Edmund Burke once said that “by gnawing through a dike, even a rat may drown a nation.” Could thousands of rats have drowned the French colonial ego? *The Great Hanoi Rat Hunt*, by Fulbright Visiting Professor at Paññāsāstra University of Cambodia, Michael G. Vann and illustrator Liz Clarke, explores a 1902 incident in French colonial Hanoi wherein invasive, plague-bearing rats infested the French quarter’s sewer system, thereby prompting colonial authorities to enlist local assistance to “kill every rat in [Hanoi]” (p. 84). In the spirit of Gwen Wright’s *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism* (1991), Brenda Yeoh’s *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore* (2003), and Rudolf Mrázek’s *Engineers of Happy Land* (2002), Vann and Clarke highlight the agency of the colonized to respond to their occlusion from the colonial modern-making project. Despite French authorities establishing a bounty system to recruit locals (who outnumbered Frenchmen by a nearly twenty-to-one ratio) to kill plague-bearing rats, naïveté underpinned the French modernity project from the onset. Highly successful at killing rats (20,000 in one day in one instance) and, later, collecting rat-tails for bounties, Vietnamese locals flipped the system of *dératisation* in their favor by effectively “farming” rats to maximize French payoffs in a prime example of “perverse incentive” (p. 95).

Originally part of Vann’s doctoral research in the 1990s, the book consists of five parts: a graphic novel-style history of the rat-killing project and its regional and global historical context; more than sixty pages of English-language primary sources (making such materials accessible to non-experts); and three parts that provide useful resources for teaching the *Great Hanoi Rat Hunt* in the classroom. Vann and Clarke masterfully weave together an urban history of French colonial Hanoi with a larger history of globalization, empire, migration, disease, and modernity. Clarke’s attention to detail in illustrating Beaux-Arts architecture, the colonial-era dress of Hanoi’s various classes (ranging from mandarins and street vendors to rickshaw pullers and laborers), and the folly of the French *mission civilisatrice*, is reminiscent of the meticulous artwork one finds in the masterpieces of Alan Moore and Katsuhiro Otomo. Her panels also capture the impact of and response to a “modernization” effort that was at its root highly racialized, guileless, physically violent, and hardly received passively (pp. 210-212). Vann’s quoting of Hannah Arendt (though spelled “Arden”) is most appropriate: “Power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent” (p. 213). And rule violently, both in theory and in practice, the French did. But to weave these disparate yet interlinked threads together, Vann and Clarke showcase a Hanoi that is not isolated from the “Modern” Age

of New Imperialism. “Context,” the third part opens, “is essential for historical understanding,” and without it “we will never really comprehend what was going on” (p. 199). Indeed, Vann and Clarke succeed in providing context surrounding this particular plague outbreak, tracking how the Third Bubonic Plague Pandemic in Yunnan, Southern China (1855-1959) made its way into French colonial villas by way of brown rat carriers, themselves arriving in Hanoi via industrialized transport systems. Vann and Clarke also highlight the callowness of the French colonial vision: “Modern” French sewers provided a perfect ecosystem in which rats could thrive, yet the colonial response was not to find fault in their own design but to take an accusatory stance toward “unclean” locals. The French were also unprepared for locals “gaming” the bounty system to their favor. Successful rat hunts led to hundreds, even thousands, of rat carcasses, which officials did not wish to store in a time of outbreak. Officials therefore amended the bounty system to offer payouts solely for rat-tails. Local entrepreneurs then set about catching rats, clipping their tails, and setting them free to produce more rats to be caught later, in a cycle of catch, clip, and release. Established rat-farms soon followed, with smugglers “growing” rats of all types and species. The way in which Vietnamese entrepreneurs turned the “de-rat-ification” bounty system around ultimately represents an example of perverse incentive—in which “policies designed to decrease something ... ironically increase it” (p. 95)—as the number of rats in Hanoi actually grew with the 1902 hunt.

Interestingly, the French policy’s abject failure is reminiscent of another French colonial failure that occurred in Indochina shortly thereafter: the Tonkin Free School (*Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục*; founded in 1907). An outgrowth of the French colonial policy of associationism, colonial authorities aimed for the school to teach Vietnamese students about European achievements in science, contemporary hygienic practices, and of course, the pillars of French nationhood (*liberté, égalité, fraternité*). However, the school’s legacy was not in “modernizing” the Vietnamese subjects but rather in producing anti-colonial nationalists, notably Phan Bội Châu (1867-1940) and Phan Chu Trinh (1871-1926). French officials shuttered the school a mere year after its grand opening as a direct result. In the cases of both the 1902 rat hunt and the Tonkin Free School, French attitudes of superiority and a steadfast commitment to the Third Republic’s civilizing mission served only to embolden and empower the *colonisés* to outwit, outmaneuver, and outright challenge their French oppressors.

Admittedly, this reviewer does not have too strident a critique of this innovative and altogether refreshing take on urban/global history. Particular praise is due for its accessibility, pop-culture references, and light-hearted approach to its subject. As Vann acknowledges in the book’s final section, the graphic genre “works well for the story of the rat hunt,” and indeed, it conveys the event as “glocal” history most effectively (p. 241). One wonders if Vann and Clarke might have offered a comparison between French colonial modern-making initiatives in Hanoi with those in Saigon, Phnom Penh, and Vientiane, though such an exploration might be more fitting for a different, more expansive project. This reviewer would also have liked the book to frame the French “modernization” effort in Hanoi as a *champ d’expérience* (experimental terrain), as Wright’s scholarship has done. French intellectuals and political actors, Wright argues, “experimented” with solutions to French urban problems of cultural hierarchy, socio-economic segregation, and economic development, but in colonial cities. Finally, it would have been intriguing to see Vann and Clarke challenge Wright’s position that official French urban policy in colonial cities “experiment[ed] while it preserved..., innovate[d] without disrupting traditions,” which we do not get a sense of in Hanoi. Was it perhaps an exception to the norm? We do, however, get a sense of a French colonial Hanoi as “a contested terrain,” to quote Yeoh.

In Hanoi, as in colonial Singapore, cities expressed and facilitated imperial aims in functional, symbolic, and spatial terms, but those who inhabited these spaces negotiated, and even challenged, these *on their own terms* at the level of discourse and in daily practice. Yeoh's focus, Chinese Singaporeans, used passive resistance to challenge English colonial urban planning ideals and sanitary science, forcing social brokers to make concessions "in deference to Chinese sentiment." Likewise, Vietnamese entrepreneurs displayed everyday resistance through flipping the script on the rat-hunt bounty system, playing the French for fools and, ultimately, obtaining a form of deference from their colonial oppressors.

In sum, all five parts make *The Great Hanoi Rat Hunt* invaluable as a teaching resource and an excellent introduction to the history of contemporary globalization. In a digital age when online materials are replacing printed ones, Vann and Clarke deserve high praise for producing an engaging and accessible way to discuss world history in a comprehensive, light-hearted yet scathingly critical way that neither alienates nor overwhelms its reader. Their work is a must read for readers interested in glocal history, be they neophytes or seasoned experts seeking to expand their horizons.

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