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## Researching Vietnamese Politics: A Comment on “Malesky vs. Fforde”

In the latest edition of the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, Martin Gainsborough offers to adjudicate a supposed dispute between two highly cited scholars of modern Vietnamese politics. Purportedly drawing on the philosophical traditions of ontology and epistemology, Gainsborough claims that we can gain traction as a field by looking closely into the preexisting belief systems that scholars bring to their research questions. Once we do this, he argues, we can weigh the merits of what scholars consider “to be reliable data in the first place.”<sup>1</sup> Along the way, Gainsborough questions the plausibility of my work<sup>2</sup> and accuses me of smuggling “liberal” values into my evaluation of Vietnam.<sup>3</sup> He concludes by pleading with the field:

Let us be clear about the underlying assumptions we are working with. Let us be willing to defend our particular approaches, but let us also be open to refining them in light of debate, working across the usual divides to produce cutting-edge research. Getting this right is not simply of academic interest—it concerns the future of ninety-five million people.<sup>4</sup>

The reader is left to presume that this edict is particularly relevant for me, as the article studies the works of only two scholars, and Gainsborough declares elsewhere that “the closer a particular branch of political analysis is to dominant power structures, the less willing its proponents are to

question the stability of key concepts. This, we argue, applies to Malesky though not to Fforde.”<sup>5</sup>

I was surprised to see my name at the top of the article. I was very happily pursuing my own style of research, hoping that more than a handful of people would read it. Gainsborough’s article, however, appears to be part of a broader narrative that, I fear, is intellectually limiting as well as disrespectful and damaging to my Vietnamese coauthors and collaborators. Adam Fforde and Gainsborough want all students of Vietnam in the same ring, so I feel obliged to defend my corner.

In this commentary, I am going to follow Gainsborough’s precept as closely as I can. There are very real differences in how he and I approach research, and a clear delineation of how I choose my research questions, design my data collection efforts, and structure my analyses might be useful for scholars hoping to challenge or build upon my findings. I hereby declare that in my research, I adhere to the principles of: 1) deductive scholarship; 2) systematic research design; and 3) falsifiability and transparency of research processes, as well as validity and reliability in measurement. Substantively, I believe that 4) the dichotomy of politics as policy or clientelism is a false one; and that 5) political institutions matter for constraining actors and shaping policy outcomes. I demonstrate my approach by contrasting my choices with Gainsborough’s scholarship both in “Malesky vs. Fforde” and his other work, showing how his research adheres to the opposite position in all five of these dimensions and strongly influences his conclusions. To be clear, I focus only on my own decisions. I do not presume to speak for the vast array of researchers studying Vietnamese politics, not even those who have a more quantitative bent.

Allow me to begin by quickly dispensing with the grandiose pretenses of the abstract and conclusion in “Malesky vs. Fforde.” This article has nothing to do with research paradigms in Vietnamese Studies, and the future of ninety-five million people does not hang in the balance. It is nothing but a cursory review of two scholars’ work on Vietnam. It is certainly not about ontology or epistemology. Gainsborough, by his own admission, never looks beyond the published work of the two authors. He doesn’t read their references to understand the scholars that influenced them or the dialogues and debates to which they are contributing. He puts

forth no effort to understand their methodological tools and conclusions they draw. He therefore has zero empirical basis to pass judgement on how *a priori* belief systems influence their choice of topics or findings.<sup>6</sup> The article has nothing to do with the objective validity of the data that scholars use, which is mentioned only in the abstract. Moreover, it is far from objective. Only my research receives criticism of any kind, and Gainsborough actually aligns his own thinking with Fforde three different times in the piece.<sup>7</sup> Finally, it is not, despite his initial claims to the contrary, a comprehensive or systematic review of the authors' works on Vietnam. As I will show, the articles reviewed and the examined concepts are selected with an eye to justifying the conclusion Gainsborough appears to have had in mind at the outset.

The bottom line is that "Malesky vs. Fforde" is an unsystematic and biased piece of work, which focuses primarily on word choice in the introduction and theory sections of articles, arriving at the banal conclusion that different authors focus on different things, but Gainsborough prefers work closer to (and even "drawing on") his own.

The mistakes rain down in such an overwhelming torrent in "Malesky vs. Fforde" that a concise and organized rebuttal is challenging.<sup>8</sup> Should I focus on Gainsborough's flawed and opportunistic research design? His misreading of my work? His misunderstanding of epistemology? His assertion that the words "representation" and "accountability" are "liberal" values and not core features of Vietnam's understanding of Democratic Centralism, described in its Constitution?<sup>9</sup> His reluctance to define key concepts in his analysis such as "liberal," "politics," "policy," and "state," or key evaluation criteria such as "plausibility" and "convincing"? His opaque depiction of the policy-making process in Vietnam? His belief that to study a particular institution in depth means to neglect the larger whole of Vietnamese politics? There is just too much with which to take issue—too many leaks to plug.

I also do not see any benefit in positioning my scholarship against Fforde's. Fforde's work informed my early research program on provincial fence-breaking.<sup>10</sup> I found Gainsborough's juxtaposition of our findings to be hyperbolic. In my opinion, the key difference between Fforde and myself is about focus, and about what it means to contribute to the study of a polity.

There are two views. One is that we understand a country's politics by examining it in full, embracing the complexity, nuance, and murkiness, and problematizing every concept. The other is that we understand a country's politics by taking it apart, breaking it into manageable pieces that we can study rigorously, with the hope that a comprehensive perspective emerges from the combination of many distinct research efforts. Fforde generally holds the first view, and I hold the latter. I think students of Vietnam can benefit from considering both.

To keep my rebuttal streamlined and systematic, I have opted to weave my response into a broader discussion of research methods and contextual understanding of the Vietnamese polity. I hope it will be beneficial to the field of Vietnamese studies to constructively approach this situation. Over the next few pages, I will walk readers through the key differences between my scholarship and Gainsborough's.

### Deductive vs. Inductive Scholarship

In his essay, Gainsborough highlights my use of quantitative methods.<sup>11</sup> The quantitative versus qualitative distinction is overstated, as I use and enjoy reading both. What really distinguishes my own work from Gainsborough's is that he generally values induction in his scholarship. That is, Gainsborough likes to work backward from data to theory building, reaching his conclusions after he has soaked himself in the research setting and poked around in the data.<sup>12</sup> Gainsborough enters his research unburdened by existing disciplinary theories, concepts, typologies, and comparison to other cases. There are limited building blocks for his work, and every concept is subject to debate and problematization. Gainsborough clearly articulates this approach in his book, where he explains that his approach to studying the state is not to define it, but to trust that a "more authentic picture" will eventually come into view in light by looking at how nonstate actors interact with it.<sup>13</sup>

By contrast, I adhere to a deductive research approach, whereby I begin with theory building and conceptualization, and then move forward to testing. First, I identify a research puzzle or question that existing theory is unable to explain.<sup>14</sup> Second, I look to existing work on these questions, often from other countries, to better understand the current theories,

debates, and concepts. Third, I construct my own theories, which build upon the excellent theoretical work of other scholars. Fourth, I work to clearly refine my theories into hypotheses that offer predictions of the outcomes we might observe if my theory is correct. When you read my work, you will often see these hypotheses bolded, indented, and marked with a capital **H** to highlight my theoretical predictions for readers. The next steps involve measurement, testing, and replication, which I will discuss in more detail below.<sup>15</sup>

There are pros and cons to both inductive and deductive research. Inductive research is very good at identifying new puzzles and generating new hypotheses to be tested in other settings. It is an inappropriate tool for hypothesis testing, however, because the theories are molded by the original setting and environment, and it is difficult to see how well they travel to new contexts. Induction can also easily degenerate into a laundry listing approach, in which many factors are assumed to have causal importance without identifying the relative salience of particular variables. Here, induction risks being used as mere window dressing for atheoretical data mining. Unmoored by theoretical guidance, scholars can confuse themselves into believing any observed pattern is relevant.<sup>16</sup>

Deductive research is more appropriate for hypothesis testing because it builds on existing scholarship and concepts.<sup>17</sup> However, deductive scholars sometimes draw inappropriate conclusions because of a mismatch between the abstract theoretical concepts they seek to measure and their actual manifestation in the research setting. Vietnam specialists often get annoyed with deductive scholars like myself for overlooking the special cultural, historical, and institutional features of Vietnam in our research designs. Indeed, every first-year political science graduate student is trained about the dangers that conceptual stretching of this nature poses for drawing inferences.<sup>18</sup> A great example of this type of mistake is Edward Miguel and Gerard Roland's study of the long-term effect of bombing in Vietnam. They used distance from the seventeenth parallel to estimate war damage and concluded that more heavily bombed places did not suffer economically from the war.<sup>19</sup> What they missed, however, is a reality that is obvious to any Vietnam specialist: postwar transfers to poor provinces were also higher for those closer to the seventeenth parallel. In short, they thought they were measuring war

exposure and ended up measuring subsequent domestic transfer policies meant to compensate for war damage.<sup>20</sup>

Both induction and deduction are at their best when accompanied by a systematic and well-planned research design that guards against selection bias. They are at their worst when the research design is non-systematic and opportunistic. In the latter cases, work moves away from research to something more like a legal brief, where the author cherry-picks evidence to fit a predetermined narrative. As I will show below, Gainsborough's research in "Malesky vs. Fforde" and other contexts fits this description. Sometimes the cherry-picking is unintentional; the author is simply more attuned to patterns he expects to find. Unfortunately, sometimes, it is deliberate and intentional.

In "Malesky vs. Fforde," Gainsborough's preference for induction emerges when he somewhat contradictorily criticizes me for both distinguishing Vietnam as an authoritarian rather than a democratic regime,<sup>21</sup> but also for benchmarking Vietnam's National Assembly on "liberal values," such as representation and accountability.<sup>22</sup> From the perspective of Gainsborough's purist, inductive approach, this is out of bounds—why am I bringing value-laden terms into a context that should be observed *sui generis*?

These choices, however, come from the fact that I am following a deductive approach, where I am trying to test existing scholarly theories of what parliaments do and how regimes use them to accomplish goals in non-democratic settings. I am therefore building on theoretical concepts that have been defined and debated in the comparative political science literature and have been used in other contexts, and I am establishing scope conditions for readers who are less familiar with Vietnam. As Gainsborough noted, much of my reviewed work is published in journals for non-area specialists. For them to make comparisons, I need them to understand where Vietnam fits in the distribution of regime types they see around the world, and I am using well-established language, concepts, and measurements that articulate this distribution. Understanding how Vietnamese leaders understand and apply the word democracy is a fascinating research question, but it wasn't my objective in those papers.

However, I am surprised that Gainsborough chose to focus on my "liberal" hypotheses and highlight them as a singular conclusion about my work:

“What we never get from Malesky is an exploration of how the National Assembly may be better understood with reference to a different set of, say, non-liberal norms.”<sup>23</sup> This statement is triply misleading. First, in focusing on representation and accountability, I am holding Vietnam to the standards stated in its own Constitution and further articulated in declarations by party leaders and speeches of the Vietnamese National Assembly (VNA) delegates.<sup>24</sup> Second, Gainsborough knows this because he uses similar language in his book.<sup>25</sup> Third, much of my work explicitly looks at how elections and assemblies are used to achieve “non-liberal” goals, such as gathering information on potential opposition and regime strength,<sup>26</sup> coopting opposition,<sup>27</sup> power-sharing among elite politicians in Vietnam,<sup>28</sup> and identifying talented cadres for promotion.<sup>29</sup> These were, in fact, the main hypotheses under investigation. Political science has a deep literature on these goals, which I and my coauthors cite copiously in describing our work, and Gainsborough could have easily seen it in our cited texts.<sup>30</sup> This leads me to believe that there is much more to Gainsborough’s misreading here than a different research tradition. I return to this conjecture when I focus on the unsystematic nature of his research designs and his casual approach to evidence.

A second example of inductive research in “Malesky vs. Fforde” comes in Gainsborough’s nod to epistemology, a dense field of philosophy on knowledge creation that goes back to the ancient Greeks. The term is often mentioned in his article yet loosely defined; the literature is unexplored, and Gainsborough makes no use of its arguments in his critiques. If Gainsborough were doing deductive scholarship, he would have invested effort in reading into the deep debates in this field, identifying the different schools of thought (i.e. historical, empiricism, idealism, rationalism, constructivism, and pragmatism).<sup>31</sup> He would have then developed theories about the features of knowledge production and built a typology of epistemological approaches that are used in the study of Vietnamese politics. Only then would he have used the conceptual building blocks of epistemological theory to organize the works of Vietnamese scholars. He does not do these things because epistemological theory is actually unimportant to his claims.

Ironically, Gainsborough’s primary research tool, both in this article and his own work, is a form of *skepticism*, the threat to knowledge accumulation

that propelled epistemic thinkers like Plato and Aristototle in the first place.<sup>32</sup> Notice in “Malesky vs. Fforde” how Gainsborough asks questions but does not provide answers. He wonders whether my account of provincial separation is plausible,<sup>33</sup> but does not offer an alternative, more plausible account of the activity. He says the VNA could be better understood with reference to a different set of non-liberal norms,<sup>34</sup> but never articulates what those are. He praises the Fforde argument that the party-state is no longer able to govern,<sup>35</sup> but fails to explain how this same entity manages to field a military, deliver public goods and services, issue currency, collect taxes, disperse transfers, and operate a bureaucracy.

This approach is familiar; Gainsborough’s strength as a researcher, best exemplified by his book *Vietnam: Rethinking the State*, which summarizes and extends upon his research portfolio, is to challenge the prevailing wisdom in the field. For example: 1) the idea that the south is more reformist;<sup>36</sup> 2) whether Vietnamese politicians are pursuing reform,<sup>37</sup> and 3) the centralization of the Vietnamese party-state.<sup>38</sup> In these oft-cited arguments, Gainsborough tears down the beliefs that we think are leading to the observed phenomena but rarely constructs alternative edifices to explain them. If southern leaders are no different in their reform orientation than their northern counterparts, why is the land below the seventeenth parallel so much wealthier on a GDP per capita basis with so many more private enterprises?<sup>39</sup> If Vietnamese elite leaders do not care about programmatic policy and are mostly focused on spoils, how is that major, sophisticated pieces of national legislation are passed, such as the 2000 and 2014 Enterprise Laws, Law on Laws, and Land Laws, and how are major public service projects delivered? Like the early Greek philosophers feared from sophists (the earliest skeptics), Gainsborough’s work effectively pulls out the foundations for how we understand Vietnam, but, because he does not offer coherent alternatives, we are sometimes left knowing less about the country’s politics than we did before reading his work.

Vietnam studies should be a big tent where all approaches are welcome. Both inductive and deductive research strategies are widely practiced in the field, and the results have been enlightening. As a field we should laud and encourage both exercises. Jonathan London’s edited volume provides an illustration of the diverse and fruitful approaches available in the study of

Vietnamese politics.<sup>40</sup> Beyond political science, Erik Harms' *Saigon's Edge* and Kimberly Hoang's *Dealing in Desire* are beautiful, ethnographic examples of the benefits of the inductive approach.<sup>41</sup> Alternatively, Brian McCaig expertly used a deductive approach to analyze the benefits of trade openness on poverty alleviation in Vietnam.<sup>42</sup>

## Systematic vs. Unsystematic Data Collection

Despite their benefits, both deductive and inductive and research can be prone to confirmation bias if not wedded to systematic, objective data collection efforts. One of my core beliefs is that political analysts must distance their prior beliefs from their data. As I will explain in the next section, we need to give ourselves as researchers an opportunity to be wrong. To some extent, this is easier in a deductive research setting, where researchers have some prior sense of their hypotheses, concepts they want to measure, and the potential variation in their explanatory and outcome variables. It is more difficult in an inductive setting, where researchers have not yet uncovered their most salient concepts.

In my own research, I try my best to strictly adhere to a process of systematic data collection. That is, I try to maximize the variation on my independent variable (sometimes called the explanatory or treatment variable)—the factor that I think is causing the observed outcome.<sup>43</sup> If I am attempting to explain a phenomenon like provincial splitting, I then collect data on all forty postwar Vietnamese provinces.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, my work with Paul Schuler and Anh Tran collected data on all of the then 460 VNA delegates and their assembly activities over seven different sessions.<sup>45</sup> In my work on Vietnamese domestic and foreign firms with Dimitar Gueorguiev and Nathan Jensen, we obviously could not survey all 500,000 operations, so we used probability sampling to derive a representative sample for analysis.<sup>46</sup> When I am doing qualitative work, such as provincial case studies, I apply a similar approach of selecting research settings based on different values of my independent variable.<sup>47</sup>

I aim to be systematic for two reasons. First, I want to make sure that my selection strategy does not bias my research. For instance, I don't just want to observe the VNA query session behavior of Nguyễn Minh Thuyết or Dương Trung Quốc, because their outspokenness and bravery

would provide a very distorted picture of how active and critical delegates are. The vast majority of delegates rarely speak and never criticize senior ministers. Second, I want to make sure that I am capturing the full range of activity in the observed phenomenon. If I don't do this, I might trick myself into believing that a particular activity is associated with an outcome when, in fact, it is not. For instance, a research design analyzing only the most critical speeches in parliament might find that the most aggressive speakers were all young. This would appear to be a meaningful correlation until one expanded the number of provinces under consideration and realized that there are many more delegates who are young but say nothing.

By contrast, Gainsborough does not adhere to systematic data collection in his work. He tends to follow his nose through the evidence and focuses attention on the observations that intrigue him. This approach is evident in his scholarship and in "Malesky vs. Fforde" in three different ways.

First, Gainsborough selectively focuses on the authors' biographies, a background that is vital to the argument he wants to make. Remember, Gainsborough's independent variable is the authors' *a priori* beliefs and his outcome variable is the topics we choose to study. A systematic approach would have looked deeply into both our backgrounds, our academic training, our non-academic policy advisory work, the courses we teach, and our writings on non-Vietnamese subjects. He might have put together a questionnaire to probe our value systems and our understanding of Vietnamese politics or interviewed us about our family histories. He might have tried a constructivist approach, looking deeply into the curricula that shaped our primary, secondary, and tertiary educations. But, Gainsborough does none of these things, and is inattentive and unbalanced in his pursuit of this knowledge. The biographical sketches are both cursory, but mine especially so. Why talk about Fforde's history in Vietnam after the war, but not my work with the Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI) in creating the Provincial Competitiveness Index (PCI)<sup>48</sup> from 2005 to today, or my work with the United Nations Development Program and the Fatherland Front on their nationally representative survey of citizens and their views of governance?<sup>49</sup> One would think it would have been helpful in understanding my beliefs about economic and business reform and elite-

level policy debates. After all, I have witnessed them firsthand. Why emphasize Fforde's Vietnamese truly excellent language ability and omit mine? If my proficiency were deemed objectively less than Fforde's, wouldn't that be a useful source of difference?

Second, Gainsborough's selection strategy is opaque. He claims to have read all our Vietnam-related publications, but includes only a snippet, so we are forced to take his word that the review was comprehensive. A systematic researcher could have approached this analysis in multiple ways. One could have read every manuscript, using a carefully designed coding system to classify article type and word usage.<sup>50</sup> If the two scholars' publications were too voluminous, one could have used computer-assisted content analysis to count word use over time and across publications. This would have been an effective approach for Gainsborough's dominant indicator for my work, which is the use of words that appear in my abstracts and introductions. Alternatively, one could have identified different research streams and read the most cited article in each stream. One could even have looked at the most cited works of each author to study the most influential pieces of scholarship. Gainsborough does none of these things.

Instead, entire research streams of mine are left out entirely or noted only in passing via footnotes. The bulk of Gainsborough's criticisms of my research program center on a single 2009 article, which he cites twelve times, accounting for 14% of his total footnotes. The rest of the review covers my six coauthored articles on the VNA. My work on measuring corruption, Vietnam's elite institutions, economic development, and business-government relations are ignored. A truly comprehensive reading of my published work would also have easily shown that my interests in Vietnamese politics are far broader than programmatic policy and the VNA.

Not only is the focus disproportionate, the justification for the attention to one particular piece is nonsystematic. The sudden swing to an article, written nearly a decade ago, in his analysis of my VNA work is whiplash inducing. Gainsborough claims to be concentrating on my VNA work, but then tells readers it will shed light on my thinking about the VNA without ever explaining why. That article, "Gerrymandering: Vietnam Style," is

particularly focused on elite politics and Central Committee voting and mentions the VNA only in passing. Furthermore, my VNA work is not about economic reform. There is no substantive justification for the comparison. The most likely explanation for the attention given to this one article is the outcome that Gainsborough wants to achieve. My VNA work and other articles do not use the word “reformer” and therefore do not make the point he has in mind. With “Gerrymandering: Vietnam Style,” however, the take-away quote fits his preexisting conceptions of my work and his belief that I am focused on a “reformer” versus “conservative” dichotomy. This is an example of selection bias at its finest. There is a deliberately misleading footnote that I want to highlight in full, because it illustrates that Gainsborough is aware of the selection bias and acts to paint it over:

While this is one of Malesky’s earlier pieces, we have checked that it is *broadly* representative of his later work. Later articles *possibly* use the language of “reformer” and “conservative” somewhat less, with terms such as “authoritarian,” “VCP officials,” and “dictator” being more common, but the fundamentals in terms of how he understands politics have not changed.<sup>51</sup>

Gainsborough knows that my post-2009 work does not use the word “reformer” or “conservative,” except when referencing the work of other Vietnamese analysts. If Gainsborough had bothered to ask me, I would have let him know that, after that article’s publication, the onset of Nguyễn Tấn Dũng administration and the closure of the Prime Minister’s Research Committee led me to the conclusion that the reformer/conservative distinction was unhelpful and so I stopped using it. If Gainsborough really wanted to check, he could have looked closely at more my recent articles on elite politics and end-of-the-year updates on Vietnamese politics that do not use that terminology, even when discussing top leaders in the Politburo.<sup>52</sup> But Gainsborough does not include them in his discussion of how my belief system is constant over time.

Rather, Gainsborough uses rhetorical flourishes to create the illusion of erroneous consistency when there is none. First, he uses the weasel words “possibly” and “broadly.” If one checked and did a thorough review, this should be easily quantifiable. Do I continue to use the word or not? Second,

he equates my use of the words “authoritarian,” “officials,” and “dictator,” from the Vietnamese National Assembly project with “reformer” and “conservative.” Thematically, these words have nothing do with each other. Which of the words in the VNA project does he think are synonyms for “reformer”? In the first, I am classifying regime types and referring to members of the Vietnamese bureaucracy. In the latter, I was describing elite opinions about state-owned enterprise (SOE) reform. Why would they in any way imply consistency? These two obvious sleights of hand reveal more about the author’s research ethics and casual relationship with logic and evidence than it does my “constant” belief system.

Gainsborough’s third non-systematic selection strategy is evident in the words he chooses to present as evidence and his unbalanced application thereof to myself and Fforde. As I have already noted, Gainsborough highlights my use of “liberal” words like “representation” and “accountability,” and not the equally prevalent non-liberal words like “cooptation,” “power-sharing,” and “corruption.” It is fascinating that Gainsborough does not apply a similar word count to Fforde. He does not add up the terms that Fforde uses and declare them “liberal” or “non-liberal”; rather he obsequiously explores Fforde’s broad research ideas and findings.

This biased selection strategy is not new for Gainsborough. Non-systematic collection is a consistent part of Gainsborough’s research portfolio. Witness how he dismisses Võ Văn Kiệt’s credentials as a reformer and defender of fence-breaking based on a quote from a single speech.<sup>53</sup> Or how he argues that Hồ Chí Minh City is no different from other provinces by looking at the absolute number of public sector jobs without taking into account population growth in the city, and not comparing corresponding public sector growth to other provinces, even Hà Nội!<sup>54</sup> Or how he makes broad conclusions about how the party controls National Assembly elections in Vietnam by reading the newspapers of only four provinces without explaining how those provinces reflect the variation observed in the other fifty-nine provinces.<sup>55</sup>

In this response, I don’t want to argue whether Gainsborough is right or wrong in these conjectures. I only want to point out that such research designs cannot possibly deliver the objectively correct answer—only the answer Gainsborough wants.

## Falsifiability, Measurement, and Transparency

I follow Karl Popper and Imre Lakatos in believing that all of my research findings should be falsifiable.<sup>56</sup> In simplest terms, this means that I present my research hypotheses in a way that I can be proved wrong. My own tests and further replications of my work should have as good a chance to overturn my theory as confirm it.

Ensuring falsifiability involves three processes before, during, and after data collection. As I wrote with coauthors in an online article:

The distinguishing features of the scientific enterprise—what makes it different from art, or rhetoric—is that its standards and methodologies are public, contested and replicable. This applies equally to the social sciences as it does to the hard or natural sciences. Scientific progress requires that scholars articulate their arguments, describe their methodologies, and reproduce the evidence that they use, and that others participate in this endeavor by questioning and critiquing each. This requires transparency.<sup>57</sup>

Before data collection, I am obligated to articulate my research hypotheses in a way that they may fail, and I need to tell the reader how to observe that failure if they do. As an example, if my theory with Nate Jensen about the effectiveness of the OECD Anti-Bribery Convention in Vietnam is right, we should observe lower levels of bribery by foreign firms from signatory countries than non-signatories after implementation.<sup>58</sup> If we are wrong, we should observe the same or higher bribery among signatories and non-signatories. Similarly, my work with Paul Schuler and Anh Tran on transparency argued that if the transparency treatment was ineffective, we should see no differences in treated and untreated delegates.<sup>59</sup>

In academic research, there is always a temptation to reconsider hypotheses after we observe the data. Therefore, in the past few years, I have begun to preregister my hypotheses online before data collection and testing.<sup>60</sup> I have written extensively about the benefit of this process in a few places.<sup>61</sup> The goal is to help readers distinguish between what I thought I would find when I started the project and what I eventually learned.

During data collection on the independent variables I think are causing change and the outcomes I want to explain, I adhere to two principles in measurement: 1) validity, or how close is my measure to the concept that I want to investigate; and 2) reliability; namely, can other researchers follow

my approach, collect data in the same manner, and reach the same conclusions as me.<sup>62</sup>

As I am often interested in abstract concepts, I spend a lot of time thinking about measurement. Because bribery is opaque and individuals are reluctant to reveal their true behavior, I developed a number of survey experiments that shielded respondents, so that I could detect the underlying true level of corruption.<sup>63</sup> To measure the impact of transparency, my coauthors and I randomized which VNA delegates' speeches were put online. To measure responsiveness of VNA delegates, we collected data on how often they speak, criticize central ministers in query sessions, and mention their own province in discussions.<sup>64</sup> To measure their participation, Markus Taussig and I worked with VCCI to visit businesses and solicit their opinions on a new hazardous chemical regulation.<sup>65</sup> In all of these cases, I tried hard to make sure my operationalization of the concept was as close as possible to the way the concept manifested itself in the Vietnamese context. I also spend significant time in my papers explaining how other researchers can use the same techniques to replicate my work or build upon my analysis.

Finally, I believe strongly in transparency and replicability. After I conduct my analysis, I post my data and computer code on my Harvard-MIT *Dataverse* website.<sup>66</sup> Future researchers have access to all of my raw data and every step I took in moving from the raw data to the final tables and figures that appear in the paper. They have every opportunity to dispute my findings and demonstrate where I was wrong. Recently, Jim Anderson, a World Bank economist, took issue with our transparency experiment, reanalyzing our data and reaching more optimistic conclusions.<sup>67</sup> I think the transparent debate and contestation is good for scholarly inquiry. Because of this philosophy, we also make all PCI and PAPI (Provincial Administrative Performance Index) data available to researchers, which has led to dozens of publications over the years, many by scholars based in Vietnam.

Gainsborough and I have very different views on these subjects. His theories are rarely presented in a manner that can be falsified, because he is often unclear about the steps he took and evidence he is using to draw his conclusions. His conclusion that Fforde has a better understanding of the roots of political power, for instance, is hard to contest.<sup>68</sup> Gainsborough is

the only judge and jury in that evaluation; he doesn't give readers the data he used and that they would need to adjudicate for themselves. His concepts are not measured in a valid and reliable manner. What are the standards he uses to determine that there is "a crisis in the meaning of political authority" in Vietnam?<sup>69</sup> Would a different researcher, using the same research design, arrive at the same conclusion?

Let me illustrate the differences with a couple of telling examples. In full disclosure, I was told about the political motivation for Vietnamese provincial separations in a private conversation by a retired Vietnamese official who was close enough to Võ Văn Kiệt to know. According to the research standards that I hold, that conversation was intriguing but not evidence. First, the conversation was private and I would never want to reveal the identity of the person who told me. I also didn't know if other well-placed individuals held the same view. I only had one anonymous source. As a result, the account was not falsifiable and the information not reliable. Another researcher could not engage in that conversation and reach the same conclusion. Second, I did not know the motivation behind the revelation of information. Perhaps the story was not true, and the individual was simply telling a *bia hơi* tall tale or seeking to burnish Võ Văn Kiệt's reputation as a clever reformer. In other words, the measurement was potentially invalid. Third, to protect my source, I would never allow a full transcript of the interview to be published, allowing others to see whether I cherry-picked the story from a long interview of conflicting information. Thus, using the quote was neither transparent nor replicable.

Knowing that I could not use the quote in a publication, I decided to test the theory indirectly. In my article, I subjected the theory to six tests. First, I needed to explore the informant's idea that SOE-dominant provinces were targeted. That was easily measurable, and I could test it against other explanations such as population size and original French boundaries.<sup>70</sup> Second, I wanted to know if Võ Văn Kiệt's fingerprints were on the legislation authorizing the separation and on party documentation about voting rules in the Central Committee.<sup>71</sup> Third, I looked at maps of the new provinces to see if the separations defied reasonable cartographic considerations (rivers, mountain ranges, straight borders, ethnic enclaves) that would indicate unusual targeting of economic actors.<sup>72</sup> Fourth, I wanted to see if the new

provinces were governed in a manner that was consistent with greater attention to the needs of the nonstate sector.<sup>73</sup> Fifth, I looked for evidence of payoffs from potential losers in the Central Committee to see if they were compensated for lost political power.<sup>74</sup> Sixth, I tested whether newly formed provinces selected different types of people to attend Party Congresses.<sup>75</sup>

I wrote the article a long time ago, and I would do some things differently now. I was naïve about the idea that the blossoming of pro-private sector legislation signaled an end to the political influence of SOEs. As I have shown in other publications, between 2010 and 2016 their political access actually strengthened along with their role in the economy.<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, I stand by my general research designs and approach. All of those processes followed my personal standards of validity, reliability, transparency, and replicability. Gainsborough does not contest the evidence presented in a single one of those tests. He simply questions the plausibility of the question. Despite the fact that multiple scholars have discussed this same divide, Gainsborough doesn't believe there was contestation of the role of SOEs in the economy and he doesn't see Võ Văn Kiệt as an advocate for experimentation or the private sector. That is fine; reasonable minds can disagree on the interpretation of evidence.

But what does Gainsborough find plausible? He cites approvingly Fforde's use of a quote that he overheard at a conference on Party Congress documents on the weakness of the Party's hold on power.<sup>77</sup> Gainsborough finds the quote so salient that he cites it twice more, using it as evidence that Fforde has a better understanding of political power than I do.<sup>78</sup> I also find the quote intriguing. Yet, this quote has all the same problems as the information from my source about provincial separations. We don't know who said it (it was overheard), and the informant, for understandable reasons, did not say it on the record as part of an interview. We don't know if it is a commonly held opinion among elites. We don't know if the same official would say the same thing in a different setting and in front of researchers. It meets my standards for something that should start a research program (hypothesis generation), but not for evidence that should conclude one (hypothesis testing).

The juxtaposition of Gainsborough's reactions to the two pieces of evidence is telling. Gainsborough isn't evaluating evidence based on neutral standards of evidence collection and testing. He is evaluating it based on his

own prior beliefs. The quote fits with his own work (“echoing Martin Gainsborough”),<sup>79</sup> but my findings from six separate tests of different pieces of evidence does not. I am fine with readers drawing their own opinions. However, let us be clear: the best description of Gainsborough’s evaluation criteria is whether the evidence the scholar presents is consistent with the arguments in Gainsborough’s “classic texts.”<sup>80</sup>

## Politics and Policy

Gainsborough criticizes me for assuming that politics is about policy, not other things. He acknowledges that I am aware of clientelistic behavior, but claims that I show an inordinate attention to policy considerations.<sup>81</sup> This criticism comes up multiple times in the article and has appeared in other Gainsborough publications. I find this line of argument confusing. I honestly do not know what Gainsborough’s mental model of the policymaking process in Vietnam is. I gather that he thinks a cabal of corrupt elites runs things at the top, making choices merely to enrich itself<sup>82</sup> and following the way the wind blows in term of nonstate activities and choices.<sup>83</sup> He has made this point a few times in his writing:

I have also questioned the notion that politics is about policymaking, famously arguing in an analysis of the Tenth Communist Party National Congress in 2006 that politics was about “all about spoils” (that is, who gets the jobs and in turn access to patronage and money).<sup>84</sup>

I find the all or nothing distinction (all about spoils versus policy) in the above quote unhelpful for explaining the policy debates I see every day in Vietnam. Moreover, how Gainsborough believes these views translate into actual decisions by party and state institutions remains opaque to me. If it is all about spoils, why do elite actors bother to write party documents, elect Party Congresses and Central Committees, debate at Central Committee plenums or in National Assembly sessions, and have ministries and local administrations fill out the laws with implementing documents? These would seem to be very inefficient and wasteful means of allocating spoils. Why not just divide it all up, warlord style?

Figure 1 below provides a rough sketch of how I see things. I follow Lasswell in understanding politics as the determination of “who gets what,

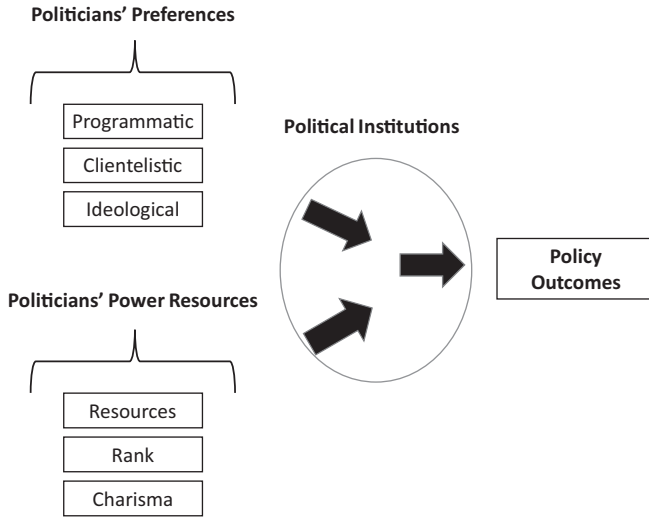


FIGURE 1: My Mental Model of Vietnamese Political Processes.

when, and how.”<sup>85</sup> Policy consists of the sets of decisions that emerge from those discussions, setting rules or allocating resources. For me, in contrast to Gainsborough, policy is the outcome to be achieved; it is not the source of the preference. A decision that allocates more money to a defense program can be called “budget policy” or “military policy.” If it takes money away from poverty alleviation programs, we can call it “redistributive policy.” The 2014 Investment Law can be referred to as “economic policy” or “regulatory policy.” Equitization of SOEs can be described as “economic reform policy.” The construction of the monorail in Saigon can be called “infrastructure policy” or “public service policy.”

Actors enter political discussions with different preferences for what they want to accomplish and different levels of power over their ability to achieve the policy they want. Power comes from the level of resources at their disposal (budgetary, appointment, access to rents), their relative rank in the system, and their charisma and personal following.

Preferences are informed by many ingredients, but most research tends to focus on three. First, actors may have programmatic goals (e.g. economic growth, poverty alleviation, environmental protection). Some of the motivation for programmatic goals may have been informed and influenced by

local level experiments, which is where I see the connection to Kerkvliet's and Fforde's work on local experimentation.<sup>86</sup> Second, actors may have clientelistic goals, distributing resources in the form of asymmetric exchange to others in ways that distort their allocation but enhance the actors' power.<sup>87</sup> Third, actors may be motivated by ideological or cultural norms. Discussions and deliberations are shaped by institutions, which can constrain or empower different political actors. In all of the policy decisions that I have highlighted above, actors entered them with programmatic, clientelistic, or ideological goals. Most of the time, actors hold all three types of preferences, and it is extremely difficult to separate them.

The debate between Võ Văn Kiệt and Nguyễn Văn Linh over the 500 kW power transmission cable in the second volume of *Huy Đức's Bên Thắng Cuộc* beautifully illustrates how I see the policy process in Vietnam.<sup>88</sup> In 1991, Vietnam was facing a tremendous developmental problem. As southern Vietnamese economy boomed in the wake of economic liberalization, it began to run into constraints posed by insufficient electricity. In parts of the rural south, electricity penetration was low and suffered repeated blackouts and brownouts due to usage by the growing business sector. By contrast, a Soviet-installed power plant in Hòa Bình province was generating a surplus of energy for the northern economy.<sup>89</sup> Nguyễn Văn Linh, who had recently left the General Secretary position and was serving as a counselor to the Politburo, recommended selling surplus northern energy to China, and using the proceeds to expand energy capacity in the south. Võ Văn Kiệt was suspicious of selling valuable resources to China and believed that the southern energy crisis was too immediate for Nguyễn Văn Linh's long-term strategy. He wanted it done in two years.<sup>90</sup> Võ Văn Kiệt therefore put forward a technologically risky strategy that had been dreamed up by Vũ Ngọc Hải and his staff at the Ministry of Energy. Vietnam would construct a nationwide cable that would transport the excess northern electricity directly to the south. The plan was extremely controversial; technical experts in Japan and multilateral organizations doubted Vietnam's capacity to build it, and the estimated costs were \$500 million USD, roughly 5% of Vietnam's GDP at the time.<sup>91</sup> General Secretary Đỗ Mười allegedly consented verbally, but no Politburo or Central Committee resolution offered official approval for Võ Văn Kiệt's plan before construction. Rather, Võ Văn Kiệt asserted his

authority under the constitution as Prime Minister to allocate expenditures and direct his administration.<sup>92</sup> His position was bolstered when he was able to mobilize a small development grant from Australia to marginally offset the cost. The line was completed in 1994 and began to transmit electricity, playing a critical role in Vietnam's extraordinarily high energy penetration rates among developing countries.<sup>93</sup> However, at the government party to celebrate the line's creation, Võ Văn Kiệt was the sole politburo member to make an appearance. The others boycotted.<sup>94</sup>

Notice that both Võ Văn Kiệt and Nguyễn Văn Linh offered programmatic proposals for a clear developmental dilemma that they agreed needed resolution. However, clientelistic exchange was certainly not absent. Energy sales to China were likely to offer substantial opportunities for padding and kickbacks, and the line's construction involved ample rent-seeking opportunities in land sales and construction contracts. Vũ Ngọc Hải was eventually jailed for the latter.<sup>95</sup> It is entirely possible that a political actor could have supported either proposal programmatically while knowing there was a good chance to benefit personally from the decision. Ideological and political factors were also evident. Võ Văn Kiệt saw opportunities to bolster political support in the south, and Nguyễn Văn Linh worried about state resources being exploited by Western investors.

Both also brought different power resources to the table. Nguyễn Văn Linh leveraged his authority within the party and his personal charisma. Võ Văn Kiệt leveraged the institutional powers allocated to him under the 1992 Constitution. Indeed, his stance was the first documented claim to government independence and authority over budget and staff, and would contribute to the dispersal of executive power in Vietnam that distinguishes it from other single-party regimes like China and Cuba.<sup>96</sup>

This story wonderfully illustrates how programmatic and clientelistic preferences, different sources of power, and institutional rules converge in Vietnam to lead to policy outcomes that simultaneously propel development and potentially line officials' pockets. In short, politics in Vietnam is about policymaking, but politicians have both programmatic and clientelistic goals. Most policy outcomes can be understood as a combination of these preferences and the relative power of the actors involved in the debates. The mix varies across different institutions, levels of government, and technical

policy debates; therefore, careful research designs are necessary for understanding which factor prevailed in the outcome.

We need not, as Gainsborough asserts, take strong stands on which of these factors is more important than the other.<sup>97</sup> If Gainsborough adheres to his quote above, there is a big disagreement between us here. But I suspect that our positions are probably closer than the distinction he appears to be drawing in his publications.

## Institutions

One final distinction of my work is that I am unapologetically focused on Vietnamese institutions. In doing so, I am heavily influenced by the work of Douglass North in defining institutions as the “rules of the game”<sup>98</sup> and Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson in how institutions can constrain political actors, allocate information among parties, and shape the outcomes we see above.<sup>99</sup> Rule breaking certainly occurs in Vietnam, but I am fascinated by the fact that even in the way political actors skirt the rules, they demonstrate a deference to institutional constraints in how they hide and justify their behavior.

Constitutional changes and party statutes are fiercely debated, because actors take the rules seriously and generally abide by the outcomes. In the 2016 Party Congress, for instance, after being disappointed by the Politburo decision not to nominate Nguyễn Tấn Dũng for General Secretary, his supporters attempted to take advantage of arcane party rules for floor nominations. Analysts were on the edge of their seats to see if they could get enough provincial delegations to support Nguyễn Tấn Dũng, allowing him to be considered and overriding the politburo recommendation.<sup>100</sup> Creative application of the institutional rules can strengthen incumbent actors, but has also been cleverly exploited by those seeking change.

My work has studied district and provincial administrations, the VNA elections and organizational system, the Central Committee, and institutions like the Party Congress, Central Committee, and Politburo. I have even studied the impact of international institutions like the WTO and OECD Anti-Bribery Convention on Vietnam. My research has also examined, in intricate detail, the specific rules of these bodies, exploring how they choose their members, make decisions, interact with other bodies, and influence

nonstate actors like businesses. Furthermore, I am interested in unwritten, informal institutions such as the retirement age, regional representation in the Politburo, and consultation norms between branches of government.

A reasonable critique of my research program is that by focusing so much attention on institutions, I have neglected to recognize that they are the result of preexisting power constellations. Political actors choose the institutions they want in order to more easily achieve their policy preferences, be they clientelistic, programmatic, or ideological.<sup>101</sup> The changes we have observed over time in the VNA rules and composition and in the relationship between the Central Committee and Politburo are not accidental. They were changed with an eye to the policy outcomes they would deliver. The only place where I have considered that issue much at all is in my work with Regina Abrami and Yu Zheng, when we discussed the origins of the 1991 Party Statutes and 1992 Constitution.<sup>102</sup>

If that is the criticism that Gainsborough is leveling when he says that my focus on the VNA is a “distraction from political realities,”<sup>103</sup> then I accept it. I have sincerely struggled to find methods to study institutional creation and change with any detail. As I have read *Hanoi’s War*, *Chuyện Kể Năm 2000*, and *Bên Thắng Cuộc*, however, I realize that there is now a much greater source of raw material to get at the origins of institutions in Vietnam and the relative power of the actors that shaped them.<sup>104</sup> I am excited about the new research ideas that will come out of these new sources.

However, I think Gainsborough has something different in mind. He argues that the party-state is weak and incoherent, and that real change is being driven by nonstate actors going their own way. Moreover, he praises Fforde’s view that the institutions of the party-state have not changed in over thirty years.<sup>105</sup> Together, these imply that, for them, institutions are not endogenous, they are fundamentally irrelevant.

Of course, Gainsborough is confusing here as well. He lauds Fforde’s work on village leadership as evidence for his deeper understanding of Vietnamese politics.<sup>106</sup> According to the Vietnamese legal framework regarding local governments, village governments are not even an official level in the party-state apparatus. Legally, central authorities do not have the administrative or budgetary powers at this level that they possess in higher level bodies (commune, district, and province), where they can incentivize

actors with opportunities for resources and promotion.<sup>107</sup> The description of how a non-party-state institution is informative about party-state relations but a national-level legislature is a distraction could benefit from some deeper elaboration.<sup>108</sup>

If this second interpretation is correct, then there is again a very real disagreement. I think institutions matter and shape outcomes; Gainsborough and Fforde do not. My challenge back to Gainsborough then is to sketch out a clearer articulation of the micro-logic that leads from nonstate behavior by businesses and agricultural associations to policy change without mediation by programmatic preferences and institutions. This would provide clearer grounds for contestation and debate.

## Conclusion

I will admit to some frustration and disorientation in facing examination by an academic, who, while calling himself a political scientist, is not familiar with my discipline's concepts, debates, specialties, and research practices, and makes no effort to understand them. In my less generous moments, I imagined myself following this approach, by picking up the *New England Journal of Medicine*, doing cursory word counts of the introductory sections of articles, and passing judgment on their conclusions: "This nephrologist frequently uses words like 'kidney,' 'diabetes,' and 'dialysis.'" I checked and saw that he possibly uses these words in other publications as well, but never subjects the term "dialysis" to critical examination. Clearly, his *a priori* beliefs about the importance of the kidney lead him to neglect the heart, brain, and soul, which, I believe, are far more important for understanding the workings of the human body."

Gainsborough is absolutely right in his diagnosis that prior beliefs can influence and bias scholarship. But he is mistaken about both the remedy and the patient's identity. I rely on extant theory to sharpen my predictions, and I have clear perspective about how the Vietnamese policy process works and a taste for focusing on institutions as an intriguing contributor to policy outcomes, be they programmatic or clientelistic. However, I take serious steps to insulate my pretest opinions from the conclusions I draw. I present my work in falsifiable terms, use valid and reliable measurements in systematic data collection, and post all of my replication data for other

researchers to contest my findings. None of this came up in Gainsborough's review of my work, despite the fact that I have actually discussed these views in refereed publications listed on my website.

Despite Gainsborough's unusual use of the royal "we" throughout the article, he certainly did not feel compelled to adhere to his own professed standard in being clear about his beliefs when evaluating the research of others. His review of my work is a case study in how undisciplined and opportunistic research strategies can lead to biased conclusions. Unfortunately, as I have shown, Gainsborough also employs the same opportunistic designs in some of his other work on Vietnamese politics. To paraphrase Robert Frost, Gainsborough plays tennis without a net.

That said, I do see benefits to having a nonspecialist read and think about my work; I learned that I can endeavor to communicate my research decisions and ideas more clearly to a broader audience. As I noted above, I need to do a better job of articulating my mental model of the policy-making process in Vietnam, and could more explicitly convey that institutions reflect underlying constellations of power. My research should be clearer about what outcomes are the result of institutions and what outcomes are more influenced by political power. Finally, I should be especially clear about the multiple steps I take to keep my own biases from affecting my conclusions.

Let me conclude with one final note about attribution. Although I welcome public criticism, I was disappointed with the way Gainsborough sidelines my coauthors and research partners in Vietnam. I have been lucky to work with numerous Vietnamese coauthors and have extensively planned research projects with nongovernmental organizations, business associations, and government agencies. Gainsborough acknowledges that I coauthor, but attributes all of the research choices to me and insists that the focus of the articles has to do with my liberal views and proximity to power in political science. He does not give my Vietnamese coauthors any agency in the research process, does not consider the possibility that their own values and beliefs may also be reflected in the publications' arguments and foci, and ignores that their own dedication and initiative were necessary to execute the research. The notion that my liberal views are alien to the Vietnamese context are particularly biting when seen in this light. The unstated implication,

whether intended or not, was that my valued partners and friends have been unwillingly duped by a modern-day Alden Pyle.

Of course, my Vietnamese coauthors can speak for themselves, but Gainsborough does not acknowledge their voices in the first place, and that is a mistake. Most of Gainsborough's assertions are due to his own biased selection and presentation. They are unfounded, naïve, and, it has to be said, somewhat orientalist.<sup>109</sup> I hope my rebuttal and clarification of the important work of my colleagues will go to some lengths to correct this, but I strongly believe this should have been avoided in the first place.

There are many unanswered puzzles about how the Vietnamese polity came to be, how it currently functions, and where it is going. To rise to these challenges, we must be inclusive. We need the full artillery of methods and approaches currently available in the field. We should read each other's work, build upon each other's insights, and debate vigorously when we disagree, secure in the knowledge that we are all working toward a shared enterprise. We should take the evidence of all scholars seriously, and when we see things differently, we should contest that evidence fairly and honestly. To dismiss a scholar's findings based on the country where they happen to work<sup>110</sup> or their proximity to a discipline<sup>111</sup> limits the information on the table and biases judgments. We are smarter and better researchers than that. Sadly, "Malesky vs. Fforde" was a missed opportunity to advance our shared scholarly pursuits. An article that dropped the family names from the underlying evidence and clearly delineated the most urgent substantive disagreements in the field would have been a much more fruitful contribution.

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and economic journals and received various awards, including the Harvard Academy Fellowship and the Rockefeller Bellagio Residency Fellowship. His two most recent books are *China's Governance Puzzle: Enabling Transparency and Participation in a Single-Party State* (coauthored in 2017 with Jonathan Stromseth and Dimitar Gueorguiev) and *Incentives to Pander: How Politicians Use Corporate Welfare for Political Gain* (coauthored in 2018 with Nate Jensen).

#### ABSTRACT

*In the the spring 2018 issue of Journal of Vietnamese Studies, Martin Gainsborough's "Malesky vs. Fforde" offers to adjudicate a supposed dispute between two highly cited scholars of modern Vietnamese politics. Purportedly drawing on the philosophical traditions of ontology and epistemology, Gainsborough claims that we can gain traction as a field by looking closely into the preexisting belief systems that scholars bring to their research questions. Along the way, Gainsborough questions the plausibility of my own work and claims that I smuggle "liberal" values into my writing on Vietnam. In this response, I discuss five dimensions in which Gainsborough and I disagree and why they matter for studying Vietnamese politics. I do so by contrasting my choices with Gainsborough's scholarship (both in "Malesky vs. Fforde" and other work), illustrating how Gainsborough's research decisions lead him to faulty and damaging conclusions about my work.*

KEYWORDS: *Vietnamese Politics, Malesky, Gainsborough, Fforde, Research Practices, Epistemology*

#### Notes

1. Martin Gainsborough, "Malesky vs. Fforde: How Best to Analyze Vietnamese Politics?" *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 13, no. 2 (2018): 19.
2. *Ibid.*, 9.
3. *Ibid.*, 10.
4. *Ibid.*, 18.
5. *Ibid.*, 5.
6. *Ibid.*, 19.

7. See Gainsborough, “Malesky vs. Fforde,” 12: “Indeed, echoing Martin Gainsborough, he argues that the party-state was increasingly just a vehicle for powerful people to pursue their interests...” and “To reiterate, as Fforde says—again drawing on Gainsborough—that it is all about “spoils” (i.e., elites feathering their nests). In footnote 11, Gainsborough cites his work on actors outside party structures and the nature of the Vietnamese state, which are also themes for which he praises Fforde’s work.
8. Gainsborough even manages to get my academic title wrong.
9. See Gainsborough, “Malesky vs. Fforde,” 9 (last paragraph). Article 6 of the 1992 Vietnamese Constitution states: “The people exercise State power through the National Assembly and the People’s Councils, bodies *representing* the will and aspirations of the people and which are elected by and *accountable* to the people. The National Assembly, the People’s Councils and other State bodies are organised and function according to the principle of *democratic centralism*” [emphases added], [http://www.vietnamlaws.com/freelaws/Constitution92\(aa01\).pdf](http://www.vietnamlaws.com/freelaws/Constitution92(aa01).pdf).
10. Edmund Malesky, “Straight Ahead on Red: How Foreign Direct Investment Empowers Subnational Leaders,” *Journal of Politics* 70, no. 1 (2008): 97–119.
11. Gainsborough, “Malesky vs. Fforde,” 6.
12. Alexander George and Andrew Bennet, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985): 89. The pioneer of this type of research in political studies was the great Richard F. Fenno in his masterpiece *Home Style: Representatives in Their Districts* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1978).
13. Martin Gainsborough, *Vietnam: Rethinking the State* (London: Zed Books, 2010): 177.
14. Sometimes, this involves questions that are Vietnam-specific, such as whether Vietnam’s entry into the WTO strengthened the political power of State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) or how Vietnam can permit comparatively competitive elections but still manage to ensure a comfortable share of elite party members in the Vietnamese National Assembly (VNA) (see Leonardo Baccini, Giammario Impullitti, and Edmund J. Malesky, “Globalization and State Capitalism: Assessing Vietnam’s Accession to the WTO,” *CESifo Working Paper Series No. 6618* (2018), <http://ssrn.com/abstract=3036319>; and Edmund Malesky and Paul Schuler, “The Single-Party Dictator’s Dilemma: Information in Elections without Opposition,” *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (2011): 491–530). Sometimes, the puzzles are comparative, such as why Vietnam and China both grew at such rapid rates but inequality increases in China were more pronounced (see Edmund Malesky, Regina Abrami, and Yu Zheng, “Accountability and Inequality in Single-Party Regimes: A Comparative Analysis of

- Vietnam and China,” *Comparative Politics* 43, no. 4 (2011): 401–421). Other times, the questions are about more general economic development, such as whether the OECD Anti-Bribery Convention has been effective or whether allowing the participation of small- and medium-size enterprises in the design of regulations can increase compliance with the new rules (see Nathan M. Jensen and Edmund Malesky, “Nonstate Actors and Compliance with International Agreements: An Empirical Analysis of the OECD Anti-Bribery Convention,” *International Organization* 72, no. 1 (2018): 33–69 and Edmund Malesky and Markus Taussig, “The Danger of Not Listening to Firms: Government Responsiveness and the Goal of Regulatory Compliance,” *Academy of Management Journal* 60, no. 5 (2017): 1741–1770).
15. For a basic undergraduate primer on this approach, see Philip H. Pollock III, *The Essentials of Political Analysis* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2016).
  16. David Bladgen, “Induction and Deduction in International Relations: Squaring the Circle between Theory and Evidence,” *International Studies Review* 18, no. 2 (2016): 195–213.
  17. Pollock, *The Essentials of Political Analysis*, Chapters 1 and 2.
  18. Giovanni Sartori, “Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics,” *American Political Science Review* 64, no. 4 (1970): 1033–1053.
  19. Edward Miguel and Gerard Roland, “The Long-Run Impact of Bombing in Vietnam,” *Journal of Development Economics* 96, no. 1 (2011): 1–15.
  20. See our discussion of this problem in Edmund Malesky and Markus Taussig, “Out of the Gray: The Impact of Provincial Institutions on Business Formalization in Vietnam,” *Journal of East Asian Studies* 9, no. 2 (2009): 276.
  21. Gainsborough, “Malesky vs. Fforde,” 9.
  22. *Ibid.*, 10.
  23. *Ibid.*
  24. See note 9 above. See also Nguyễn Sinh Hùng, former VNA Speaker, describing the work of the body: “Thanks to the NA’s oversight activities, many shortcomings and weakness in management of local administration in various levels have been addressed. They have also contributed to enhancing the public’s trust to the Party and State.” *VOVWorld*, “State, Government and National Assembly Leaders Deliver End-of-Term Performance Reports,” March 22, 2016, <http://www.talkvietnam.org/2016/03/state-government-and-national-assembly-leaders-deliver-end-of-term-performance-reports/>.
  25. See *Rethinking the State*, 10: “The government is *accountable* to the National Assembly, and reports both to the National Assembly and the President” [emphasis added].

26. Edmund Malesky and Paul Schuler, "The Single-Party Dictator's Dilemma: Information in Elections without Opposition," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (2011): 491–530.
27. Edmund Malesky and Paul Schuler, "Nodding or Needling: Analyzing Delegate Responsiveness in an Authoritarian Parliament," *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 4 (2010): 762–786.
28. Malesky et al., "Accountability and Inequality."
29. Edmund Malesky and Paul Schuler, "Star Search: Do Elections Help Non-Democratic Regimes Identify New Leaders?," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 13, no. 1 (2013): 35–68.
30. See Malesky and Schuler, "Star Search," 36, for an exemplary quote that Gainsborough claims to have read: "This dialogue is situated within a broader debate among students of Vietnam and authoritarian regimes regarding the purpose elections serve in single-party systems. Theories abound about the potential benefits a regime may gain from elections, ranging from increased domestic and international legitimacy to information about potential opponents." On this same page, we also explained that we were exploring a hypothesis that had been debated in the Vietnamese *Journal of Legislative Studies*. See Vũ Văn Nhiêm, "Bàn thêm về chủ đề 'Có nên bằng cấp hóa tiêu chuẩn đại biểu Quốc hội?'" *Tap Chí Nghiên Cứu Lập Pháp*, [www.nclp.org.vn/ban-doc-viet/ban-them-ve-chu-111e-201cco-nen-bang-cap-hoa-tieuchuan-111ai-bieu-quoc-hoi-201d](http://www.nclp.org.vn/ban-doc-viet/ban-them-ve-chu-111e-201cco-nen-bang-cap-hoa-tieuchuan-111ai-bieu-quoc-hoi-201d).
31. See Peter Markie, "Rationalism vs. Empiricism," The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Stanford University, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rationalism-empiricism/> (accessed July 4, 2017).
32. See Peter Klein, "Skepticism," The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Stanford University, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/skepticism/> (accessed July 4, 2017); Michael Williams, *Problems of Knowledge: A Critical Introduction to Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
33. Gainsborough, "Malesky vs. Fforde," 9.
34. *Ibid.*, 10.
35. *Ibid.*, 15.
36. Gainsborough, *Rethinking the State*, 25–49.
37. *Ibid.*, 1–10; Martin Gainsborough, "From Patronage to 'Outcomes': Vietnamese Communist Party Congresses Reconsidered," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 2, no. 1, 3–26.
38. Martin Gainsborough, "The Myth of the Centralised Socialist State in Vietnam: What Kind of Myth?," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 30, no. 3 (2017): 119–143.

39. For a quick summary of differences, see Jason Folkmanis and Nguyen Dieu Tu Uyen, "Saigon Beating Hanoi Four Decades after Vietnam War," *Bloomberg Business*, September 4, 2014. For raw data see the General Statistical Office, Vietnam Statistical Handbook (Hanoi: Statistical Publishing House), [http://www.gso.govs.vn/default\\_en.aspx?tabid=479&idmid=4&ItemID=9778](http://www.gso.govs.vn/default_en.aspx?tabid=479&idmid=4&ItemID=9778) (accessed July 4, 2018).
40. Jonathan London (ed), *Politics in Contemporary Vietnam: Party, State, and Authority Relations* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).
41. Erik Harms, *Saigon's Edge: On the Margins of Ho Chi Minh City* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Kimberly Kay Hoang, *Dealing in Desire: Asian Ascendancy, Western Decline, and the Hidden Currencies of Global Sex Work* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).
42. Brian McCaig, "Exporting out of Poverty: Provincial Poverty in Vietnam and US Market Access," *Journal of International Economics* 85, no. 1: 102–113.
43. Barbara Geddes, "How the Cases You Choose Affect the Answers You Get: Selection Bias in Comparative Politics," *Political Analysis* 2 (1990): 131–150; Robert O. Keohane, Gary King, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994): 129–150.
44. Edmund Malesky, "Gerrymandering Vietnam Style: Escaping the Partial Reform Equilibrium in a Non-Democratic Regime." *Journal of Politics* 71, no. 1 (2009): 132–159.
45. Edmund Malesky, Paul Schuler, and Anh Tran, "The Adverse Effects of Sunshine: Evidence from a Field Experiment on Legislative Transparency in an Authoritarian Assembly," *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 4 (2012): 762–786.
46. Edmund Malesky, Dimitar Georguiev, and Nathan M. Jensen, "Monopoly Money: Foreign Investment and Bribery in Vietnam, a Survey Experiment.," *American Journal of Political Science* 59, no. 2 (2015): 419–439.
47. Edmund Malesky, "Push, Pull, and Reinforcing: The Channels of FDI Influence on Provincial Governance in Vietnam," in *Beyond Hanoi: Local Governance in Vietnam*, eds. Ben Kerkvliet and David Marr (Singapore: Institute for South East Asian Studies and NIAS Press, 2004): 285–333.
48. Reports, data, and media discussions can be found at [www.pcvietnam.org](http://www.pcvietnam.org).
49. Reports, data, and media discussions can be found at <http://papi.org.vn/>.
50. I have written about thirty articles and a handful of book chapters that reference Vietnam, in addition to contributing to the annual Provincial Competitiveness Index (PCI) and Provincial Administrative Performance Index (PAPI) reports. This would not have been difficult.

51. Gainsborough, "Malesky vs. Fforde," 23fn30 [emphasis added].
52. To double-check, I went back and did keyword searches on the five articles most likely to use the term because of their focus on elite politics and economic reform (listed below). In total, the term reformer is used three times and conservative four times, 6/7 were referring to China, and all were summarizing work by other scholars. Malesky et al., "Accountability and Inequality in Single-Party Regimes." ((r)eformer=1/(c)onservative=1, both refer to work on China by others); Edmund Malesky and Jason Morris-Jung, "Vietnam in 2014: Uncertainty and Opportunity in the Wake of the HS-981 Crisis," *Asian Survey* 55, no. 1 (2015): 165–173 (r=0/c=1 (referring to speculation by others)); Edmund Malesky, "Vietnam in 2013: Single-Party Politics in the Internet Age," *Asian Survey* 54 no. 1 (2014): 30–38 (r=0/c=0); Edmund Malesky, Anh Tran, and Paul Schuler, "Vietnam 2010: Familiar Patterns and New Developments Ahead of the 11th Vietnam Communist Party Congress," *Southeast Asian Affairs* (2011): 339–363 (r=0/c=0); Edmund Malesky and Jonathan London, "The Political Economy of Development in China and Vietnam," *Annual Review of Political Science* 17 (2014): 412–413, (r=2/c=2, both refer to work on China by others).
53. Gainsborough, *Rethinking the State*, 292fn3. Even the actual wording of the quote used is opportunistically interpreted and does not confirm Gainsborough's point. I checked both the original Vietnamese and Gainsborough's translation. Võ Văn Kiệt is not talking about fence-breaking or local experiments at all. He is talking about corruption: "Party members who engage in under-the-counter deals, work hand in glove with speculators and smugglers, and who lend a hand to economic saboteurs."
54. Gainsborough, *Rethinking the State*, 40–42 (Tables 2.1 and 2.2). Between 1990 and 2000, Gainsborough finds that public sector employment in the city increased from 178,000 to 208,000 (17% growth). Over that same period, population growth in the city grew from 4.1 million to 5.4 million (28% growth). In other words, public employment grew slower than population growth, undermining Gainsborough's key finding—public workers per capita were significantly smaller than they were at the onset of Đổi mới. General Statistical Office, *Vietnam Statistical Handbook* (Hanoi: Statistical Publishing House), <http://www.gso.govs.vn/default.aspx?tabid=387&idmid=3&ItemID=12873> (accessed July 4, 2018).
55. Martin Gainsborough, "Party Control: Electoral Campaigning in Vietnam in the Run-Up to the May 2002 National Assembly Elections," *Pacific Affairs* 78, no. 1 (2005): 59.
56. Karl Popper, "Philosophy of Science: A Personal Report," in *British Philosophy in the Mid-Century*, ed. J. H. Muirhead (London: George Allen and Unwin;

- 1957); Imre Lakatos, “History of Science and its Rational Reconstructions,” *PSA: Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association* (1970): 91–136.
57. Tom Pepinsky, Edmund Malesky, Nathan Jensen, and Mike Findley, “Can Greater Transparency Lead to Better Social Science?,” *Washington Post Monkey Cage Blog*, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/09/24/can-greater-transparency-lead-to-better-social-science/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.6577a22ad582](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/09/24/can-greater-transparency-lead-to-better-social-science/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.6577a22ad582) (accessed July 4, 2018).
  58. Jensen and Malesky, “Nonstate Actors and Compliance with International Agreements,” 45–47.
  59. Malesky et al., “Adverse Effects,” 767–768.
  60. Readers can find my preregistered hypotheses and pre-analysis plans at the Evidence in Governance and Politics (EGAP) website <http://egap.org/design-registrations> (accessed July 4, 2018).
  61. Michael G. Findley, Nathan M. Jensen, Edmund J. Malesky, and Tom B. Pepinsky, “Can Results-Free Review Reduce Publication Bias? The Results and Implications of a Pilot Study,” *Comparative Political Studies* 49, no 13 (2016): 1667–1703.
  62. Pollock, *The Essentials of Political Analysis*, Chapter 2.
  63. See Malesky et al., “Monopoly Money” and Jensen and Malesky, “Nonstate Actors and Compliance.”
  64. See Malesky et al., “Adverse Effects.”
  65. See Edmund Malesky and Markus Taussig, “Can Political Participation by Firms Increase Government Legitimacy and Regulatory Compliance in Developing Countries: A Field Experiment in Vietnam,” paper presented at Trinity College, Dublin, March 8, 2017, [http://www.tcd.ie/Economics/assets/pdf/Seminars/20162017/Edmund%20Malesky%20Opening%20Doors%20\(Jan%2031%202017\).pdf](http://www.tcd.ie/Economics/assets/pdf/Seminars/20162017/Edmund%20Malesky%20Opening%20Doors%20(Jan%2031%202017).pdf).
  66. Readers can access all my replication data and code at <http://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/emalesky>.
  67. James Anderson, “Sunshine Works—Comment on The Adverse Effects of Sunshine: A Field experiment on Legislative Transparency in an Authoritarian Assembly,” World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 6602 (2013).
  68. Gainsborough, “Malesky vs. Fforde,” 16.
  69. *Ibid.*, 18.
  70. Malesky, “Gerrymandering: Vietnam Style,” 146–150.
  71. *Ibid.*, 142.
  72. *Ibid.*
  73. *Ibid.*, 152.
  74. *Ibid.*, 155.

75. Ibid., 152.
76. See Baccini et al., “Globalization and State Capitalism,” and Malesky and London, “The Political Economy of Development in China and Vietnam.”
77. Gainsborough, “Malesky vs. Fforde,” 12.
78. Ibid., 14; 16.
79. Ibid., 12.
80. “Classic texts” is Gainsborough’s own description in “Malesky vs. Fforde,” 19.
81. Ibid., 9.
82. Gainsborough, *Rethinking the State*, 135–156.
83. Ibid., 172–174.
84. Gainsborough, “The Myth of the Centralized Socialist State,” 136.
85. Harold Dwight Lasswell, *Politics: Who Gets What, When, and How?* (New York: P. Smith, 1950).
86. Benedict J. Kerkvliet, *The Power of Everyday Politics: How Vietnamese Peasants Transformed National Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005); Adam Fforde and Stefan De Vylder, *From Plan to Market: The Economic Transition in Vietnam*. (New York: Westview Press, 1996).
87. Do Quoc-Anh, Kieu-Trang Nguyen, and Anh N. Tran, “One Mandarin Benefits the Whole Clan: Hometown Favoritism in an Authoritarian Regime,” *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 9, no. 4 (2017): 1–29.
88. Huy Đức, *Bên Thắng Cuộc* [The Winning Side], II. *Quyền Bính* [Authoritative Power] (USA: Osin Books, 2012), 157–161.
89. Đăng Nam - Tấn Vũ, “Từ nghị trường đến hiện trường [From Parliamentary Initiative to Actual Event] *Báo Tuổi Trẻ*, May 13, 2014, <http://tuoitre.vn/tu-nghi-truong-den-hien-truong-607028.htm> (accessed July 4, 2018).
90. Huy Đức, *Bên Thắng Cuộc*, 1.
91. Ngọc Quang, “Dấu ấn trên công trình 500 kV Bắc – Nam [Hallmark of the North-South 500kw Project],” *VNExpress*, August 7, 2014, <http://vnexpress.net/tin-tuc/thoi-su/ve-dep-nang-luong/dau-an-tren-cong-trinh-500kv-bac-nam-3028180.html> (accessed July 6, 2014).
92. Nguyễn Xuân Thành, “The Leadership of Prime Minister Võ Văn Kiệt,” Fulbright University School of Public Policy Lecture, July 1, 2018.
93. Vietnam’s electricity penetration rate increased from 75% (68% in rural areas) to 100% today, among the highest levels in the world for countries at its stage of development. Indeed, in the years immediately after the line Vietnam was able to move from a net energy importer to exporter. See World Bank, *World Development Indicators Dataset* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2018), <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=world-development-indicators> (accessed July 4, 2018).

94. Huy Đức, *Bên Thắng Cuộc*, 161.
95. Võ Văn Kiệt would later visit him in jail to present him with a state medal. Observe the photograph under the section heading, “Chiếc huy hiệu 500 kV và hai chai sâm banh [A medal and two bottles of champagne],” in Đăng Nam – Tấn Vũ, “Tin vui trong trại giam [Fun in the Detention Center] *Báo Tuổi Trẻ*, May 17, 2014, <http://tuoitre.vn/tin-vui-trong-trai-giam-607668.htm> (accessed July 4, 2018).
96. See the discussion of comparative elite institutions, especially the role of the Prime Minister in Vietnam with Abrami and Zheng in Regina Abrami, Edmund J. Malesky, and Yu Zheng, “Vietnam through Chinese Eyes: Divergent Accountability in Single- Party Regimes,” in *Why Communism Did Not Collapse: Understanding Authoritarian Regime Resilience in Asia and Europe*, edited by Martin Dimitrov (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013): 237–276. In a television interview before his death, Võ Văn Kiệt reflected on the incident, remarking that “only the Prime Minister had the power to authorize this decision.” VTV1, “Kỷ ức Việt Nam – Đường dây 500Kv,” January 12, 2015. He makes the statement at 3:28 into the program; see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oqIpmnf0J8Y> (accessed July 4, 2018).
97. The 500 kW story and other incidents described in Huy Đức’s second volume also challenge the larger narratives in Gainsborough’s *Rethinking the State* about the weak party-state, the role of the south in reform, and Võ Văn Kiệt’s position as an advocate for innovative development policies—but these debates are beyond the scope of this article.
98. Douglass C. North, *Institutional Change and Economic Performance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 3. I am such a fan that I even contributed a chapter to North’s Festschrift. See Scott Gelbach and Edmund Malesky, “The Grand Experiment that Wasn’t? New Institutional Economics and the Postcommunist Experience,” in *Institutions, Property Rights, and Economic Growth: The Legacy of Douglass North*, eds. Sebastian Galiani and Itai Sened (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012): 223–248.
99. Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty* (New York: Broadway Business, 2013).
100. Nguyen Manh Hung, “Continuity and Change under Vietnam’s New Leadership,” *ISEAS Perspective* 50 (September 13, 2016), 1–7.
101. Thomas Pepinsky, “The Institutional Turn in Comparative Authoritarianism,” *British Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 3 (2014): 631–653; Kenneth A. Shepsle, “Studying Institutions: Some Lessons from the Rational Choice Approach,” *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 1, no. 2 (1989): 131–147.
102. Edmund Malesky, Regina Abrami, and Yu Zheng, “Institutions and Inequality in Single-Party Regimes: A Comparative Analysis of Vietnam and China,” *Comparative Politics* 43, no. 4 (2011): 401–419.

103. Gainsborough, "Malesky vs. Fforde," 16.
104. Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Bùi Ngọc Tấn, *Chuyện kể năm 2000* (Toronto: thời mới, 2000); Huy Đức, *Bên Thắng Cuộc*.
105. Gainsborough, "Malesky vs. Fforde," 13.
106. *Ibid.*, 12.
107. Nguyen Hai Hong, *Political Dynamics of Grassroots Democracy in Vietnam* (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
108. After all, Gainsborough says this in *Rethinking the State*, 23: "For example, the party may still be the ultimate authority, but now has to contend with more robust governmental institutions and stronger National Assembly, as notwithstanding their common party representation, they are alternative seats of power."
109. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1978).
110. Gainsborough, "Malesky vs. Fforde," 17.
111. *Ibid.*, 5.