

## Spaces, States and Microhistory

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In participating in a seminar with the Appendix Group (Phụ Lục) for *Skylines With Flying People 3*, I tried to think of ideas that I, an historian, share with them, a group of artists. Although they do not express this directly, I recognise three topics in the work of the Appendix Group that relate to the work of historians: spaces, states (or governments) and microhistory. And if I were to summarise what I am thinking into one sentence, it would be that “states create spaces and microhistory is a way to help us think about the spaces that states (imperfectly) create.”

### Spaces and States

Let’s start by thinking about the spaces that states create. A few years ago there was an animation video made by some university students that became very popular called *Vietnam, an S-shaped Country*. This video made many Vietnamese feel proud. They were proud that some university students had made a piece of animation that was so good, and they were also proud of Việt Nam and the shape of the country.

This act of being proud of a shape on a map that people can easily recognise is something that is very modern. It is something that modern states brought about because they were the first to create modern maps using the latest technology as they wanted to be able to “see” their territory clearly so that they could effectively govern over it. At the same time, they wanted their people to remain loyal to that space and its government. Therefore, millions of textbooks were produced to teach the people to understand what their home country looks like and to develop emotions of loyalty to, and pride for, a shape on modern maps, such as the “S” shape of Việt Nam.

While this is what states aspire to do, of course their efforts can never be completely successful as every country in the world has areas that are different from others and people in different parts of the country, or people of different sub-groups of the population can have different feelings and ideas when they see the shape of the map.

### Microhistory

One way to gain an understanding of the difference between the idea that the image of a country on a map projects and the way people actually think about that image and what it stands for is by engaging in an historical approach known as microhistory. The idea of microhistory is to make people think more deeply about the past by looking at something small that contradicts, but does not necessarily “overturn,” something that we usually take for granted.

A famous example of this is a book called *The Great Cat Massacre*. To greatly simplify the complex story in this book, it is about some workers in France in the 1700s who really had a lot of fun killing cats. Now usually when people read about France in the 1700s, they read about things like the great philosophers of that time, as this was the time of the Enlightenment. However, by learning about how some common workers at that time enjoyed killing cats, we are forced to question why we only think about issues like the Enlightenment when we think of 18<sup>th</sup> century France.

Inspired by *The Great Cat Massacre*, an historian in America wrote an article called *The Great Hanoi Rat Massacre*. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the French decided to “modernise” Hà Nội. They saw that the Old Quarter was not modern, but rather than change it, they instead built a new section of the city, the French Quarter with its straight and “logical” streets. They also put in a sewer system below it, which they were very proud of, as it was one of the first sewer systems in Asia.

However, they soon came to realise that rats (which the French were convinced were coming from the Old Quarter) started to inhabit the sewer system and to come up into French houses. So they told the Vietnamese that they would pay them money for each rat that they killed. The Vietnamese were soon bringing in 1,000s of rats every day. Not wanting to deal with all of the bodies, the French then decided to pay the Vietnamese for rat-tails. The Vietnamese were supposed to kill the rats and throw away their bodies, but to deliver their tails to get paid. Well, not long after that, the French started to notice that there were lots of “tail-less rats” in Hà Nội, as the Vietnamese started to catch rats, cut off their tails to get money, but then let the rats go so that they could have babies and produce more rat-tails.

## Conclusion

This is an example of microhistory. This small story of the rat massacre is presented in contrast to the plans of the French to “modernise” Hà Nội, and thinking about all of this together forces us to look at that time period in more complex ways.

I think that the Appendix Group does something similar to this. By travelling from the north to the south, that is, across the area of S-shaped Việt Nam, they find that the homogeneity of the S-shape is not as deep as they thought it was. They

find, for instance, that some of the everyday objects that they brought from Hà Nội, and which people take for granted in Hà Nội, are not necessarily common objects in Sài Gòn.

This is microhistory. And again, the point of microhistory is not to try to “overturn” some way of seeing things. It doesn’t challenge the existence of the S-shape, but it makes us see that S-shape as an image that is multi-layered and that can have multiple meanings to different people. In other words, the work of the Appendix Group helps us see the complexity of life, and that is the purpose of microhistory.

Sources:

Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre: And Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

Michael G. Vann, “Of Rats, Rice, and Race: The Great Hanoi Rat Massacre, an Episode in French Colonial History,” *French Colonial History* 4 (2003):191-203.

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