

Revolutionary Alternatives, or Điện Biên Phủ After the Battle

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Điện Biên Phủ is a place often invoked but poorly understood. On 7 May 1955, a year to the day after Vietnam's great victory over France, a ceremony on its hallowed ground established the Thái-Mèo Autonomous Zone and celebrated national ethnic unity under revolutionary socialism. Yet local critics decried the Zone's resemblance to the colonial Tai Federation and called for a revolutionary alternative to regional autonomy. Escalating resource claims turned simmering discontent among Hmong, Khmu, and Dao swidden cultivators into a boil. Intensive engagement with revolutionary ideals and participation in anti-colonial struggle had changed the region's peoples, destabilizing its elevationally-layered social formation.

Largely unknown to scholars, a countermovement in and around Điện Biên enriches a geographic concept of territory as an uncertain outcome of grounded struggles. Rising up in 1957, midland and upland peoples joined forces, protested state resource claims, and appealed to a supernatural sovereign to deliver justice, topple an ethnicized hierarchy, and unite kin across borders. Its leaders held high-level positions in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, demonstrating how the millenarian movement rose not in spite of but alongside and within the rising national state. Crushed by **security** forces and its leaders jailed by 1958, the movement built on and amplified tensions embedded in postcolonial territory. Its political vision—a highland geobody ruled by a divine king—challenges how we as scholars conceptualize hegemonic spaces of nation-state rule.

Christian C. Lentz is Associate Professor of Geography at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He holds a PhD and MS in Development Sociology from Cornell University and a Master's of Environmental Science from the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. His research focuses on agrarian studies, development, state formation, nationalism, and nature-society relations in Southeast Asia, especially Vietnam and Indonesia. His publications have appeared in leading academic journals such as *Modern Asian Studies*, *Geopolitics*, *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, *Political Geography*, and *Journal of Peasant Studies*. His book *Contested Territory: Dien Bien Phu and the Making of Northwest Vietnam* is forthcoming in spring 2019 with Yale University Press. It explores hidden histories of territorial construction and political struggle during and after the battle that toppled French Indochina in 1954. He teaches undergraduate and graduate courses on Agriculture, Food, and Society; Geographies of Globalization; Research Methods in Geography; the Sociology of Development; Geography of Vietnam; and Agrarian Studies.

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12:00 Noon
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