History by other means

On Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge.

Phnom Penh in the 1950s

by Theodore Dalrymple

When a graceful, smiling Cambodian waitress expresses the hope, in the imperative mood, that you enjoy your breakfast, you can't help wondering what she means by it, if anything at all. Can it really matter very much in a country with a recent history such as Cambodia's whether or not a visitor enjoys his breakfast? (As a matter of fact, I did).

Of course, daily life has to go on, even after a catastrophic historical experience. Indeed, such an experience is soon forgotten, in the sense of not being present in the mind all the time. For example, I recall the time I crossed into Germany from France with my mother. It was nearly thirty years

since my mother had fled Germany, and the same period of time had elapsed between the end of the war and then as between the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge and now; and, having sworn never to return, it was the first time she had been back. In those days, there were still borders and border guards in Western Europe, and on the German side they found it puzzling that a person such as my mother, who was born in Berlin, should be traveling on a British passport. They had a discussion between themselves about it, and appeared not to be able to think of any explanation at all of this curious circumstance. I hasten to add that they were clearly not stomping Nazis.

The physical grace and delicacy of the Cambodians, and their friendly good humor, sits ill with the abysmal brutality of the Khmer Rouge, and raises questions akin to those raised by stories of concentration camp commandants who wept over *Winterreise* after a hard day's genocide. But if westernization proceeds too far or too fast in Cambodia, the puzzle will dissolve itself: there won't be much physical grace left to puzzle the observer. In neighboring Bangkok, I was astonished to see how fat and lumpen many Thai children, at least of the middle class, had become. They seem, from the moment they are released from school, to need to eat their own body weight in two hours, like insectivorous shrews. Lacking the shrews' high metabolic rate, however, they quickly grow fat, and many of them waddle rather than walk. Gone is the almost feline elegance of South-East Asia.

How easy it is to take physical grace for a sign of every other virtue! (Mary McCarthy certainly did it in her book called *Hanoi*.) The apparent gentleness of Cambodian life in Sihanouk's time fooled many sympathetic onlookers into supposing that they were observing a near-paradise. François Bizot, the French anthropologist and scholar of South-East Asian Buddhism, who was twice a prisoner of the Khmer Rouge (including of its most notorious jailer and torturer, the former mathematics teacher Deuch), and who has recently

published a memoir called *The Gate*, remembered the pre-Lon Nol, pre-Khmer Rouge Cambodians as a people infused with a Buddhist sense of proportion, content with the unceasing regularity of the rural round, with its celebrations, festivals, and comforting changelessness. Not for them the snares and delusions of progress and ever-increasing material consumption that never satisfies, whatever its level. They were wise where we westerners were merely clever.

Was it ever really thus, or has the horror that overtook Cambodia lent a roseate glow to memories of a prelapsarian country? Bizot is certainly not the only one to remember it like this: almost everyone who wrote of Cambodia at the time experienced the same *douceur*.

No doubt this roseate view of things captured an aspect of Cambodian reality, but only an aspect. Paradise is not of this world. Sihanouk was not above a little political murder, and political murder does not take place where there is no conflict. Moreover, as soon as the Cambodian peasants were offered what they mistakenly thought was an opportunity to escape their rice paddies, by means of education, to obtain a job in a government office with an air-conditioner or even just a ceiling fan, they did so: despite the unrivalled tender green of young rice plants. To slosh about all day—all life, in fact—in rice paddies is evidently not as romantic as it looks.

Needless to say, anything was and is better than the Khmer Rouge, either in prospect or retrospect. Books about Pol Pot and his regime are everywhere, in large quantities, just to remind people of the fact. I haven't seen anything comparable since I visited the Dominican Republic, where within a day or two I had accumulated a small library of books about the dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo. Compared with Pol Pot, of course, he was a humanitarian, a mere amateur of mass murder: but he was the subject of the same proportion of books sold.

Where did the ferocity come from in Cambodia, a country regarded as gentle as Germany was once reputed to be civilized, or Japan was once reputed to be refined? Every time a Cambodian smiled at me, welcoming me with a graceful gesture, I wondered whether, secretly, he hated me with an inextinguishable class or national hatred.

Leaving aside the permanent human propensity to commit as much evil as can be got away with, there are those who see the ferocity of the Pol Pot years as emerging from specifically Cambodian tendencies and characteristics; and there are those who emphasize its roots in an intellectual doctrine, or at least in an intellectual tradition, namely Marxism-Leninism and its Stalino-Maoist sub-variants.

The historiographical difference is similar to that to be found in explanations of the disastrous trajectory of the Soviet Union. Was it Russian or was it Marxist? If you read the Marquis de Custine, you can’t help but be struck by the many parallels between the Russian of Nicholas I and that of the Soviets. Still, the Soviets killed more people for political reasons in a hundred days than the Tsarists managed in a hundred years. Here, if anywhere, is an illustration of one of the three great laws of dialectical materialism, the transformation of quantity into quality. The water of Tsarism turned into the ice of Marxism.

The great exponent of the view of the Khmer Rouge as continuers of Cambodian tradition is the historian Michael Vickery. In his standard book, *Cambodia 1975–1982*, he denies that the Pol Pot regime was qualitatively different from anything that had gone before in Cambodian history. To prove his point, he cites anecdotes from pre-Khmer Rouge days illustrating the propensity of the Cambodians, despite their superficial gentleness, to spitefulness and cruelty. It doesn’t seem to bother him that no one foresaw the outbreak of mass killing in Cambodia (as Dostoevsky did in Russia, if the revolutionary ideologues ever came to power), or that the

history of every country in the world would provide evidence of the kind he adduces. His task, though, is not so much to rehabilitate Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge—that would have been beyond the powers even of the Webbs—as to "relativize" them (to use his own term), and to de-marxify them. Yes, Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge were worse than others, but not qualitatively so: the law of dialectical materialism is not valid in this instance.

An example of his "relativizing" is his treatment of the forced removal of Cambodians from Phnom Penh immediately after it fell. The population of the city had, of course, swelled enormously, to over two million, as a result of the American bombing of the Cambodian countryside. This was one of the least glorious episodes in American history, stupid, murderous, and ineffective, albeit carried out in the name of a good cause, that of halting the spread of Communism, the very opposite of what it achieved.

Not only does this overlook a very real difference between the two population movements—that the move into Phnom Penh was spontaneous, in the sense that it was chosen by people in response to their circumstances, however horrible those circumstances, while the reverse movement was centrally decreed without reference to the wishes of anyone except the leaders—but it also overlooks the fact that the Khmer Rouge emptied all towns and cities equally, and abolished money and markets. It is preposterous to see the emptying of Phnom Penh as merely an exercise in reversing a previous, undesirable demographic trend.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Vickery's estimate of the numbers of excess deaths in Pol Pot's four years of power is lower by a million than that of other writers. But what he is really trying to do (for when numbers are so large, the exact figure hardly matters from the moral point of view) is to exculpate an entire ideology: the Pol Pot episode was merely the continuation of Khmer history by other means, and thus had

nothing, or nothing much, to do with ideology. “The Cambodian revolution. was in contrast to any variety of Marxism, classical or revisionist.” As also were the Russian, Chinese, Albanian, North Korean, etc., revolutions. So Marxists can sleep easy in their beds—Marxism is responsible for nothing, certainly not mass killing and starvation.

Most writers, though, take the view that without ideology, without the ideas that Saloth Sar (later Pol Pot) and his small group of associates picked up in Paris in the early 1950s, the history of Cambodia would have been very different and much less brutal. True, Cambodians have a record of brutality, perhaps even brutality of a particular kind—but is there any people that has not? Ideology raises brutality to a new level, and surely it isn’t very difficult to see threads that connect Pol Pot’s regime to other Marxist regimes, as well as to Marx himself.

This being the case, the visitor to Cambodia can begin to relax again. Maybe the Cambodian tradition has its flaws, maybe the country is not a full democracy and never will be; no doubt it is a very unpleasant thing to fall into the hands of the Cambodian police, who do not behave as they should. Maybe corruption is rife and the rule of law as we know it hardly exists. But the Pol Pot years really were different in point of brutality from all that preceded them, and were not the logical or inevitable outcome of purely Cambodian phenomena or developments. The charms of the Cambodian people are real charms after all, they are not a front for something else, they are not a screen for an unquenchable fire of hatred or a mask for national sadism. You can enjoy these charms for what they are, without having to agonize over their incompatibility with what happened twenty-eight years ago.

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