

Disclaimer: This is a machine generated PDF of selected content from our products. This functionality is provided solely for your convenience and is in no way intended to replace original scanned PDF. Neither Cengage Learning nor its licensors make any representations or warranties with respect to the machine generated PDF. The PDF is automatically generated "AS IS" and "AS AVAILABLE" and are not retained in our systems. CENGAGE LEARNING AND ITS LICENSORS SPECIFICALLY DISCLAIM ANY AND ALL EXPRESS OR IMPLIED WARRANTIES, INCLUDING WITHOUT LIMITATION, ANY WARRANTIES FOR AVAILABILITY, ACCURACY, TIMELINESS, COMPLETENESS, NON-INFRINGEMENT, MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR A PARTICULAR PURPOSE. Your use of the machine generated PDF is subject to all use restrictions contained in The Cengage Learning Subscription and License Agreement and/or the Gale Academic OneFile Terms and Conditions and by using the machine generated PDF functionality you agree to forgo any and all claims against Cengage Learning or its licensors for your use of the machine generated PDF functionality and any output derived therefrom.

Cambodia: 1975-1982.

Author: Thomas F. Mayer

Date: June 1985

From: Monthly Review(Vol. 37)

Publisher: Monthly Review Foundation, Inc.

Document Type: Book review

Length: 3,231 words

Full Text:

The recent history of Cambodia has been extremely disconcerting for those of us who struggled against American military intervention in Indochina, who firmly rejected claims that U.S. withdrawal would mean a bloodbath, and who welcomed the victory of the Khmer Rouge in April 1975. Many times over the past decade the record of the Pol Pot regime, officially known as Democratic Kampuchea, has been thrown in my face by people whom I had tried to influence against U.S. policy in Southeast Asia. I myself was horrified and confused by reports from Cambodia and could only rather lamely respond that U.S. saturation bombing of Cambodia's central agricultural region had contributed to the barbarous deeds in Democratic Kampuchea, and that post-1975 policies in Laos and Vietnam seemed far more benign.

My inner turmoil and confusion were recently revived by seeing the film *The Killing Fields*. Under this stimulus I read the most enlightening account of the Cambodian tragedy I have encountered. Although the author has strong opinions which he does not hide, *Cambodia: 1975-1982* achieves a remarkable standard of objectivity in dealing with a painful and controversial subject.

Vickery is unusually well qualified to write this book. His experience in Cambodia stretches back to 1960, and he speaks all Khmer dialects fluently. He is well versed in academic scholarship on Indochina, holds a doctoral degree from Yale, married into a Cambodian family, interviewed numerous Cambodian refugees, and has traveled extensively in Cambodia after the fall of the Pol Pot regime. Of special value were the interviews Vickery conducted with refugees whom he had known in Cambodia prior to 1975.

Using his profound knowledge of Cambodian society, Vickery subjects his interview data to critical scrutiny throughout which enables him to salvage useful evidence from a welter of inconsistent and distorted materials. He carefully presents evidence contradicting his own views and fully discusses the work of writers like Stephen Heder who have reached very different conclusions about the Cambodian revolution. While plowing through this mountain of information, Vickery remains alert to theoretical issues. Confronting violence and human suffering of mind-boggling dimensions, he still tries to move beyond condemnation toward genuine historical explanation.

The policies followed in Democratic Kampuchea have deep roots in Cambodian society where an intense antagonism between town and country has long existed and frequently flared into violence. Cambodia never had a large landlord class. Surplus which was extracted from the peasantry, mainly by means of usury and taxation, supported a state bureaucracy that made little if any contribution to production. The exploitation of countryside by town grew more intense as the urban population expanded and the Cambodian elite established closer ties with Western capitalism.

For many centuries the Cambodian ruling class has relied upon foreign protectors. The manifold ties of dependency between Cambodian city folk and the United States caused the former to acquiesce in the devastating bombardment of rural society from 1970 to 1975. Between 500,000 and 1 million Cambodians died as a result of military actions in this period, and the population of Phnom Penh increased from about 600,000 to over 2 million. The orgy of killing and destruction occurred almost entirely in the countryside, greatly exacerbating the smoldering tensions between urban and rural classes. By Vickery's account, the peasant armies which triumphed in April 1975 regarded many, if not all, city dwellers as traitors and thirsted for revenge.

While highly critical of Democratic Kampuchea, Vickery maintains that the Pol Pot regime has been misinterpreted in virtually every quarter. According to the usual interpretation, called the "Standard Total View" (STV) by the author, the Pol Pot government tried to exterminate the entire urban elite, all intellectuals, and everybody with more than basic primary education. It supposedly abolished schooling, religion, the family, and medical care, while marking certain ethnic minorities for total elimination. Moreover, these policies were said to be uniformly implemented over the entire four-year duration of Democratic Kampuchea and in all parts of the country.

According to Vickery, the STV requires extensive modification. The basic intent of the Pol Pot government was not to exterminate all educated people but to reduce the entire population to the position of peasants both as a response to the critical shortage of food and

as a strategy for achieving a classless society. The policies carried out in Democratic Kampuchea varied a great deal both by region and by time. In certain regions at certain times reality did indeed resemble the STV, but in other places and periods a quite different situation prevailed. Educated people were not uniformly hunted down and sometimes even assumed positions of responsibility.

To comprehend the variations that emerged within Democratic Kampuchea, it is necessary to know something about the history of conflicts within the Cambodian Communist movement. Early Cambodian Communists participated in the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) which was dominated largely by the Vietnamese contingent. In 1951 the ICP divided into Vietnamese, Lao, and Cambodian organizations. These parties worked together in the struggle against the French, and the Cambodian Communists of this era retained sympathy for Vietnamese concepts of building socialism. These concepts stressed expanding the forces of production and harnessing them for the common benefit rather than disruptive struggles to put everyone in the same class position.

When the Geneva Conference met in 1954, the Cambodian Communist insurgency controlled considerable territory. Nevertheless, the Geneva Accords of that year did not give the Cambodian revolutionaries a regroupment zone. This was a serious blow to Communist aspirations, and the movement apparently split on how to deal with it. Some Communists went to Hanoi, while others participated in a legal opposition within Cambodia. After 1954 the Cambodian revolutionary movement experienced a period of decline.

Meanwhile the future leaders of Democratic Kampuchea—including Pol Pot, Ieng Sary, and Khieu Samphan—were studying in France. For reasons which Vickery does not fully explain, their views became more nationalistic than those of older Communists from the ICP tradition. The radicalized students were far less favorably inclined toward Vietnam. Indeed, some held Vietnam responsible for the shabby treatment given the Cambodian revolution at Geneva.

When these radicalized students returned to Cambodia, they participated in the then underground Communist organization and by the early 1960s had risen to leadership positions within it. While doing this, they maintained their own unity and kept a certain distance from the older Communists whom the returned students saw as closely identified with Vietnam. By the end of 1963 Pol Pot, Ieng Sary, and some other future leaders of Democratic Kampuchea had taken up armed struggle in the countryside.

As the armed struggle expanded, especially in the years after 1970, the two most important regions of revolutionary activity were the East (actually the southeastern part of Cambodia bordering on Vietnam) and the Southwest. But these two regions were from the older Communist group favoring cooperative relations with Vietnam and an approach minimizing internal class struggle while building socialism. In the Southwest, the poorest agricultural region in Cambodia, the group around Pol Pot gained influence. In this process the Pol Pot group moved steadily away from Marxism and increasingly adopted what Vickery calls "poor peasant populism" an ideology stressing hostility toward towns, rapid leveling of class distinctions, compulsory collectivization, mistrust of modern technology, and maximum reliance upon simple manual labor.

Relations between these two tendencies were further embittered in 1971 by the return of about 1,000 revolutionaries who had been living in Hanoi since 1954. Although they came to participate in the armed struggle, the returned revolutionaries were subjected to serious extermination attempts by certain local Communists who mistrusted their connections with Hanoi. Those who survived either went into hiding or returned to Vietnam. Even while the conflict with Lon Nol and his American supporters still raged, the future leaders of Democratic Kampuchea came to regard Vietnam as the principal enemy. These differences remained unresolved when the Khmer Rouge took power in 1975.

Virtually the first act of the new regime was to evacuate the 2 million inhabitants of Phnom Penh. The fate awaiting the urban refugees depended heavily upon the region to which they were evacuated. At first, according to Vickery's informants, living conditions in the Eastern zone ranked among the best. There were few killings and almost no one starved. In contrast to some other regions, the Eastern zone cadres showed no inclination to persecute the urban refugees. These relatively favorable circumstances changed drastically in 1978.

During the first 18 months of its existence, Democratic Kampuchea registered some positive achievements in agriculture and elsewhere. The struggle between the Pol Pot and Eastern-zone factions about the political course to be followed by the revolution waxed unabated. For a while the Eastern tendency seemed ascendant, but by October 1976 Pol Pot had consolidated his position and soon launched upon a major purge of the opposition and anyone else who might be favorably disposed to Vietnam. This, by Vickery's account, started the truly dark age of Democratic Kampuchea. The purge wreaked its worst havoc in the Eastern zone which was rapidly transformed from the best to the worst region. Almost all Eastern-zone leaders—veteran Communists of the older tradition—perished. A few escaped to Vietnam. The most grisly episodes of the Pol Pot regime pertain to this period.

No religious activities were tolerated in Democratic Kampuchea; but, contrary to the STV, neither medicine nor the family was abolished. In fact, the Pol Pot regime attempted to extend its own brand of medical services to the peasantry which had previously received almost no modern medical care. It was handicapped in this effort by a drastic shortage of medical supplies, by its own rigid insistence upon medical self-sufficiency, and by a frequent refusal to use those doctors who remained in the country. The official policy of Democratic Kampuchea was to eliminate illiteracy, but formal education nevertheless came to a standstill. Local cadres typically regarded higher education as useless and educated people as politically less reliable than others. Exhibiting any pride about one's education could be fatal.

Estimates of the number of deaths attributable to the Pol Pot regime run as high as 3 million (over 40 percent of the 1975 population). Vickery shows that such astronomical figures are thoroughly inconsistent with available demographic information. By carefully reviewing these data, he estimates that something like 750,000 unnecessary deaths occurred in Democratic Kampuchea leading to an absolute decline in population of around 400,000. Of these deaths he speculates that perhaps 300,000 were outright killings while the rest attribute to hunger, exhaustion, and illness. These reduced figures still constitute a powerful condemnation of Democratic

Kampuchea.

How does Vickery explain the policies followed under Pol Pot? Cambodia, he argues, had something like an Asiatic Mode of Production characterized by absence of feudal relations and direct extraction of surplus from the peasant class by the state bureaucracy. Under these conditions, neither a landlord class nor an indigenous merchant class could develop. To make matters even worse, Cambodia is not well endowed with natural resources. Thus there existed a large and increasingly exploited peasant class and little prospect of accomplishing a transition to either capitalism or socialism. Poor-peasant populism is the ideology most congruent with these circumstances. Reviewing evidence from Spain, Russia, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria, Vickery concludes that peasant movements, if lacking outside leadership and if objectively blocked hence, disorganization, and resistance to fundamental change.

The realities of Cambodian society, plus the dynamics of power competition within the Communist movement, plus antagonism toward Vietnam and refusal to follow its lead, plus a fixation upon autarkical development all combined to push Pol Pot and his colleagues away from Marxism and toward poor-peasant populism. Vickery thinks they did not intend to unleash such massive violence upon Cambodian society and were, to various degrees, shocked by the outcome of their policies. He also thinks that Marxists should have predicted the disastrous failure of Democratic Kampuchea certainly no later than the evacuation of Phnom Penh when it became evident that the movement was principally animated by poor-peasant populism.

Undoubtedly this analysis sheds new light on the social dynamics underlying Democratic Kampuchea, but some problems remain. The pattern of violence described by Vickery is not entirely consistent with his explanation. Why were other revolutionary movements in Indochina relatively immune to poor-peasant populism? The killings reported by Vickery's informants were seldom spontaneous outbursts of peasant wrath. On the contrary, they were systemically planned executions carried out by local Communist organizations. That the worst purges resulted from factional conflicts within the Communist movement also belies the poor-peasant populism argument.

Also somewhat lacking is an explanation of why French-educated intellectuals accepted the poor-peasant ideology. Reasonably analogous situations existed in both Yugoslavia and Vietnam, but in these cases Communist organizations had a moderating influence on peasant behavior. Why Pol Pot and his colleagues eschewed any such moderation remains obscure.

Vickery has a firm grasp of Marxist concepts but a fairly narrow interpretation, legitimate Marxist economic policy necessarily entails an immediate thrust toward industrialization.

BOOKS This justifies his claim that the leaders of Democratic Kampuchea abandoned Marxism in favor of poor-peasant populism. My understanding of Marxist theory does not support Vickery's argument. Marxist premises do not preclude the strategy of transforming relations of production before attempting to expand the forces of production. Nor is the view that autonomous development in a third world country requires isolation from the world market inherently anti-Marxist. Even temporary deployment of all labor power on agricultural production does not prove rejection of Marxism. Such policies may well be disastrous, and most Marxists yearn to be rid of the Pol Pot incubus; but Marxist theory is not proof against disaster, and the fellowship of revolutionaries has never been able to exclude tyrants.

Democratic Kampuchea was overthrown by the Vietnamese army. Vickery implies that the conflict with Vietnam was stirred up mainly by the Pol Pot government, but he fails to explain why Pol Pot and his colleagues might take such an ill-advised action. We may accept that the leaders of Democratic Kampuchea despised Vietnam and felt they had legitimate territorial claims against it; but given Cambodia's weakened condition, why would its rulers invite war with a nation at least seven times as populous and whose military forces had proven themselves of the highest caliber? One almost suspects that people secretly hostile to Pol Pot and company encouraged active aggression against Vietnam in hopes the ensuing conflict would eliminate the Cambodian regime.

The government put into office by the Vietnamese calls itself the People's Republic of Kampuchea. Its main leaders are survivors of the Eastern-zone purge with links to the old Indochinese Communist Party. Vickery is at pains to show that, despite the new leadership's dependence upon Vietnam, it represents a tradition with a venerable place in Cambodian revolutionary history.

From the outset, the People's Republic of Kampuchea adopted policies diametrically opposed to those of Pol Pot. Towns were reopened and extensive freedom of travel was permitted. Most of the urban refugees left the countryside and either returned to their former homes or went into exile abroad. Schools were reopened. Market transactions were allowed and even encouraged. By Vickery's account, the behavior of the Vietnamese troops has usually been exemplary; and Vietnamese presence in Cambodia has gradually diminished but will not disappear while the danger of a Pol Pot restoration--now being nourished by supplies from China, Thailand, and the United States--remains.

The Heng Samrin government has bent over backwards to distinguish itself from its predecessor. Vickery claims it is often reluctant to collect taxes, enforce laws, or impose necessary social discipline for fear of evoking memories of Pol Pot. In some ways the People's Republic of Kampuchea has moved away from socialism. Class differentiation is occurring in both urban and rural regions. Phnom Penh is once again a nonproductive consumer city. In many parts of the country Communist presence is minimal or nonexistent, and administrators from Sihanouk or Lon Nol days--unquestionably hostile to socialism--staff broad reaches of the state bureaucracy.

All this liberality has not endeared the People's Republic to the educated classes whose skills are badly needed but who have departed Cambodia in droves. Vickery explains their hostility toward the present government as prejudice against the Vietnamese, antagonism toward socialism based upon experiences in Democratic Kampuchea, and fear that the regime--though presently tolerant--will sooner or later become authoritarian.

Vickery himself is sympathetic to the People's Republic. He regards its policies as "humane, pragmatic, and unoppressive." Its retreat from socialism is a salutary rejection of a viciously authoritarian collectivism. Movement toward socialism will be renewed when the necessary economic foundations have been laid and when the government has regained the confidence of its people. Vietnam does not have imperial ambitions in Cambodia, and Vietnamese backing does not seriously constrain Cambodian national independence. If foreign powers stopped propping up the wreckage of incompetent and discredited Cambodian political regimes, Vickery thinks the People's Republic of Kampuchea would have a reasonably bright future.

I hope Vickery is right in his assessment of Cambodia's present government, but I found this part of his argument somewhat less persuasive. A slightly different tone seems to creep into the interview materials on which Vickery bases his conclusions about the People's Republic. He still presents evidence contradicting his own position; but when dealing with contradictory testimony, he sometimes pumps for something which will discredit the witness; and he allows one supportive piece of evidence to outweigh an array of disconfirming information. Occasionally he even gets angry at his informants and implicitly accuses them of being hopelessly selfish and responsible for their own misfortunes.

Vickery consistently underrates the force of nationalism when evaluating the People's Republic. Again and again he casts aspersions on the authenticity of this settlement, as if it merely resulted from the xenophobic propaganda of Sihanouk, Lon Nol, or Pol Pot. Can anyone doubt that the people of Indochina intensely desire national independence? Suppose the Heng Samrin government is indeed humane and attuned to the needs of Cambodian society. Being installed and maintained by a foreign power--and not just any foreign power, but one with a long and complex relationship to Cambodia--can the People's Republic serve as a satisfactory vehicle for aspirations toward national independence? I do not think so.

That the United States should help revive the discredited Pol Pot organization is entirely consistent with the cynical and enormously destructive role our government has played in Indochinese affairs. Nevertheless, the military harassment endured by the People's Republic throughout its six-year existence is not exclusively the result of great power intervention. We have here a profound contradiction. A regime which can claim substantial domestic achievements under difficult circumstances is arrayed against an opposition whose tenure in power was disastrous but which can still embody the aspirations of Cambodian nationalism. This may be why the defeated and repudiated hulk of Democratic Kampuchea has managed to rally support from not a few of the refugees it so fiercely persecuted.

If this contradiction between the political embodiments of sensible policy and national independence persists, we could have here the makings of yet another major Indochinese war.

The American intervention in Indochina was the strongest formative influence on the political consciousness of many people in my generation. For reasons mentioned at the outset, some of us still experience internal conflict about happenings in this part of the world. I hope many of my comrades in the antiwar movements of the sixties and seventies will read this courageous, informative, and most important book.

Copyright: COPYRIGHT 1985 Monthly Review Foundation, Inc.

<http://monthlyreview.org.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/>

Source Citation (MLA 9th Edition)

Mayer, Thomas F. "Cambodia: 1975-1982." *Monthly Review*, vol. 37, June 1985, pp. 45+. *Gale Academic OneFile*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A3793129/AONE?u=lond95336&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=2ce4e570. Accessed 21 Apr. 2024.

Gale Document Number: GALE|A3793129