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WHAT VIETNAM DID FOR SUSAN SONTAG IN 1968

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"It's a very complex self that an American brings to Hanoi."

SUSAN SONTAG

PART ONE: SONTAG IN HANOI

When Susan Sontag arrived in Hanoi on May 3, 1968, she joined a roster of U.S. "citizen diplomats" that would eventually include two hundred other prominent U.S. antiwar voices. At the invitation of the North Vietnamese, all of them would take the arduous three-day, multi-stop international flight to the "enemy camp" – putting at risk their safety, reputations, and passports – in order to gain a direct experience of the Vietnam War. In a few remarkable instances, the activist travelers carried letters from U.S. families to be delivered to POWs, then escorted POWs safely back to the United States.[1] Encountering Vietnamese revolutionaries face-to-face and on their home turf added to the intensity, commitment, and aspirations of the U.S. antiwar movement.[2]

By 1968, Sontag was much more than an outspoken critic of the Vietnam War. Her feisty yet highbrow approach to culture and politics; her not-so-closeted bisexuality; and even her striking physical appearance all gave her a larger-than-life influence over the world counterculture of the 1960s. An essayist and cultural critic born in 1933, Sontag acquired that position of influence primarily through her polemic writing style and subject choices. From "Notes on Camp" (1966) to *On Photography* (1977) and *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), her widely published commentary proffered ideas and insights that were received by many readers as intellectually substantial and thought provoking despite the fact that she eschewed academia as an institution and refused to abide by conventions of academic argumentation. Sontag's intellectual practice involved exposing her own thought processes on the page, thereby inviting readers to join her subtle act of retrospection, querying, and probing.

Surely when Tom Hayden suggested Sontag to the North Vietnamese as someone to whom they ought to extend an invitation, he was thinking specifically of the intellectual and political boost she would give to the U.S. antiwar movement. Her 1968 essay "Trip to Hanoi: Notes from the Enemy Camp" was first published in *Esquire* magazine, then later that same year appeared as a small paperback simply titled *Trip to Hanoi*.[3] In 1969, "Trip to Hanoi" was republished as the long closing essay in her famous collection *Styles of Radical Will*.

But Hayden would have no way of knowing of the trip's lifelong impact on Sontag or her way of understanding herself in relation to war, empathy, and large-scale suffering. According to literary scholar Franny Nudelman, the Vietnam trip fundamentally shaped Sontag's ideas about photography.[4] Nor could Hayden have predicted that she would later visit China and Poland, then step back to draw negative conclusions about the "Grand Tour offered to visitors to communist countries ... [requiring] the visitor's intellectual and cultural distance ... [in a] Disneyland of Revolution."[5] For abandoning leftist doctrine, Sontag was slapped with the label "political changeling" by her once admiring Hanoi traveling companion, Andrew Kopkind. Sontag would, however, remain an outstanding critic of U.S. imperialism throughout her life. To illustrate: Sontag issued a searing denunciation of George W. Bush's post-911 attack on Iraq for a Special Collector's Edition of the *New Yorker*, once again demonstrating her formidable political backbone.[6] As Sontag scholar Sohnya Sayres put it, Sontag "seized the little space allotted to knock us awake" when everyone else was going on about "this is where I stood when the towers fell."[7]

Although Sontag prepared for her trip by studying critical accounts of the Vietnam War, her pre-existing notion of familiarity and connection with Vietnam was immediately negated by the embodied experience of actually being there. Within days she wrote: "All I seem to have figured out about this place is that it's a very complex self that an American brings to Hanoi. At least this American!"[8] The journal entries she kept during the trip in May 1968 were later supplemented with more extended reflections written upon her return; the completed essay is dated June-July 1968. For reasons that are surely much more complicated than anyone knows, Sontag developed the essay around herself and her interior feelings and thought process. Doing so made sense given her trademark practice of "allowing questions to remain on the page" rather than presenting solid, unsinkable arguments as other writers, especially male scholars of her generation, would likely have done.[9] Her essay contained very few, if any, factual details.[10] Instead, she traced the mental and emotional gap she could not bridge as a "complex [American] self" in Hanoi. She dwelt on subtleties, observing her hosts and analyzing intricacies in their statements and behaviors that other travelers may have experienced but did not put into words. In so doing she

gave voice to delicate musings about ethics, morality, style, and tone for which U.S. antiwar activists at that time had no satisfying frame or lexicon. The value of Sontag's Hanoi essay in 1968 was its capacity to surface and validate the complex and contradictory interior political experience that was associated with her external stance of international solidarity. Reconsidered today, the essay gives credibility to efforts to achieve an embodied, empathic, dialogic awareness about the continuing legacies of U.S. imperialism both at home and abroad.[11]

"Vietnam/1968" is an Asian American subject as well as an historical one. From an Asian American Studies perspective, perhaps the most intriguing and unsettling aspect of the essay is Sontag's cultural discomfort in Hanoi, and the reflex to treat the handful of guides and translators who met with her as representatives of all Vietnamese people. The essay openly confesses to this feeling of cultural unease, fully exposing and exploring it. In one passage, however, her thoughts indulge a superiority complex that closely resembles racism: "The truth is: I feel I *can* in fact understand [the Vietnamese] ... They may be nobler, more heroic, more generous than I am, but I have more on my mind than they do."[12] More on her mind! What in heaven's name was she thinking?

During the entirety of Sontag's ten-day visit, North Vietnam was under heavy military attack. Hundreds of thousands of civilian casualties would result from Operation Rolling Thunder, a three-year-long sustained aerial bombing campaign.[13] Meanwhile, international peace talks were just getting underway in Paris. It would take five whole years to produce a peace agreement, and two years after that before the U.S. military would withdraw fully from the scene.

For Sontag to believe even for a nanosecond that she had more on her mind than the besieged Vietnamese had on theirs is immensely difficult to fathom. It is as if she were temporarily blinded by her unmarked privilege as a white, Euro-American coming from the world's "greatest purveyor of violence."[14] Instead of understanding the group differences she observed in Hanoi in terms of wartime destruction, volatility, or fear, she framed them (at least initially) in terms of an orientalist East/West binary. However, perceptions evolve, and Sontag did not remain stuck in orientalism. She traveled again to Hanoi in 1973, evidently with plans to arrange for a Vietnamese translation of her essay. The second time around, Sontag clearly felt more comfortable as a Westerner in Vietnam: "VN seems like 'the West'—say, Cuba—after China. I marvel at my culture-shock of 4 ½ years ago. None now."[15] Perhaps that was the underlying point of her essay: that political revolutions need to account for and intentionally cultivate new values, perceptions, and moral sensibilities; it will never be enough to replace power structures and put an unreconstructed underdog in command.

Writing in a self-reflective mode enabled Sontag to deliver a message about the antiwar movement that should resonate strongly today, especially within retrospectives on the long global Sixties. She said: "Radical Americans have profited from the war in Vietnam, profited from having a clear-cut moral issue on which to mobilize discontent and expose the camouflaged contradictions in the system. Beyond isolated private disenchantment or despair over America's betrayal of its ideals, Vietnam offered the key to a systemic criticism of America. In this scheme of use, Vietnam becomes an ideal Other."[16] Framing the gains of international solidarity this way—rather than saying, for instance, that Vietnamese revolutionaries benefited from U.S. antiwar activism—focuses on what U.S. activists lacked, rather than on what they had to offer. Despite the privileges and sense of entitlement associated with global military dominance, the U.S. antiwar movement needed an "Other" to spur its own self-reflection and self-understanding.

The vocabulary, tools, and skills that Sontag developed to work through her sense of dislocation in Hanoi became instrumental later when she wrote about the Cuban revolution, photography, travel, and "the pain [and torture] of others" in Bosnia and Abu-Graib.[17] Even though she anguished over her inability to communicate through language and cultural barriers in Hanoi, she clearly understood the value of dialogue and relationship, and of being open to discover what she was bringing to the table in terms of pre-conceptions, beliefs, habits, attachments, and assumptions. She concluded the essay with a deeper appreciation of and respect for the North Vietnamese and their revolutionary aspirations.

PART TWO: A METHOD AND PRACTICE FOR STUDYING WAR

By contexualizing Sontag's experience in Hanoi five decades ago, we can develop a method and a practice for studying the Vietnam War and the antiwar movement today. Besides expressing herself in writing, what exactly was Sontag doing in her Hanoi essay? Literary critic Leo Marx treats the essay as a case of "revolutionary pastoralism," an outlook promoted within the New Left. The New Left was searching for "gentle, other-worldly virtues: openness, spontaneity, tolerance, eroticism, nonviolence" to counter Leninist ideology and the strict discipline and combativeness of the Old Left. By directing her gaze inward during and after her trip to Hanoi, Sontag engaged a new "pastoral ethos" dominated by "moral and aesthetic motives."[18] Another literary critic, Harvey Teres, defends Sontag – along with the "New York intellectuals" whose anti-authoritarian instincts she inherited – for her commitment to intellectual dissent. Moreover, Sontag rejected academia; her writing purposefully spoke to educated people outside university settings. Teres decries the attitude of disdain so many academic critics have toward the general public. He holds up Sontag's socially engaged writing as an alternative model, saying it is "incumbent upon leftists to fashion vocabularies and a politics capable of contributing to the difficult tasks Americans face: living a moral life, constructing

an identity, dealing with ambiguity and uncertainty, and finding pleasure."[19]

Many others weigh in on Sontag's Hanoi experience, but simply taking these two perspectives into account already tells us that by composing the essay she was not just fashioning her own unique antiwar statement for the consumption of the mass media. Instead, she was stepping into an ongoing, multi-layered conversation regarding large-scale social change that educated people were carrying on in many different sectors of society, not on university campuses only. This conversation was made up of, and continues to encompass, many threads of debate and it was never as black and white as being "for" or "against" war. In fact, big questions about the brutality of a U.S. war causing death and destruction in Asia were tightly interwoven with tiny, specific, local, and personal questions about daily life right at home. Sontag's brilliant choices of words illuminated those tiny questions without separating them from the bigger backdrop.

In 1995, Sontag offered a humble and realistic assessment of her own work. Referring specifically to an influential collection of essays published in 1966, she wrote:

The world in which these essays were written no longer exists ... It is not simply that the Sixties have been repudiated, and the dissident spirit quashed, and made the object of intense nostalgia. The ever more triumphant values of consumer capitalism promote — indeed, impose — the cultural mixes and insolence and defense of pleasure that I was advocating for quite different reasons. No recommendations exist outside a certain setting.[20]

Sontag knew perfectly well that the defiant countercultural moment she helped stir up got subdued and co-opted into today's mainstream culture, one she would surely label "nihilistic" or "barbarian" were she alive to witness it. Indeed, her suggestions for self-inquiry in Hanoi were not intended as a bourgeois narcissism, although they could be easily mistaken as such. When I asked her translator in Hanoi why he and his publisher did not move forward with a Vietnamese translation of "Trip to Hanoi," he gracefully tiptoed around my question: "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I did not have time. We were being bombed..." He did not say he refused to translate it because it was excessive or irrelevant. But it is not difficult to imagine how boring, self-indulgent, and wasteful Sontag's intimate ponderings might have appeared to him, or to any Vietnamese reader, at that time.[21]

Teasing out lessons from Sontag's Hanoi experience is a tricky project, particularly because her views were continually evolving and she was always probing them. When the war ended, she judged the antiwar movement to be ineffective and naive: "The American-financed and supplied slaughter of Asians by Asians might have gone on indefinitely. Only the distractions of Watergate prevented Nixon from resuming the bombing of North Vietnam in 1973." Her comment on liberated Vietnam was even harsher: "[L]iving with their victory (however devoutly that was to be wished) will not be as edifying or as simple morally as protesting their martyrdom—a matter which is already clear as they busy themselves installing a social order in which few of us who supported the DRV [Democratic Republic of Vietnam] and the PRG [Provisional Revolutionary Government] would care to live, and under which none of us, as 'us,' would survive."[22]

Clearly there is a rich and deep discussion to be had around the world about the outcomes and consequences of the Vietnam War and the antiwar movement. But a more urgent project faces us: To

allow young and old alike a way to grasp fully the underlying conditions that made collective dissent possible in Sontag's era—and why alternatives to the status quo are possible, necessary, and already emergent, now as well as then. We need to facilitate an embodied and empathic meeting with the past that intentionally connects to the multi-dimensional experience of living in the present. What if a giant public symposium on the long global Sixties were to bring together antiwar activists, war veterans, Southeast Asian American leaders/scholars/critics, and university students to meet each other face-to-face and on equal terms, much as the North Vietnamese invited international citizen diplomats to meet with them during the war? No one would give a bare rundown of facts and statistics, or offer a chronology of all the rallies and protests, and expect the complex lessons of the past to display themselves automatically. Such intricacies are gleaned only through reflection, dialogue, and discussion—precisely the method and practice Sontag imparted in 1968.

1 For a compelling account of going to Hanoi and elsewhere in North Vietnam in 1967 and 1969 and then returning to the country in 2013 and 2015, see Rennie Davis, "Seeing Viet Nam with My Own Eyes," in *The People Make the Peace: Lessons from the Vietnam Antiwar Movement*, ed. Karín Aguilar-San Juan and Frank Joyce (Charlottesville, VA: Just World Books, 2015).

2 The literature on citizen diplomacy during the Vietnam War is blossoming. In addition to Aguilar-San Juan and Joyce, *The People Make the Peace*, see Tom Hayden, *Hell No: The Forgotten Power of the Vietnam Peace Movement* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017); Mary Hershberger, *Traveling to Vietnam: American Peace Activists and the War* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003); and Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, *Radicals on the Road: Internationalism, Orientalism, and Feminism during the Vietnam Era* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

3 Susan Sontag, *Trip to Hanoi* (New York: Noonday Press, 1968).

4 Franny Nudelman, "Against Photography: Susan Sontag's Vietnam," *Photography and Culture* 7, no. 1 (2014): 7-20.

5 Susan Sontag, "Questions of Travel" (1984), *Where the Stress Falls* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 255-58.

6 Susan Sontag, "The Tuesday After," *New Yorker*, September 24, 2001.

7 Sohnya Sayres, "For Susan Sontag, 1933-2004," *PMLA* 120, no. 3 (2005): 834-38.

8 Susan Sontag, *Trip to Hanoi*, 34.

9 I credit visual anthropologist Zeynep Gursel for this phrase describing Sontag's trademark approach.

10 For an account of the trip by another participant, originally published in the British *New Statesman* in May 1968, see Andrew Kopkind, "From Hanoi with Love," *The Thirty Years' Wars: Dispatches and Diversions of a Radical Journalist, 1965-1994*, ed. JoAnn Wypijewski (New York: Verso, 1995), 121-30.

11 For particularly discerning commentaries on Sontag's Hanoi essay, see Paula Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary* (New York: Verso, 1994); Leo Marx, "Susan Sontag's 'New Left' Pastoral: Notes on Revolutionary Pastoralism in America," in *Literature in Revolution* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972); and Harvey M. Teres, *Renewing the Left: Politics, Imagination, and the New York Intellectuals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

12 Sontag, *Trip to Hanoi*, 26.

13 For Operation Rolling Thunder, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Rolling_Thunder#Conclusions (accessed March 13, 2018).

14 Martin Luther King, Jr., "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence," Common Dreams, https://www.commondreams.org/views/2018/01/15/beyond-vietnam-time-break-silence (accessed March 16, 2018).

15 Sontag Papers, UCLA, accessed January 2011. Strangely, her posthumously published journals make no mention of this important awakening. See the "1972" entry in Susan Sontag, *As Consciousness Is Harnessed to Flesh: Journals and Notebooks, 1964-1980*, ed. David Rieff (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 322-49.

16 Sontag, *Trip to Hanoi*, 87.

17 Susan Sontag, "Some Thoughts on the Right Way (for Us) to Love the Cuban Revolution," *Ramparts*, April 1969, http://www.unz.org/Pub/Ramparts-1969apr-00006?View=PDF (accessed June 2, 2014); Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977); Sontag, "Questions of Travel," 255-58; Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003); Susan Sontag, "Regarding the Torture of Others," *The New York Times*, May 23, 2004, sec. Magazine, https://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/23/magazine/regarding-the-torture-of-others.html.

18 Marx, "Susan Sontag's 'New Left' Pastoral," 552-75.

19 Teres, *Renewing the Left*, 9.

20 Susan Sontag, "Thirty Years Later ..." (1996), *Where the Stress Falls* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 271-72. My emphasis.

21 Interview with Mr. Pham Khac Lam, conducted in Hanoi, January 2013.

22 Susan Sontag, "The Meaning of Vietnam," *New York Review of Books*, June 12, 1975.