10-2020

Nguyễn An Ninh's Anti-Colonial Thought: A New Account of National Shame

Kevin D. Pham
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/poliscifac

Part of the Political Science Commons, Politics and Social Change Commons, and the Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Nguyễn An Ninh's Anti-Colonial Thought: A New Account of National Shame

Abstract

A source of national shame can be the perception that one's nation is intellectually inferior to other nations. This kind of national shame can lead not to despair but to a sense of national responsibility to engage in creative self-renewal and to create national identity from scratch. An exemplar of someone who recognized and engaged with this kind of national shame is Nguyễn An Ninh (1900–1943), an influential Vietnamese anti-colonial intellectual in French colonial Vietnam. Ninh's account of national shame challenges existing assumptions in political theory, namely that national identity requires national pride, that national shame comes from bad actions towards outside groups, and that national responsibility means responsibility for those bad actions. Postcolonial and decolonial literature have tended to attribute any perception of inferiority on the part of the colonized to "internalized inferiority," and to assume the existence of an indigenous "original" culture that colonizers destroy, overlooking the fact that natives themselves sometimes questioned the existence of "original" culture. Ninh shows that colonized people can be ashamed of lacking intellectual culture on their own terms and be anti-colonial at the same time.

Keywords

Nguyễn An Ninh, Vietnamese political thought, colonialism, postcolonialism, national shame, inferiority

Disciplines

Political Science | Politics and Social Change | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies

Nguyễn An Ninh's Anti-Colonial Thought:
A New Account of National Shame

Kevin D. Pham, Gettysburg College

A source of national shame can be the perception that one's nation is intellectually inferior to other nations. This kind of national shame can lead not to despair but to a sense of national responsibility to engage in creative self-renewal and to create national identity from scratch. An exemplar of someone who recognized and engaged with this kind of national shame is Nguyễn An Ninh (1900–1943), an influential Vietnamese anti-colonial intellectual in French colonial Vietnam. Ninh's account of national shame challenges existing assumptions in political theory, namely that national identity requires national pride, that national shame comes from bad actions towards outside groups, and that national responsibility means responsibility for those bad actions. Postcolonial and decolonial literature have tended to attribute any perception of inferiority on the part of the colonized to "internalized inferiority," and to assume the existence of an indigenous "original" culture that colonizers destroy, overlooking the fact that natives themselves sometimes questioned the existence of "original" culture. Ninh shows that colonized people can be ashamed of lacking intellectual culture on their own terms and be anti-colonial at the same time.

Keywords: Nguyễn An Ninh, Vietnamese political thought, colonialism, postcolonialism, national shame, inferiority

O n an October day in Saigon in 1923, twenty-three year old Nguyễn An Ninh (1900–1943) stood before a large crowd of fellow young Vietnamese and gave a fiery speech, delivered in French. He shamed his own country for its poor intellectual output compared to other nations: "At present, as India and Japan provide thinkers and artists whose talent or genius radiates alongside the talents and geniuses of Europe, Annam is still only a child who does not even have the idea or

the strength to strive towards a better destiny, towards true deliverance."[1] Nguyễn An Ninh wanted his countrymen to feel ashamed about Vietnam's past and present intellectual weakness, but this was supposed to motivate them to become "great men" rather than drive them to despair. Their task, he exhorted, was to muster a creative spirit to "guide the footsteps of the people and enlighten their path. We need artists, poets, painters, musicians, scientists to enrich our intellectual heritage."[2] This speech became one of the most influential in Vietnam at the time, and Ninh would soon become one of the most influential Vietnamese anti-colonial intellectuals of French colonial Vietnam (1858–1945), embodying the attitudes and aspirations of an entire generation of Vietnamese youth coming of age during the height of French rule.[3] Ninh's account and use of national shame sheds light on an aspect of national identity that has been given little attention by political theorists.

This essay uses Ninh's case to show that one's national identity can be based on a feeling of shame (a painful feeling of humiliation, loss of respect, or dishonor) that one's nation is intellectually inadequate compared to other nations. It also shows that rather than leading to self-hatred or despair, such shame can inspire a redemptive project of national responsibility centered on creative remaking of the self and construction of national identity from scratch.

National shame from a sense of intellectual inadequacy was significant in Vietnam, at least for many Vietnamese who followed Ninh. Such national shame may also exist in other so-called "periphery" or "marginal" nations, whose thinkers have had more difficulty identifying an indigenous intellectual tradition to be proud of. This contrasts with thinkers from perceived civilizational "centers" who can more easily identify an intellectual tradition of which to be proud. Yet this way of conceptualizing and relating national shame and responsibility has been overlooked in existing political theory, which has hitherto viewed these concepts from the perspective of more powerful/dominating nations.[4] By taking the perspective of a thinker

---

1. "Idéal de la Jeunesse Annamite" (Ideals of Annamite Youth) reprinted in the newspaper *La Cloche Fêlée* (Saigon), January 7, 1924. Unless noted otherwise, translations are mine. Annam is the name used for Vietnam prior to 1945.

2. Ibid.

3. Hue Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Roots of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 5.

4. Scholarship on national shame focuses primarily on countries such as Germany, the U.S., Japan, and Israel. See Emma Dresler-Hawke and James H. Liu, "Collective Shame and the Positioning of German National Identity," *Psicología Política* 32 (2006): 131–53; and Larry May and Stacey Hoffman, eds., *Collective Responsibility: Five Decades of Debate in Theoretical and Applied Ethics* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1992).

from a dominated/colonized nation, I offer a different, though not necessarily normatively superior, way in which national identity can be grounded.

The first section of this essay exposes the assumed referents and contexts of political theories of national identity, pride, shame, and responsibility through a brief and broad review of scholarship on the topics. Although I address a wide range of debates, it is in service of a simple observation: scholars have so far typically assumed that national identity comes from pride,[5] that national shame comes from bad actions towards others,[6] and that national responsibility is the righting of the wrongs of those bad actions.[7] This is because these scholars typically have powerful dominating/colonizing nations in mind when they talk about national identity. I pay special attention to Farid Abdel-Nour's account, which appears to embody most of these trends.[8] His account holds that national pride is the source of national identity, prompting a kind of national responsibility and shame centered on redressing the bad actions of one's nation towards others.

In the second section, I show how these traditional understandings of national identity are challenged by the case of Nguyễn An Ninh, who, from the perspective of a dominated/colonized nation, presents a different way in which national identity can be grounded. I briefly discuss his historical context, his diagnosis of Vietnam's problems, and his exhortations to the Vietnamese. In doing so, I show how he challenges the prevailing assumptions of national identity, pride, shame, and responsibility. In contrast to Abdel-Nour, Ninh shows that national shame (rather than pride) can be a source of national identity, and that this shame can come from a sense of intellectual inferiority (rather than from harming others). This prompts a kind of national responsibility centered on creatively remaking the self and on nation-building. While traditional understandings of national identity make more sense to explain how national identity can be sustained over time (through pride of a nation's achievements), Ninh's account is significant because it can better explain how national identity is created from scratch.

---

5. See Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 7.

6. See Dresler-Hawke and Liu, "Collective Shame" (see note 4 above); James Goodman, "Refugee Solidarity: Between National Shame and Global Outrage," in *Theorizing Emotions: Sociological Explorations and Applications*, ed. Debra Hopkins et al. (Frankfurt, Germany: Campus Verlag, 2009): 269–90; and Emile Therein, "The National Shame of Aboriginal Incarceration," *Globe and Mail*, July 2011, at http://www.theglobeandmail.com.

7. See David Miller, *National Responsibility and Global Justice* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2007); and May and Hoffman, *Collective Responsibility* (see note 4 above).

8. Farid Abdel-Nour, "National Responsibility," *Political Theory* 31 (2003): 693–719.

In the final section, I discuss how postcolonial and decolonial theorists have also overlooked the account of national shame of which Ninh is exemplary. Despite these literatures' purported intention to pay attention to the subjectivities of colonized people,[9] there are at least three blind spots in these discourses: (1) there is a paucity of explorations of how colonized peoples have expressed a sense of their own cultural inferiority; (2) in the little discussion of such expressions that exists, they are interpreted in a dismissive way, categorized as "internalized inferiority" or "false consciousness" caused by colonialism,[10] thus overlooking how colonized people can be ashamed and critical of themselves on their own terms and anticolonial at the same time; and (3) it is assumed that colonialism destroys an "original" indigenous culture, overlooking the fact that natives themselves have questioned the existence of any "original" indigenous culture of their own.

The case of Vietnam challenges these problematic tendencies and opens new paths for scholarly exploration. Vietnam was ruled by China for more than a thousand years (111 BC to 938 AD), and remained influenced by China's cultural, philosophical, and political models. Thus, Vietnamese intellectuals of the French colonial period struggled to identify a unique Vietnamese intellectual culture. This did not lead to self-alienation, nor was it a justification for the imposition of French culture. Rather, the shame of cultural shortcomings provoked a desire to recreate Vietnamese identity. Postcolonial and decolonial theorists, in arguing that colonialism *causes* colonized people to "see their past as one wasteland of nonachievement,"[11] tend to dismiss the agency of colonized people to conclude this for themselves and miss the fact that such "nonachievement" can motivate self-renewal, rather than self-hatred.

Existing Assumptions about National Identity, Pride, Shame, and Responsibility

National Identity and National Pride

Consider this cartoon, popular on the Internet.[12]

---

9. Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2001), 64.

10. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: East African Educational Publishers, 1986), 3; E. J. R. David and Sumie Okazaki, "Colonial Mentality: A Review and Recommendation for Filipino American Psychology," *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 12 (2006): 1–16, at 2.

11. Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind*, 3 (see previous note).

12. The cartoon is by Tom Gauld: https://twitter.com/tomgauld/status/571994690289061888; used with permission of the artist.
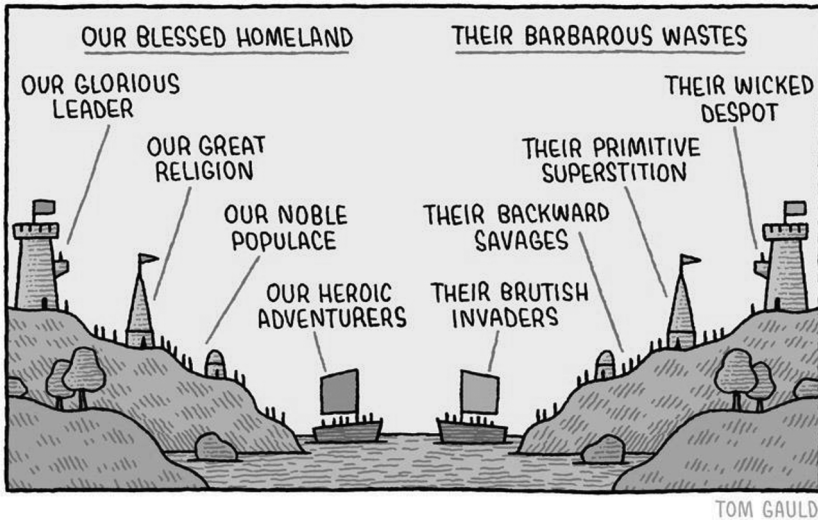
1. "Our Blessed Homeland" by Tom Gauld

Its message points to a widely accepted assumption: whenever there is a sense of national identity, or of an "us" and a "them," the "us" is always perceived as superior or normal and the "them" is always perceived as inferior or bizarre. The cartoon echoes a similar point made by Montaigne in the sixteenth century: "each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice."[13] However, some groups may view themselves as inferior to others in some domain. Political theorists have not paid enough attention to this because they more often have powerful nations in mind when thinking about national identity.

Nationalism is synonymous with national pride, but even if we distinguish national identity from nationalism, much of the literature still assumes that national identity requires national pride. National pride is viewed as *the* cohesive force for national identity. Farid Abdel-Nour argues that the "national bond is a bond of pride that allows modern individuals to be something in the world, to have a certain standing in it."[14] Our modern understanding of the nation, Liah Greenfield points out, can be traced to early sixteenth-century England, when being a member of a nation started to mean that one "partake[s] in its superior, elite quality . . . [that

---

13. Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, trans. Donald Frame (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1965), 152.

14. Abdel-Nour, "National Responsibility," 700 (see note 8 above).

renders all other] . . . lines of status and class . . . superficial."[15] She writes: "Nationality makes people feel good. . . . National identity is fundamentally a matter of dignity. It gives people reasons to be proud."[16] Anthony Smith notes that although national identity poses the danger of exacerbating conflicts by dividing humanity into nations, it is at the same time "a source of pride for downtrodden peoples."[17] Abdel-Nour goes so far as to suggest that if we do not feel a sense of national pride when we view the achievements of our compatriots, then we might not have national identity.[18]

Richard Rorty writes, "National pride is to countries what self-respect is to individuals: a necessary precondition for improvement."[19] A lack of national pride, Rorty says, can "make energetic and effective debate about national policy unlikely."[20] This essay will show that, contrary to these prevailing assumptions, *shame* can be the cohesive force for national identity, and individuals may be motivated to move their country in a desirable direction when national shame outweighs pride. However, the kind of shame that I have in mind is different from the kind of shame that is typically discussed.

National Shame

National shame has usually referred to the shame a nation feels as a result of its reprehensible actions towards outside (weaker) groups, and has been understood as an emotion that threatens to unravel national identity. For Rorty, the new cultural left in the United States has been unfortunately mired in this kind of shame. They find pride in American citizenship to be an "endorsement of atrocities: the importation of African slaves, the slaughter of Native Americans, the rape of ancient forests, and the Vietnam War."[21] Scholars discuss how Germany might deal with its shameful actions towards Jews.[22] In Israel, the "New Historians" have

---

15. Greenfeld, *Nationalism*, 7 (see note 5 above).

16. Ibid., 490, 487.

17. Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1993), 176.

18. Abdel-Nour asks us to imagine a person who views the achievements of her compatriot not with pride but with mere approval and admiration, "without gaining for herself from them a sense of added authority, or added standing in the world," analogous to how a Chinese or Indian individual might admire a work by Shakespeare or Leonardo Da Vinci. "But about such a person we must ask whether she still has a national identity"; Abdel-Nour, "National Responsibility," 713 (see note 8 above).

19. Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 3.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid., 7.

22. Dresler-Hawke and Liu, "Collective Shame," (see note 4 above).

challenged traditional versions of Israeli history to bring attention to the harm Israel has inflicted on Palestinians.[23] Others write about the national shame of detaining refugees[24] or incarcerating aboriginals.[25] To be sure, it is equally intuitive that national shame could be based on something that was done *to* the nation, rather than *by* it. Koreans and particularly Korean "comfort women" during the Asia-Pacific War (1937–45), [26] the inhabitants of occupied Palestine,[27] and many others have experienced a sense of dishonor or humiliation around being occupied by another power and subsequent atrocities. This kind of shame has been missed by political science in general.[28] However, this essay will explore a kind of national shame different from these, one arising not from bad acts towards others or from being humiliated by others, but from a sense of intellectual inadequacy.

National Responsibility

Under the heading of "collective responsibility," a vast literature addresses the question of whether groups or nations of people are collectively responsible for the harms that they perpetrate against others.[29] Domestically, there are debates about what kind of responsibility nations have for past injustices, such as concerning reparations for the enslavement of blacks in the United States.[30] Internationally, national responsibility is evoked in discussions of global justice. On the one hand is the intuition that inequality between nations is unjust. Thus some, like Thomas Pogge, insist that wealthy nations have a responsibility to share their wealth with those of the global south.[31] On the other hand is the intuition that each nation has a right to devote its "national responsibility" to its own members

---

23. Benny Morris, "The New Historiography: Israel Confronts its Past," in his *Making Israel* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 11–28.

24. James Goodman, "Refugee Solidarity" (see note 6 above).

25. Therein, "The National Shame of Aboriginal Incarceration" (see note 6 above).

26. Pyong Gap Min, "Korean 'Comfort Women': the Intersection of Colonial Power, Gender, and Class," *Gender and Society* 17 (2003): 938–57.

27. Glenn Pettigrove and Nigel Parsons, "Shame: A Case Study of Collective Emotion," *Social Theory and Practice* 38 (2012): 504–30.

28. An exception, Howard Wiarda suggests that national inferiority complexes help explain why some "peripheral" countries, through a desire to "wreak revenge on those 'superior' nations that earlier treated other countries with considerable disdain," have adopted Marxism-Leninism; see Howard Wiarda, "Political Culture and the Attraction of Marxism-Leninism: National Inferiority Complexes as an Explanatory Factor," *World Affairs* 151 (1988): 143–49, at 148.

29. May and Hoffman, *Collective Responsibility*, 1–8 (see note 4 above).

30. Lawrie Balfour, "Reparations after Identity Politics," *Political Theory* 33 (2005): 786–811.

31. Thomas Pogge, "Cosmopolitanism and Sovereignty," *Ethics* 103 (1992): 48–75.

first and foremost. David Miller, an eminent proponent of "national responsibility," attempts to solve the conflict between these opposing intuitions by preserving respect for national self-determination and constructing minimal principles for global justice. For him, national responsibility should be thought of not as a demand for the uniform treatment of individuals across national boundaries, but rather as upholding universal protection of human rights.[32] In all these cases, the responsible nation is assumed to be a powerful one that has either harmed a weaker group or has power to help weaker others.

These discussions of collective responsibility are essentially debates over whether groups can have beliefs and intentions, and whether they can act. This irresolvable dilemma has led Abdel-Nour to skip the idea of *collective* national responsibility and home in on *individual* national responsibility. It is worth paying special attention to his argument not only because he shares the prevailing assumptions about national identity, pride, shame, and responsibility discussed above, but also because my argument will parallel, yet invert, his.

Abdel-Nour's central argument is that, on the individual level, wherever there is national pride, there is national responsibility, and this responsibility is best taken up in the form of national shame.[33] What he means is that if a person feels proud of something their national ancestors did (e.g., founding the country), and if that action produced a bad situation (e.g., genocide of the natives), then, to the extent the person is proud, they are also responsible. They are responsible because they imaginatively identify with their national ancestors (evidenced by saying things like, "*We* won the war," or "*We* made the desert bloom") who were the cause of the bad situation. The person should not be punished, because you cannot punish someone for feeling proud of their country. Rather, their responsibility should be to feel shame. By feeling national shame, they would become self-reflective and perhaps take it upon themselves to transform the myths of their country or to change how they relate to their country.

Abdel-Nour's argument evokes an interesting question that he does not attempt to answer: how do people with national pride—and no national shame—come to accept the idea that their ancestor's actions caused the bad situation, and therefore recognize their responsibility to feel shame? His central argument might be restated more clearly as this: If someone has national pride, they have national responsibility whether they agree or not, and *should* accept responsibility and feel shame.

---

32. Miller, *National Responsibility and Global Justice*, 164 (see note 7 above).
33. Abdel-Nour, "National Responsibility," 713 (see note 8 above).

However, this is tantamount to declaring, "You should feel ashamed!"—to which one can simply respond, "No."

For the special individuals who are able to admit that their ancestors' actions caused a bad situation, Abdel-Nour offers the title of "mature agents." But what makes an immature agent become mature?[34] A more useful research question would be: In cases where people with national pride—and no national shame—were able to come to recognize their national responsibility and feel shame, how did they do so? What do their narratives look like? The point of all these criticisms is not to undermine Abdel-Nour's argument, but to focus on a question that his argument inspires: How do individuals with national identity come to accept and conceptualize their national responsibility? This essay attempts to answer such a question, but with a twist. I present a case where a colonized person's national identity is rooted in shame, not pride.

Nguyễn An Ninh offers an account that runs along parallel lines as Abdel-Nour's. A person may feel *shame* because they acknowledge that their national ancestors failed to create a robust cultural stock for their nation. This shortcoming in cultural stock created a bad situation (e.g., it weakened the country, making it vulnerable to foreign conquest). Given that the person has a sense of national identity (evidenced by their use of "we" to refer to themself and fellow nationals), they have national responsibility to redeem national shame by engaging in creative self-remaking and constructing a new "culture" for the purpose of nation-building, so that their national identity can become pride-worthy.

Pride connects individuals to the achievements of others, some of whom might be dead. Thus, pride can sustain national identity over time. Similarly, shame can connect the individual to the *shortcomings* of others, some of whom might be dead. The difference is that while pride can help sustain national identity over time, national shame can help motivate the creation of national identity from scratch. Thus, for Ninh, shame engenders a different mode of responsibility for a different purpose from the kind that Abdel-Nour's notion of pride would.

In short, the lessons we will take from Ninh are (1) national identity can be based on national shame, not just pride; (2) national shame can refer to feelings of inadequacy as compared to others, not only to the shame from harming outsiders;

---

34. Ibid. Abdel-Nour acknowledges in a footnote, "One is entitled to ask, what is to be done when the member of the nation is not a mature agent?" He rules out that others can actively shame the immature agent, since shaming is a form of punishment, and suggests others can "exhort" them to be more self-critical. Indeed, his argument is more clearly rephrased as an exhortation. (Quote at 718, note 74; see note 8 above).

and (3) national responsibility can refer to the duty to creatively self-remake the individual for the sake of nation-building and national self-determination, not only for redressing harms done to others.

Nguyễn An Ninh

By the time Nguyễn An Ninh was born in 1900, France had been extending its control over Vietnam for four decades. In the first three decades of the twentieth century, Vietnamese intellectuals saw their task as twofold: providing their countrymen a diagnosis of how Vietnam had fallen to French rule and prescribing how the Vietnamese might strengthen their country to stand up to French rule.

Up until Ninh's birth year, Vietnamese intellectuals were primarily mandarins who had studied classic Confucian texts for civil service exams. However, entering the twentieth century, many elites began doubting that Confucianism as it had been practiced was an adequate social philosophy for Vietnam. A new idea, Social Darwinism, took hold from the end of the nineteenth century to the 1920s in Vietnam as the prevailing explanation for the country's fall to French rule.[35] Its emphasis on struggle and competition went against ideals of equilibrium and harmony long held by Confucian elites. According to Hue Tam Ho Tai, Social Darwinism was a revelation to the Vietnamese, providing "an explanation of their country's downfall. . . . Vietnam had indeed fallen prey to a mightier country, but its conqueror's might lay in its cultural superiority."[36] Elites who were accustomed to gauging the health of a country using cultural criteria were easily seduced by this argument.

It seemed that the fate of the country depended on what culture, ideas, and values it would take on as its own. Vietnamese intellectuals at this time would not have been fully convinced by Samuel Huntington's claim that "the West won the world not by the superiority of its ideas or values . . . but rather by its superiority in applying organized violence."[37] Many Vietnamese indeed assumed that Western material superiority must have had something to do with their supposedly superior culture, ideas, and values. Thus, Vietnamese thinkers believed that the only way Asians could equal the West was to master Western ideas. In the decades before communism became an attractive ideology, young Vietnamese intellectuals

---

35. David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 297.

36. Tai, *Radicalism*, 20 (see note 3 above).

37. Samuel Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 51.

debated the merits of an eclectic range of political philosophies in order to find the ones most suitable for their goal of self-determination. For example, they were entranced by Giuseppe Mazzini's argument that education and activism must advance simultaneously,[38] by Montesquieu's notion of democracy as loving laws and one's country,[39] by Abraham Lincoln's example of developing inner virtue,[40] and by many other Western thinkers. Students were encouraged to travel to Japan where modernization was taking place. There, Vietnamese students studied Japanese, Chinese, and Western ideas.[41] Tai writes, "Equating independence with survival, patriotic literati believed that they were engaged in a desperate race against annihilation as a people and a culture."[42] Schools such as the *Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục* (Tonkin Free School) were created in order to promote debates about what and how to learn from the West, and what should be done to strengthen the Vietnamese people spiritually, intellectually, and culturally, with the assumption that doing so would bring greater material and political power.[43]

Part and parcel of this new educational movement was the imperative to construct a sense of national identity which was only incipient and would remain so until at least the late 1920s.[44] At the Tonkin Free School, "a functionary in the local bureau of cartography made a big map of Vietnam out of white cloth, which he used at the school to describe the S shape of the country . . . People are said to have come from other neighborhoods just to view that map—probably the first time that they had seen their country rendered schematically."[45]

The question of how to construct national identity where there was none was deeply related to the question of where the Vietnamese should get their moral guidance. There were two ostensible choices: the old Chinese Confucianism or the new Western liberalism. By the 1920s, these two options increasingly came to appear unsatisfactory for a new young generation. By then, Social Darwinism's influence

38. David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885–1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 129.

39. Phan Châu Trinh, "Morality and Ethics in the Orient and the Occident," in *Phan Châu Trinh and His Political Writings*, ed. and tran. Vinh Sinh (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 2009): 103–23, at 116.

40. Mark Philip Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919–1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 31.

41. Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 99–108.

42. Tai, *Radicalism*, 2 (see note 3 above).

43. Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*, 164 (see note 38 above).

44. In 1925, Phan Châu Trinh, Vietnam's most famous early 20th century nationalist, was criticizing the Vietnamese for having little sense of national identity. See Trinh, "Morality and Ethics" (see note 39 above).

45. Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism*, 166 (see note 38 above).

was diminishing and being supplanted by the rising influence of "radicalism," a term used by Tai to describe a nonideological reaction to colonialism, characterized by iconoclasm and the marriage of the personal and political.[46] Unlike Social Darwinism, radicalism was influenced by anarchism and was preoccupied "not with survival and competition but with freedom and the relationship between the individual and society."[47] At this time, many young Vietnamese saw "symmetry between the national struggle for independence from colonial rule and their own efforts to emancipate themselves from the oppressiveness of native social institutions and the deadweight of tradition."[48] The most influential figure of this period and the one who best embodies its radicalism is Ninh. Vietnam's period of radicalism was flowering with liberal ideas, philosophical experimentation, and new political vocabularies. Although it was eventually replaced by Marxism-Leninism (another radical tradition), it remains rich political-theoretical terrain that has been overlooked by political theorists.

The rise of radicalism could perhaps be explained by this young generation's deep immersion in European philosophy and further distancing from traditional Confucianism. They "no longer possessed a sense of rootedness and had fallen prey to a deep spiritual malaise."[49] In the previous generation, two renowned Vietnamese nationalists of the early twentieth century, Phan Bội Châu (1867–1940) and Phan Châu Trinh (1872–1926), were among the first Vietnamese to learn about Western ideas after having been immersed in Chinese philosophy, although the Western texts they read were Chinese translations of Japanese translations. Before Trinh and Châu, scholars studied Chinese philosophy exclusively. By contrast, in the 1920s, Ninh was fluent in French and educated in the best French schools. He lived in France from 1920 to 1923 and received a law degree from the Sorbonne. On his bookshelf could be found works by Nietzsche, Rousseau, Plato, Kant, and Tolstoy, as well as a photograph of Rabindranath Tagore.[50] Ninh returned to Vietnam and created, edited, and wrote for the newspaper *La Cloche Fêlée*, which made its debut on December 10, 1923.[51] This newspaper is where we find most of Ninh's writings and speeches. For many, Ninh was the archetypal patriot intellectual. However, his patriotism, as I will show, stems not from national "pride" generally understood, but rather from a passionate sense of responsibility rooted in national

---

46. Tai, *Radicalism*, 1 (see note 3 above).
47. Ibid., 4.
48. Ibid., 3.
49. Ibid.
50. Léon Werth, *Cochinchine* (Paris: Rieder, 1926), 35.
51. For a history of *la Cloche Fêlée*, see Tai, *Radicalism*, 125–31 (see note 3 above).

shame. The few historians who have written about Ninh have not framed him as being primarily motivated by national shame.[52] Therefore this essay offers a new interpretation of Ninh. In what follows, I show that (1) Ninh's national shame arises from his feeling that his nation is intellectually inadequate compared to other nations and that this shame can be a cohesive force for Vietnamese national identity; (2) that this kind of shame can motivate the Vietnamese to recreate themselves anew; and (3) that Ninh's critiques of the Vietnamese are compatible with and part of his anti-colonialism.

National Shame from a Sense of Intellectual Inadequacy

In 1923, Ninh diagnosed the central problem for Vietnamese youth as a crisis of moral knowledge. "Vietnamese youth is caught as if in whirling waters, not knowing toward which direction to swim. Faced with a moral choice, it does not know on which morality to base its actions and its judgments."[53] Turning to Chinese ideas or Western ideas for prepackaged moral guidance would not work, he thinks. Although he says that it is possible for Confucianism to "elevate men,"[54] he argues that Vietnamese reliance on Chinese ideas is inadequate in the face of new problems facing Vietnamese society: "Haven't the so-called elite fashioned by Chinese books been forced to cling to Confucian ideas like shipwrecked people to a raft?"[55] Similarly, the Vietnamese should not simply adopt French or European values without struggling on their own to make such ideas meaningful to themselves:

> The future that we desire will not come to us in a dream. It is not enough to mark in gold letters on the front of public buildings: liberty, equality, fraternity, in order for liberty, equality, and fraternity to reign among us. . . . You claim from others things that they cannot give you . . . things that you must acquire by yourselves.[56]

---

52. For works on Nguyễn An Ninh, see Tai, *Radicalism* (see note 3 above); Judith Henchy, "Performing Modernity in the Writings of Nguyễn An Ninh and Phan Van Hum," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Washington, 2003; Pierre Brocheux, "Une histoire croisée: l'immigration politique indochinoise en France (1911–1945)," *Hommes et Migrations* 1253 (2005): 26–3; Ngo Van, *Viet-nam, 1920–1945: Révolution et Contre-révolution sous la domination coloniale* (Paris: Nautilus, 2000) 28–45; Lan, Phương Bùi Thế Mỹ, ed. *Nguyễn An Ninh, Nhà cách mạng* (Sài gòn: Tủ sách sưu khảo, 1970).

53. Ninh, in *Cloche Fêlée*, December 10, 1923; translation in Tai, *Radicalism*, 72 (see note 3 above).

54. Ninh, "Ideals of Annamite Youth," in *Cloche Fêlée*, January 7, 1924.

55. Ibid.

56. Ninh, in *Cloche Fêlée*, December 24, 1924.

If Chinese or European moralities are not solutions, then it would be natural to turn to Vietnam's indigenous culture for moral guidance. For Ninh, culture is the primary source of moral knowledge for all nations. For any nation, its culture is its "soul," guiding not only its citizens' moral behavior but also allowing nations to survive in the face of foreign attacks. According to Ninh:

> Any people dominated by a foreign culture cannot know true independence if they do not posses an independent culture. . . . Take, for example, a culture that we are still influenced by: the Chinese culture. Vanquished constantly by brutal force, conquered by barbarian neighbors, China owes its existence to its culture.[57]

Correspondingly, a nation with a weak culture has a weak "soul" and is vulnerable to foreign domination.

Ninh thought that Vietnam shamefully does not possess its own robust intellectual culture, and this is the cause of its weakness:

> If we pile up all that we have produced in our country in terms of purely literary and artistic achievements, the intellectual lot that was left to us by our ancestors would certainly be weak compared to the heritages of other peoples. . . . The literary lot that was transmitted to us is thin and, what's more, exhales a strong breath of decadence, of sickness, lassitude, the taste of an impending agony. This is not the kind of heritage that will help give us more vigor and life to our race in the fight for a place in the world.[58]

The standards that Ninh endorses to assess the value of a nation are not necessarily "European" (e.g., rationality and autonomy), but rather concern whether a nation has a heritage of intellectual culture, specifically literary and artistic works, and whether these have endured to guide and invigorate future generations and inspire the world at large.[59] He writes, "Many people owe to their culture the duration of their name, their influence in the world, and the messianic role that they play in the world."[60] Unfortunately, Vietnam lacked a pantheon of "great men," according to Ninh, and the little culture that the youth have inherited is more harmful than good. Vietnam's standing in the world is low, even compared to

---

57. Ninh, in *Cloche Fêlée*, January 7, 1924.

58. Ibid.

59. Ninh's emphasis on written texts as "culture" bears resemblance to the Chinese literati view of culture. In Chinese, the first character in the word "culture" (文化) literally means "literature or writing."

60. Ninh, in *Cloche Fêlée*, January 7, 1924.

other nations colonized by the West: "India, despite its oppression by the English, has its philosophers, its poets, its intellectuals, its leaders who lead actions of the masses."[61] By contrast, "Annam figures like a pygmy next to a giant, because India has a most glorious past."[62] Compared to nations like India and Japan, whose thinkers "radiate alongside the talents and geniuses of Europe, Annam is but an infant."[63] More than mere "envy," "shame" best captures Ninh's feeling of Vietnam's dishonor and humiliation.

It is interesting that Ninh cites India as an inspiration. For Gandhi, the problem for Indians was not their lack of an intellectual culture (of this they knew they had a rich heritage), but rather a contemporary moral failing in falling prey to the desire for luxury, ease, and material gain.[64] In contrast, the problem for Vietnam, in Ninh's view, is that it lacked even the requisite foundation of an intellectual culture. Whereas "self-criticism" may describe Gandhi's approach, a deeper sense of "shame" best describes Ninh's.

Ninh's remarks on the lack of indigenous Vietnamese intellectual culture were not unique in Vietnam. A generation before him, the Vietnamese nationalist Phan Châu Trinh said that a number of European thinkers such as Voltaire, Rousseau, and Montesquieu had "contributed to unshackling their compatriots from autocratic rule" and that only "Confucius, Mencius, Mozi, Laozi, or Zhuangzi . . . in ancient China might be compared" to those European men. From the Qin dynasty [221–206 BCE] on, "there has been no person of such caliber" in Vietnam.[65] In a public speech in 1925, Phan Châu Trinh asked, "In our country at present, is there a person who may be called moral philosopher? Even since the time of the Lê dynasty, is there anyone who may be called a moral philosopher like those I mentioned?"[66]

Ninh goes further than Trinh, attacking Vietnamese literati for not only failing to be moral philosophers, but for achieving nothing more than badly copying Chinese Confucian ideas.[67] Yet, for Ninh, Vietnamese cultural and intellectual inadequacy is not an inherent condition, nor are they condemned to be forever inferior.

---

61. Ibid.

62. Ibid.

63. Ibid.

64. Farah Godrej, "Gandhi, Foucault, and the Politics of Self-Care," *Theory & Event* 20 (2017): 894–922.

65. Phan Châu Trinh, "Morality and Ethics in the Orient and the Occident," 115 (see note 39 above).

66. Ibid.

67. Ninh, in *Cloche Fêlée*, January 7, 1924

The problem is not *metaphysical*, but deeply related to the historical processes that constitute Vietnam's situation (e.g., lingering Chinese cultural dependency and material hardship under French colonialism).[68]

National Shame as Motivation

What task, then, is incumbent upon the Vietnamese given their shamefully limited cultural stock? Ninh's solution is for the Vietnamese to aim for a kind of originality generated through intense, energetic, personal, spiritual struggle. Their aim should be to become "great men." Quoting the Indian thinker Ananda Coomaraswamy, Ninh writes, "the only and real importance of India for the world will be revealed in the great men India will provide to humanity."[69] Ninh wants Vietnam to offer its own "great men"—by which he means philosophers, artists, and poets—to the world. Unfortunately, Ninh thinks, the Vietnamese may not be receptive to this idea because they are "without energy, without will, discouraged by the slightest effort," which are consequences of a lack of intellectual culture rather than natural, essential qualities. "Even if favored by heredity and by circumstance, very few of us are capable of efforts that can bring us up to the level of spirit cultivated in Europe."[70] Yet, even so, "why shouldn't we speak of great men, since we need great men, a flowering of great men, personalities that can give status to their own people?"[71]

For Ninh, his generation's task involves creatively "finding a solid intellectual heritage that can serve as the first stone on which to build our dreams."[72] This heritage would be solid only if it was a result of their efforts rather than the work of others: "The current generation needs new ideals, *their ideals*; a new activity, *their activity*; new passions, *their passions*."[73]

---

68. Roberto Schwarz, writing in the context of Brazil, argues that the occasional superiority of a Latin American artist over his or her European model does not indicate cultural parity of their respective spheres, though it might relativize the idea of "originality." Even so, while the idea of relativism might make Latin Americans feel better when it lets them know they "are not metaphysically predestined to suffer the inferiority of imitation, since in fact the Europeans imitate as well (hence the relativization of originality)," the fact remains that "innovation is not distributed equally over the planet, and that if the causes of that inequality are not metaphysical, they are perhaps something else." The "something else" that Schwarz has in mind is found in an "international space that is polarized by hegemony, inequality, and alienation—a space where we find the historical and collective hardships of underdevelopment." Roberto Schwarz, trans. R. Kelly Washbourne and Neil Larsen, "National Adequation and Critical Originality," *Cultural Critique* 49 (2001): 18–42, at 20.

69. Ninh, in *Cloche Fêlée*, January 7, 1924.

70. Ibid.

71. Ibid.

72. Ibid.

73. Ibid.

For ideas, Vietnam should not depend solely on China or Europe but should learn from diverse sources. He writes, "in these times, all Asian minds must be nourished by two cultures, one occidental and one oriental."[74] Vietnam should be like a vampire, sucking up wisdom and knowledge wherever wisdom and knowledge can be found in order to reinvigorate the nation: "What we need is curiosity under all its forms, a curiosity that is the last hope and last sign of life, that is capable of every audacity in order to quench its thirst, a curiosity that burrows, seeks, searches, and dissects everything that is life in others so as to find the remedy which will give new vigor to a weakened blood."[75] This reinvigorated "blood" will be hybrid. Importantly, although other sources should be studied for inspiration, what the Vietnamese need "is not servile imitations that far from liberating us attach us to what we imitate. We need personal creations that come from our own blood or works that come from an actual change within ourselves."[76] He says this to "prove to today's youth that in all things they can count on no one but themselves to rise to the level where man, aware of his own strength, also begins to be aware of his dignity."[77]

One precondition to attaining a genuine "change within themselves" was the necessity of breaking away from convention, tradition, and even their families. "It is against your milieu that you must struggle, against your family that paralyzes your efforts, against the vulgar society that weighs on you, against the narrow prejudices and hindrances that lurk around your actions, against ideals that lack vigor and nobility, that are humiliatingly base and reduce, day by day, the status of our race."[78] The greatest idealists, he writes,

> have always hitherto advised those who wanted to be their disciples to flee "their father's house." We, too, must flee the "house of our father." We must escape our family, escape our society, distance ourselves from our country. We must have a life of struggle that awakens the little vigor we have; we must have a society that reveals our true worth.[79]

Here, Ninh's exhortations echo Nietzsche's Superman.[80] At a time when even the most progressively minded Vietnamese felt that at least some traditional family

---

74. Ibid.
75. Quoted in Tai, *Radicalism*, 79 (see note 3 above).
76. Ninh, in *Cloche Fêlée*, January 14, 1924.
77. Ibid.
78. Ibid.
79. Ibid.
80. Ninh was attracted to an "anarchism heavily tinged with Nietzschean individualism"; see Tai, *Radicalism*, 73 (see note 3 above). David Marr shows that Ninh's *La Cloche Fêlée* devotes considerable attention to Nietzsche's writings; see Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition*, 161–62 (see note 35 above).

values ought to be respected, Ninh's call to struggle against the family were radically iconoclastic. Tai has remarked that a familiar theme of the period was that young Vietnamese should seek their destinies outside their families, but "that they should reject the values of their fathers was little short of revolutionary."[81] Only by breaking free from old and stale cultural constraints could the new generation, according to Ninh, perform their duty of rectifying the failure of their ancestors and becoming great thinkers themselves: "And more than India, we need men who know the soul of our race, its needs, and what is best suited to it. We need men who guide the steps of the people and illuminate their path. We need artists, poets, painters, musicians, and intellectuals to enrich our intellectual heritage."[82]

Ninh's exhortations to break from tradition, learn from diverse sources, and become "great men" can be read as the "national responsibility" he prescribes for Vietnamese youth. My account of national responsibility, paralleling Abdel-Nour's, draws on Bernard Williams's model of responsibility. On Williams's view, any notion of responsibility requires that a link be made between someone who (whether they intend to or not) causes a bad state of affairs, and the later self that knows the meaning and consequences of the act.[83] Yet, raising the question of *national* responsibility, how is it possible for someone who merely identifies imaginatively with the members of their nation be responsible for what those members do, or, in Ninh's case, did not do? The answer lies in the use of "we" statements. An individual's ability to say "we have been conquered"—and mean it—is, in Abdel-Nour's words, "evidence of their success (by whatever mechanisms) in extending their sense of communal belonging to persons they have neither met nor are likely to meet or hear about."[84] Ninh makes a link between Vietnam's ancestors (whose act of omission—not creating great intellectual works—caused a bad state of affairs) and the present generation of Vietnamese who know the meaning and consequences of the act of omission. Thus, the "task that is incumbent on the present generation is heavy."[85] This generation has a "mission. And who better than us to take on this mission?"[86] His generation is a "sacrificed generation" that should "think of our task and not our happiness, that we should contribute all our efforts

81. Tai, *Radicalism*, 80 (see note 3 above).
82. Ninh, in *Cloche Fêlée*, January 7, 1924.
83. Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 55.
84. Abdel-Nour, "National Responsibility," 699 (see note 8 above).
85. Ninh, in *Cloche Fêlée*, December 24, 1923.
86. Ibid.

to a better future."[87] Only by fulfilling these responsibilities could the Vietnamese eventually conceive their national identity in terms of pride: "Today's youth must avoid above all talk of the fatherland and of patriotism. They must concentrate all their strength on seeking themselves. The day they find themselves, the words fatherland and patriotism will have become greater words, more elevated, more noble."[88] Here, Ninh shows that Vietnamese national identity can be worthy of pride so long as Vietnamese youth fulfill their responsibility to creatively remake themselves. Yet taking on such responsibility is only possible after correctly diagnosing Vietnam's primary problem as a shameful lack of intellectual culture.

One might criticize Ninh's "national responsibility" for placing undue emphasis on individual answerability while overlooking the realities of capitalist expansion and imperialism on the part of the French.[89] However, we now turn to the way Ninh calls for Vietnamese answerability *while also* being fundamentally anticolonial and well aware of the historical realities of French imperialism and the brutality of French colonial power. Far from being an apologist for French colonialism or a victim of false consciousness, his call for national responsibility is part of his anti-colonialism.

Ninh's Anti-Colonialism

While we have so far seen Ninh's exhortations addressed to Vietnamese youth, his critiques of colonialism are found in his writings addressed to French citizens in the metropole, informing them about their government's unjust actions in Indochina. Ninh rejects colonialism on the basis of equality and self-determination. Ninh's anti-colonial commitment is expressed in three ways.

First, Ninh thinks colonialism as a civilizing mission is unjust because no people is inherently inferior. Even if the colonizing nation hypothetically really were superior, he still would not have actually supported colonialism because, as seen earlier, Ninh deplored mimicry and imitation and believed that internal, personal struggle gave meaning to anything. Yet Ninh thinks the French are not actually superior. He writes, "the European prestige is based neither on the moral nor the intellectual superiority of the Europeans over the Asians. It is based on the color

---

87. Ibid.
88. Ninh, in *Cloche Fêlée*, January 14, 1924.
89. For a critique of Bernard William's emphasis on causality and individual answerability for being only "vaguely concerned with sociological realities and contexts," see Antonio Y. Vázquez-Arroyo, *Political Responsibility: Responding to Predicaments of Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016): 134.

of skin alone."[90] Moreover, this "European prestige" holds that "a European, as idiotic as he can be, could be a boss over a Vietnamese, and the inverse is inadmissible."[91] He writes, "It is the European prestige that kills justice in the courtrooms; that prevents the judges from giving the same sentence to a Frenchman and a Vietnamese indicted with the same offense."[92]

Second, Ninh believed the French civilizing mission was a fraudulent sham from the beginning, providing mere justification for exploitation—"it was not to carry out a sentimental deed that France came to Indochina"—and that those Vietnamese who "have talked about France's humanitarian ideas, in order to humor the colonialists, are as naive as those Europeans who believe in the civilizing mission of Europe."[93] Referring to a recently published work titled "The French Miracle in Asia," he asks: "What is this miracle? It is a miracle indeed to be able in a short time to bring a people with a low intellectual level down to deeper ignorance, and to bring a people with democratic ideas into complete servitude."[94] Moreover, those who officially represent France in Indochina, he writes, "can only speak of the construction of costly railroads, ruinous underwater cables, . . . in short, of the excessive exploitation of Indochina in both senses of the word."[95] Ninh is also aware of the harm French colonialism is inflicting on the French themselves, quoting Rabindranath Tagore: "Those who take pleasure in dominating foreign races abdicate little by little their own liberty and their own humanity in favor of the mechanisms that are necessary to keep other peoples in servitude."[96]

Third, and lastly, Ninh is well aware of and expresses outrage at a wide range of human rights abuses by the French. Such violations justify violent rebellion as a last resort: "there are cases when violence must be accepted for it represents the only recourse."[97] Death is preferable to slavery, he says. However, before combatting "violence with violence as in a bulls' fight, the Vietnamese youth of today, fully conscious of its responsibilities towards its own society, tries first to reconcile French interest with Vietnamese wishes. It tells the mother country—which is too far away

---

90. Ninh, "France in Indochina," in *Cloche Fêlée*, November 30 and December 3, 1925; trans. Truong Buu Lam, in *Colonialism Experienced: Vietnamese Writings on Colonialism, 1900–1931* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000): 190–207, 196.
91. Ibid.
92. Ibid.
93. Ibid., 191.
94. Ninh, in *Cloche Fêlée,*, January 7, 1924.
95. Ibid.
96. Ibid.
97. Ibid., 191.

from Indochina—the truth about what happens in this colony."[98] Thus, he first appeals to France's purported sense of rights. Citing France's Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789, he explains his aim of moving the French people in the metropole to understand the lack of these basic rights in Indochina.[99] For Ninh, not only does France not apply to Indochina the principles that France proclaimed; France also destroys the democratic tradition of Vietnamese society.[100] The French regime, he notes, violates several rights, such as the right of Vietnamese to travel freely in their own country and the right to freedom of thought by censoring Vietnamese newspapers.[101] For several consecutive issues of *La Cloche Fêlée*, each issue displays on one of its pages in large text two or three articles of the Declaration of the Rights of Man of 1789, until all seventeen articles are presented. In one place, he writes that he has heard of some Vietnamese who have been afraid to subscribe to *La Cloche Fêlée* given its anti-French tone. This is "too bad," he says, but he understands that they do not yet have the power to revolt against despotism. He exhorts them to at least defend rights they have obtained and to try to rebel against tyranny and despotism. "Any concession you make today is binding on your heirs. Live in servitude and serfdom if you like, but you have no right to mortgage the liberty of your children."[102] However, implicit in Ninh's appeal to the French metropole's sense of human rights is also an admiration for France's noble ideals of rights. For Ninh, it just so happened that their colonizers and colonialism in general were hypocritical. Ninh detests one kind of France (a colonial France) and admires another France (a rights-loving France).

Postcolonial and Decolonial Dismissals

So far, we have seen that contemporary political theorists typically conceptualize national identity, pride, shame, and responsibility from the perspective of dominant nations. In contrast, Ninh offers an alternative account of these concepts from the perspective of a dominated nation.

We may naturally turn to the field of postcolonial and decolonial thought for insight into expressions of shame arising from a sense of intellectual and cultural inferiority on the part of the colonized. After all, postcolonial and decolonial theory, though not a single, homogenous ideology, has the purported aim of giving

---

98. Ibid.
99. Ibid., 203.
100. Ibid., 195.
101. Ibid.
102. Ninh, in *Cloche Fêlée*, January 28, 1924.

attention to the ideas and subjectivities of colonized peoples. Yet these discourses are inadequate to explain the case of Ninh. Such discourses focus more on the destructive aspects of the colonial relationship for the self-understanding of the colonized, while overlooking how colonized natives are agents of their own internal conversations about national self-strengthening and nation-building. As Antonio Vázquez-Arroyo has aptly put it, "violent conquests constitutive of colonial situations inaugurate predicaments of power beset with forms of historical and political agency that complicate the dyad colonizer/colonized and call for political explanation as opposed to moralization."[103] Taking the perspective of the colonial situation, and, I would add, specifically of the colonized, thus "enables a historically accurate understanding of colonialism and the different—because asymmetrical—but real modalities of political agency constituting rulers and ruled."[104] Attention to Ninh's agency to use shame to spur a new national identity is illuminating because it challenges and enhances postcolonial and decolonial thought. Specifically, there are three blind spots in these literatures that preclude explorations of the kind of agency and national shame that Ninh expresses. Taking Ninh's account into consideration provides a more holistic understanding of colonial situations.

First, there is simply a paucity of explorations of how colonized peoples have expressed a sense of their own cultural inferiority. In contrast, there is a great amount of literature about how colonizers viewed the colonized as inferior. In the two most widely cited introductory texts to postcolonialism in which the field of postcolonial literature is surveyed, as well as in texts that expose political theory's "social contract" as actually a "racial contract," one finds much evidence for a tradition of Europeans viewing non-European peoples as intellectually, culturally, and biologically inferior, thus justifying the latter's conquest and colonialism.[105] Yet we rarely see how colonized people expressed their own sense of inferiority or shortcomings. To be sure, there are some discussions of how colonized people were self-critical, particularly Gandhi's remark that "the English have not taken India; we have given it to them,"[106] and his criticisms of Indians for becoming dependent on Western goods. Scholars have interpreted this as an instance of self-criticism in

---

103. Antonio Y. Vázquez-Arroyo, "Critical Theory, Colonialism, and the Historicity of Thought," *Constellations* 25 (2018): 54–70, at 60.

104. Ibid.

105. See Young, *Postcolonialism* (see note 9 above); Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (New York: Routledge, 2005); and Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1997).

106. Anthony Parel, *M. K. Gandhi: Hind Swaraj and Other Writings* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 39.

which Gandhi holds Indians responsible for their weakness and vulnerability to colonial rule.[107] However, Gandhi is criticizing Indians for their moral failure, not for India's lack of indigenous intellectual traditions, of which—he and other Indians clearly recognized—there was no lack. As we saw, Ninh's shame is rooted not only in Vietnamese moral failure but also in his belief that Vietnam lacked indigenous intellectual culture upon which moral guidance depends. Whereas for Gandhi the solution for Indians was to turn to indigenous ideas for self-strengthening and moral guidance, for Ninh the Vietnamese had no such solution because they did not have a foundation of indigenous ideas to begin with.

Second, if any attention is given to colonized peoples' expressions of shame arising from a sense of cultural inferiority, such expressions are usually interpreted in a dismissive way. They are viewed primarily as psychological consequences of colonialism rather than taken seriously on colonized peoples' own terms. Colonized peoples' self-proclaimed inferiority is diagnosed as *internalized inferiority* reflecting a colonial mentality. It is "false consciousness" in which they have internalized their colonial masters' beliefs in their own inferiority. Internalized oppression is used to describe "a condition in which the oppressed individuals and groups come to believe that they are inferior to those in power," and scholars view 'internalized oppression' as a "salient consequence of systematic and sustained oppression."[108] Implicit in claims like these is that groups cannot really come to believe that they are inferior on their own or for their own purposes. Rather, it is implied, feelings of inferiority are always solely the product of sustained oppression. Though foreign conquest may indeed evoke shame among the conquered, subsequent attempts on the part of the conquered to explain how they became conquered may center on what exactly they should feel ashamed about. One should take these claims seriously and resist the tendency to attribute them to "false consciousness," despite what one might think the real reasons are for their being conquered. Such a tendency is not surprising, considering that, according to Robert Young, Marxism (the chief promulgator of the term "false consciousness") "remains paramount as the fundamental framework of postcolonial thinking."[109]

I do not deny the existence of at least some variants of internalized oppression and false consciousness, for scholars have done important work exploring the

---

107. See Godrej, "Gandhi, Foucault, and the Politics of Self-Care," 904 (see note 64 above); Rudolf C. Heredia, "Interpreting Gandhi's Hind Swaraj," *Economic and Political Weekly* 34 (1999): 1497–1502; and Anthony Parel, *Gandhi, Freedom, and Self-Rule* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2000), 106.
108. David and Okazaki, "Colonial Mentality," 2 (see note 10 above).
109. Young, *Postcolonialism*, 6 (see note 9 above).

impact of colonialism on beauty standards and on the sense of self-worth of col-
onized peoples.[110] I am also not suggesting that reigning postcolonial and de-
colonial wisdom holds that the critique of or shame in one's own culture on
the part of the colonized can *only* be a sign of internalized inferiority and false
consciousness. I am merely suggesting that the use of terms such as "internalized
inferiority" to describe most cases of self-proclaimed inferiority discourages us
from exploring and taking seriously other instances of self-critiques, such as
the claim that one's own intellectual culture is inferior. Moreover, I am not saying
that a field as diverse and complex as postcolonialism and decolonialism gives us
only two options for the colonized person: false consciousness (apology for colo-
nialism) versus agency (rejection of colonial values). There is a complex recogni-
tion in this literature of how agency and oppressed consciousness work together.
However, my point is that most postcolonial and decolonial discourses—follow-
ing Marx, Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, and Jean Paul Sartre—deter us from taking
seriously self professions of cultural inferiority on the part of the colonized.

Furthermore, understanding Ninh's national shame *on his own terms* does not
mean that shame has nothing to do with colonization or empire. Any response on
the part of the colonized to the colonial situation is mutually constituted by colo-
nizer and colonized, and this interdependence should not be ignored. In this vein,
Edward Said's exhortation to read texts "contrapuntally" is correct. However, read
through the lens of Ninh, Said is not contrapuntal enough. For Said, a "contrapun-
tal reading must take account of both processes, that of imperialism and that of re-
sistance to it, which can be done by extending our reading of the texts to include
what was once forcibly excluded."[111] For instance, we should take into account
the fact that the Bertram family in Jane Austen's novel *Mansfield Park* (1814)
was so wealthy because of the British colony of Antigua, although Antigua is "re-
ferred to only in passing."[112] For Said, a contrapuntal reading brings Antigua to the
fore and allows us to see the bigger picture, to read the novel not as something ahis-
torical or only concerned with private, domestic issues, and instead to read the for-
gotten Other back into the text. This is admirable. However, if we want to take a
more deeply contrapuntal approach to history, it is not enough to reveal the

---

110. Cynthia Robinson-Moore, "Beauty Standards Reflect Eurocentric Paradigms—So
What? Skin Color, Identity, and Black Female Beauty," *Journal of Race & Policy* 4 (2008):
66–85. See also Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston: Beacon, 1965); Paulo
Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970); and David and Okazaki,
"Colonial Mentality," 1–16 (see note 10 above).

111. Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1993): 66–67.

112. Ibid., 89

interdependence of colonizer and colonized within the texts of European writers only. Contrary to what Said seems to imply in his famous book *Orientalism*, there *is* a way to engage the texts of non-Europeans without being "orientalist."[113] Whereas Said privileges texts of those from powerful/colonizing nations, I privilege the perspective of the colonized. For Said, culture is a crucial factor in the desire to found and maintain imperial regimes, and this is what makes his contrapuntal readings of European texts useful: they challenge these cultures. Yet Ninh shows a different use of culture: a lack of culture can cause national vulnerability to foreign conquest, and a robust culture can be a crucial factor in enabling a nation to stand up to and resist imperial regimes. This is why, for Ninh, the Vietnamese must construct their culture, and thus their national identity, anew.

Lastly, in assuming that colonialism destroys an "original" indigenous culture, postcolonial theorists overlook the fact that some colonized people themselves were unsure about the existence of such. For most postcolonial theorists, it goes without saying that colonized, non-Western people have indigenous intellectual traditions. This is the premise underlying what Robert Young describes as the main assumption that postcolonial theory operates on: "that the intellectual and cultural traditions developed outside the west constitute a body of knowledge that can be deployed to great effect against the political and cultural hegemony of the west."[114] While indigenous intellectual traditions have certainly developed outside the west, little attention has been given to how some non-Western thinkers, at least in "peripheral" nations such as Vietnam, may have debated and questioned the existence of the development of their own indigenous intellectual traditions.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon famously defines all colonized people as those "in whom an inferiority complex has taken root, whose local cultural originality has been committed to the grave."[115] However, as I have shown, Ninh and some Vietnamese intellectuals living under French colonialism were suggesting that the Vietnamese, having been ruled by China for about a thousand years (111 BC to 939 AD), had little "local cultural originality" to begin with. Theorists who follow Fanon may dismiss such a claim as internalized inferiority. Yet Ninh's national shame leads not to depressing self-hatred but to self-renewal. Similar to Fanon's claim, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o asserts that colonialism destroys indigenous cultural achievements through a "cultural bomb":

---

113. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

114. Ibid., 65.

115. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 2.

> The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of nonachievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance, with other peoples' languages rather than their own.[116]

This may have been true for some colonized peoples. Ninh indeed saw his country's past as somewhat of a wasteland of nonachievement, but this was not the "effect of a cultural bomb" from French colonialists. Rather, it was Ninh's own conclusion, independent of what colonialists may have said about the Vietnamese. Moreover, Vietnamese nonachievement does not make him want to distance himself from his "Vietnamese-ness" but rather to *recreate* the Vietnamese self through engagement with a variety of traditions, non-Western and Western.

Jean-Paul Sartre argues that if colonized blacks consume the French culture and education imposed upon them, they would be alienated from their authentic roots. The solution to alienation, Sartre argues, is to "breach the walls of the culture prison"[117] of the whites and to "return to Africa."[118] This would allow them to "die to the white world in order to be reborn to the black soul."[119] Sartre assumes that there is an "authenticity" and indigenous "soul" that blacks can recover or return to. These well-intended assertions are problematic, Marie Paule Ha rightly argues, because they share the same assumption with racialist arguments that essentialize groups.[120] The reality is that there may be no "authentic soul" to begin with, and that if a colonized person acknowledges this, they are not necessarily apologetic for colonialism or expressing a "false consciousness."

Often, postcolonial theorists interpret colonized peoples' expressions of their cultural inferiority as mere parroting of their colonial masters, dismissing the fact that such conclusions can be attributable to the agency of the colonized. Ania Loomba remarks that countless colonial intellectuals "certainly parroted the lines of their masters," and that at least some Indian students willingly adopted "the role

---

116. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind*, 3 (see note 10 above).

117. Jean Paule Sartre, trans. S.W. Allen, *Black Orpheus* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1976), 20.

118. Ibid.

119. Ibid., 31

120. Marie-Paule Ha, "On Sartre's Critique of Assimilation," *Journal of Romance Studies* 6 (2006): 49–60, 53.

of Macaulay's English-educated Indian who acts as a surrogate Englishman and awakens the native masses."[121] Thomas Babington Macaulay, the architect of English education in India, infamously said, "It is, I believe, no exaggeration to say that all the historical information which has been collected in the Sanskrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the paltry abridgments used at preparatory schools in England."[122] Leela Gandhi argues that what Macaulay is doing here is "canon formation," in which English literature is established as "the normative embodiment of beauty, truth, and morality," and that it "enforces the marginality and inferiority of colonized cultures and their books."[123] Yet we have seen that Ninh essentially says the same thing as Macaulay, that European literature *is* worth more than Vietnamese literature—but Ninh does not say this to uphold other nations' works as "normative embodiments of beauty and truth." Rather, he views the great works of other cultures as things to admire and learn from, and believes that if the Vietnamese fulfill their national responsibility, they too can create equally great works. Rather than internalizing what colonizers wanted him to believe, Ninh is an example of being self-critical while also rejecting colonial attempts to establish normative "truths."

A dismissal of Ninh's judgment of his own culture risks being a dismissal of his agency to judge. Some scholars, such as Gayatri Spivak, have been wary of too easy a recovery of the "agency" of colonized peoples.[124] Others have simply overlooked the agency of colonized peoples. Edward Said's *Orientalism* has been criticized by Megan Vaughan as implying that "the historical experiences of colonial peoples themselves have no independent existence outside the texts of Orientalism."[125] Said "appears to have placed himself in the position of denying the possibility of any alternative description of 'the Orient', any alternative forms of knowledge and by extension, any agency on the part of the colonized."[126]

Of course, not all postcolonial theorists deny or overlook the agency of colonized peoples. The study of colonialism has focused on the agency of colonized

---

121. Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 78 (see note 105 above).

122. Edward Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 12.

123. Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (Sydney, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1998), 144.

124. Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" reprinted in *Marxist Interpretations of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Basingstoke, U.K.: Macmillan Education, 1988 [1985]), 271–313.

125. Megan Vaughan, "Colonial Discourse Theory and African History, or Has Postmodernism Passed Us By?," *Social Dynamics* 20 (1994): 1–23, at 3.

126. Ibid.

peoples to violently resist colonialism. However, some postcolonial theorists are giving more attention not to violent revolutionary agency but to the agency of colonized peoples to resist *colonial discourse*.[127] The most influential example of this is Homi Bhabha's concept of "mimicry," which refers to a kind of exaggerated copying on the part of the colonized of the language, culture, manner, and ideas of their colonizers.[128] This often occurs after colonizers attempt to create a loyal indigenous class that speaks and thinks in the colonizers' language. If the colonizer feels that the English or French-speaking indigenous class begins to resemble the colonizer too much, the colonizer may experience an unsettling anxiety. This anxiety, Bhabha thinks, opens a space for the colonized to resist colonial discourse. Mimicry threatens to undermine the colonizers' apparently stable, original identity: "The menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority."[129] Closely related to mimicry is Bhabha's notion of "hybridity," which also challenges colonial discourse. While for Bhabha hybridity shows how postcolonial identity is a mix and new creation, hybridity actually refers to the impurity of cultures *in the first place*, as there is never pure or "authentic" cultural identity, despite familiar forms of "official" culture. Hybridity is significant because it challenges the tendency of colonizers to set up distinctions between pure cultures.[130]

Half a century before Bhabha introduced the concept of hybridity, Ninh told his fellow Vietnamese, "all Asian minds must be nourished by two cultures, one occidental and one oriental."[131] Ninh is aware that cultures are always already mixed and impure, so originality or purity are never his goals. Rather, he thinks the Vietnamese should aim to be sincere and genuine in their creative efforts to construct a new culture after learning from other cultures. They should produce personal creations "that spring from our own blood or works that derive from an actual change within ourselves."[132] He warns the Vietnamese against "servile imitation," and to avoid mimicking the colonizers, as mimicry weakens Vietnamese intellectual culture. To Bhabha's point, Ninh's eloquent use of the French language to subvert the French colonial project certainly provoked anxiety within French colonizers to the

---

127. See Ashis Nandy, *Intimate Enemy* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 1989), xii.

128. Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October* 28 (1984): 125–33.

129. Ibid., 129.

130. Homi Bhabha, "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside Delhi, May 1817," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1985): 144–65.

131. Ninh, in *Cloche Fêlée*, January 7, 1924.

132. Ibid.

point where they imprisoned him several times for his writings.[133] However, while Bhabha's concepts of mimicry and hybridity might be useful to understand how Ninh disrupts colonizers' self-perceptions, these concepts take on different purposes once we take Ninh's perspective. Whereas Bhabha is ultimately concerned with how mimicry and hybridity challenge colonizers and colonial discourse, Ninh thinks colonized Vietnamese should avoid mimicking colonizers, and instead work on sincere creations that generate hybridity in order to redeem their shame and create a national identity from scratch. At stake for Bhabha is challenging colonial discourse. At stake for Ninh is creating a Vietnamese national identity.

In existing discussions of the agency of the colonized to resist colonial discourse, the colonized's self-professed inferiority is hardly mentioned as part of the colonized person's anti-colonial strategy. Loomba argues, as many scholars do, that colonialist production of knowledge included a "clash with and a marginalization of the knowledge and belief systems of those who were conquered."[134] Yet it is rarely considered that colonized peoples have their own desire to marginalize and recreate their own native knowledge. Due to the common tendency to dismiss colonized people's self-professed inferiority as merely internalized colonial mentality, we are discouraged from exploring how these feelings of inferiority might have led not to assimilation to colonial values but to creative, hybrid ways of national self-remaking. Such feelings may form the basis of strategies of resisting dominant power structures emanating from both the metropole and from cultural conventions and institutions at home. I have shown a case in which an intellectual living under colonialism can be very anti-colonial and at the same time very critical of their own nation in order to construct a national identity.

Conclusion

To be sure, there are possible problematic consequences for grounding national identity on shame of one's own cultural achievements. It is possible this might stir a sense of competitiveness towards other nations—that is, a race to prove the superiority of one's nation over all others, such as in the Cold War when the antagonism between the U.S. and U.S.S.R. could be read as a race to prove not to be inferior to the other nation. However, in the context of a dominated Vietnam, this form of national shame and responsibility entails creative and hybrid self-remaking, a quest for dignity, national identity, and ultimately, self-determination. Political

---

133. Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, 307 (see note 38 above).
134. Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 60 (see note 105 above).

theorists should pay more attention to the idea of national shame as arising from national inferiority. Perhaps the larger weight of this attention should go to non-Western nations that may have felt this way during and after Western domination.

From 1926 to his death, Ninh was arrested and jailed by French authorities five times for promoting riots and revolts. On his last arrest, he was sent to Côn Đảo prison, where he died on April 14, 1943. Nearly four decades later, in 1980, the Vietnamese state conferred upon Ninh the title of "Revolutionary Martyr." Today, major streets in many Vietnamese cities are named after him.[135] Today's Vietnam, having militarily vanquished two powerful nations, the French and the Americans in the first (1945–1954) and second (1955–1975) Indochina Wars, might be said to be full of pride, rather than shame. Yet whether there is any shame or pride towards a Vietnamese intellectual tradition, and whether Ninh's street signs evoke his exhortation that the "current generation needs new ideals, *their ideals*; a new activity, *their activity*; new passions, *their passions*,"[136] remain an open question.

Kevin D. Pham is an assistant professor of political science at Gettysburg College. His work focuses on the intersection of East Asian and European political philosophy, and explores theories of freedom, identity, and self as they relate to conquest, empire, colonialism, and anti-colonialism through cross-cultural analysis that complicates and enhances the way we understand the canon of political theory. His current project explores how Vietnamese thinkers drew on Chinese notions of morality and political obligation in order to debate the utility of European Enlightenment political ideas for strategies of decolonization from French colonial rule. His work has been published in *The Review of Politics, Montaigne Studies, The European Legacy,* and *Contemporary Political Theory.* He can be reached at kpham@gettysburg.edu.

135. Da Anh, "Nguyễn An Ninh- A Patriotic Lawyer," *Vietnam Law & Legal Forum*, October 29, 2012, at http://vietnamlawmagazine.vn/Nguyễn-an-ninh-a-patriotic-lawyer-4662.html

136. Ninh, in *Cloche Fêlée*, January 7, 1924.