

The Cambodian Genocide

Simon Leys on Francis Deron's *The Trial of the Khmer Rouge*

It is a mark of fundamental human decency
to feel ashamed of living in the twentieth century.

- Elias Canetti

One remembers the last lines of Kafka's *Trial*: Josef K., an innocent citizen who fell into an incomprehensible and endless web of judicial proceedings for reasons that will never be revealed to him, is in the end taken by two official-looking gentlemen to a deserted quarry; there, with a sort of stupid bureaucratic formality, without violence, without anger and without a single word, they undertake to execute him. As one of the two gentlemen turns a knife twice in his heart, K. has one last conscious feeling: "It was as if the shame would outlive him."

Many readers have experienced perplexity on encountering this last sentence. Yet Primo Levi, who wrote a short essay on Kafka, was puzzled by their puzzlement. He explained:

This last page takes my breath away. I, who survived Auschwitz, would never have written it, or not in this way: out of inability, or insufficient imagination, certainly, but also out of a sense of decency in the face of death (which Kafka either ignored or rejected); or perhaps simply out of lack of courage. The famous phrase - source of so much discussion - which closes the book like a gravestone ("It was as if the shame would outlive him") presents no enigma to me at all. What should Josef K. be ashamed of? He is ashamed of many contradictory things ... Still, I feel there is, in his shame, another element which I know well. At the end of his harrowing journey, the fact that such a corrupt tribunal does exist and spreads its infection to all its surroundings causes him shame ... After all, this tribunal was made by man, not by God; and K. with the knife already stuck in his heart experiences *the shame of being a man*.

The horrors of the twentieth century were to confirm Kafka's prophetic intuition. At the end of that same century, the Cambodian genocide stands as a most extreme and

most grotesque epilogue: it was not only a monstrous event, it was also the *caricature* of a monstrosity.

By simplifying forms and amplifying lines a caricature can reveal the inner essence of its subject. In this sense, Khmer Rouge propaganda, in its primitive crudity, grasped a central reality:

The whole world keeps its eyes on Democratic Kampuchea, for Khmer Revolution is the most beautiful and *the most pure*.

Khmer Revolution is without a precedent in world history. It resolved the eternal contradiction between city and country. *It develops Lenin and goes beyond Mao Zedong*.

This is quite true, in fact; in the light of the Khmer Rouge experiment, one can see more clearly the fundamental dynamics that informed the great Hitlero-Lenino-Stalino-Maoist tradition. Twentieth-century totalitarianism wore a variety of cultural garbs, with different degrees of sophistication, yet its basic elements remained fairly simple and never greatly varied. A quarter of a century ago, Kazimierz Brandys summed it up neatly (with the clear-sightedness that characterises so many Polish intellectuals, who on this subject have acquired a bitter expertise): "Contemporary history teaches us that all you need is one mentally sick individual, two ideologues and three hundred murderous thugs in order to take power and gag millions of people."

The Cambodian terror offers a perfect illustration of this outline, as shown in Francis Deron's monumental work *Le Procès des Khmers rouges: trente ans d'enquête sur le génocide du Cambodge* [The Trial of the Khmer Rouge: a 30-year investigation of the Cambodian genocide] (Gallimard, 465pp; €24.90), which analyses the ascent of the Khmer Rouge

Preceding pages: Khmer Rouge bombardment of Phnom Penh.

1 February 1974 © CORBIS

Right: In remembrance of the Khmer Rouge genocide

© Manuel Caneta /AFP

At the fall of the regime,
Cambodia had lost
between one-quarter
and one-third of
its population:
a self-genocide the
magnitude of which is
without precedent in the
history of humankind.



movement, its victory, its brief and bloody reign, its downfall, its lengthy artificial survival (thanks, among others, to the culpable collusion of the West!) – and, at long last, its approaching punishment, as justice is finally catching up with a handful of still-surviving, semi-senile criminals.

It is a cliché to say that journalists are the historians of the present time – but it is true. For his entire journalistic career, Deron was an influential and respected correspondent, covering China at first, and then South-East Asia. In his latest book he tackles 30 years of the Cambodian tragedy; he unravels its complex threads, outlines the biographies of the main protagonists, clarifies and interprets the sequence of events; now and then he intersperses his historical narrative with vivid vignettes drawn from his old reporter's notebooks. The architecture of the book is composite, but it is organised with method and clarity.

Deron benefited from his in-depth experience of Maoist China; his two earlier books on the 'Cultural Revolution' and its aftermath superbly prepared him to grasp the nature and significance of the Khmer Rouge phenomenon. What Maoism took 20 years to achieve in China – the great purges of intellectuals ('The Hundred Flowers' movement), the enforced lowering of the entire nation to the primitive level of the countryside (the 'Great Leap' backward, with its makeshift village blast-furnaces, peasants confined to 'People's Communes' dormitories – and the gigantic famine which ensued), and finally the 'Cultural Revolution' and the murderous savagery of the Red Guards – all these initiatives were to be found again in the brief experiment of 'Demo-

cratic Kampuchea', but they were recycled and compressed within a period of only three years and ten months. The imitation was therefore grossly simplified and exaggerated; the objectives were the same, but they were pursued by means even more ferocious – and more dreadfully *stupid*.

The Khmer Rouge achieved complete control over all of Cambodia from 17 April 1975 (conquest of Phnom Penh by Pol Pot) until 7 January 1979 (fall of Phnom Penh, arrival of the Vietnamese army). During such a relatively short period, the regime succeeded in its grandiose project: the total destruction of society. From the outset, it had only modest means (which confirms Brandys' formula, quoted above); the Cambodian Communist Party numbered a mere 18,000 members, who were leading an army of 85,000 men; with these cadres, the regime was able to mobilise the bulk of its forces: a huge and fearsome mass of illiterate and savage youngsters and children, fanatically indoctrinated and heavily armed, and vested with discretionary powers over the whole population. As a result, at the fall of the regime, *Cambodia had lost between one-quarter and one-third of its population: a self-genocide the magnitude of which is without precedent in the history of humankind.*

This program of National-Communism took form from the very moment Phnom Penh was overtaken. On Pol Pot's orders, the capital city was emptied of all its inhabitants, within three weeks. The entire urban population – including even sick patients in the hospitals – was forcibly deported on foot and thrown on the highways of the country and the tracks of the bush. Those who survived this exodus ended up reduced to the condition of slaves in crowded agricultural camps. (When the Vietnamese army eventually entered Phnom Penh three years later, they found there only 70 civilians wandering in a ghost-city amidst the stench of rotting bodies.)

Having thus lobotomised the country (Phnom Penh was its very brains), the regime could more easily eliminate in the provinces all forms of administrative institution, education, public health, established religion and all other expressions of civilised life.

Symbolic gesture: in deserted and lifeless Phnom Penh, the army that had come out of the forest undertook to throw into the river all the electrical and mechanical appliances they could grab from the city shops, offices and private residences – in a word, all the equipment of modern life. (Note that, outside the capital city, nine-tenths of Cambodia was without electricity.) This anti-modern frenzy did not even spare the motorbikes of the local Harley-Davidson club: the fact that these machines were in perfect working condition and the bush cruelly lacked motorised transportation could not save them from this watery ending. Another thing that attracted the virulent



Pol Pot and his grandchildren c.1976.
© CORBIS

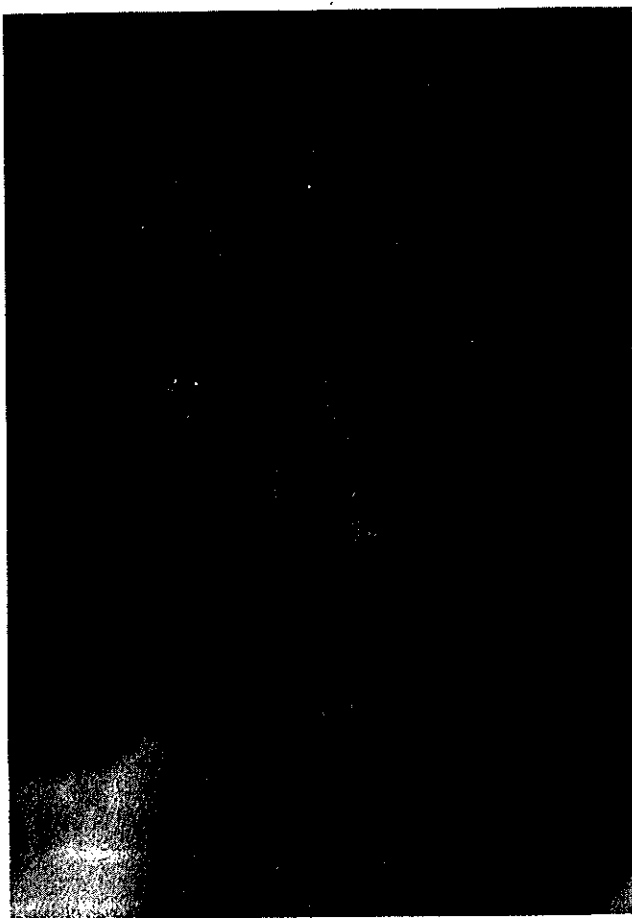
hostility of the Khmer Rouge: people wearing glasses; spectacles were to be confiscated and destroyed on the spot, and their owners arrested and sent to labour camps to await eventual execution, on the suspicion that they were educated and therefore belonged to the oppressor class. (By the way, Son Sen - the chief enforcer of the regime - himself wore glasses; he was eventually murdered by his own comrades in 1997, but not for that reason.)

This wild delirium originated at the top; Pol Pot's rare declarations betrayed his complete divorce from reality. He was praising the splendid progress of the country, the development of industrial and agricultural production, of economy, of education and culture, at the very moment when that part of the population which had temporarily escaped massacre was tottering on the edge of starvation in a state of primeval deprivation - schools had been destroyed, commerce had vanished, money had been abolished and, in the bush, some executioners practised cannibalism.

The total inversion of reality that was expressed in the leader's speeches was not part of a propaganda effort - it reflected Pol Pot's actual and sincere beliefs; and these beliefs, in turn, proved contagious, since neither his Chinese

allies nor his Vietnamese enemies were ever able to perceive the imminence of his downfall. Having laid the country waste and turned the population into deaf and mute beasts of burden, the ruling clique started to self-destruct by indulging in demented purges. And then, in this situation of instability and weakness, Pol Pot chose to launch border attacks against the Vietnamese enemy. Reacting to these insane provocations, the Vietnamese army, five times superior in strength, entered Phnom Penh after a *Blitzkrieg* whose swiftness and ease took everyone by surprise, including the invaders themselves.

Yet, after this complete and final collapse of their actual power, the Khmer Rouge did not vanish entirely. In order to counter an imaginary Soviet-Vietnamese menace (allegedly bent on subverting all South-East Asia), an improbable Sino-American alliance enabled the Khmer Rouge to survive artificially under two forms: in a few pockets of jungle on the Thai border, as smugglers and traffickers of rubies and precious timber; and in New York, as official representatives to the United Nations of a non-existent 'Democratic Kampuchea'. Thus, for another dozen years, the votes of the murderers carried in the General Assembly as much weight as the votes of - let us say - Germany, Japan or ... the Vatican. (After the fall of Saigon in 1975, Kissinger asked the foreign affairs minister of Thailand



Kang Kek Ieu aka 'Duch', the former director of the Tuol Sleng Prison in Phnom Penh. © Philip Jones Griffiths / Magnum.
Facing page: Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crime, Phnom Penh. © CORBIS

to convey to Pol Pot the friendly wishes of the American people, adding for his interlocutor's benefit: "Of course, these people are murderous thugs, but this should not affect our good relations." The administration of Jimmy Carter - under the influence of Brzezinski, and notwithstanding the rhetorical emphasis which the president himself placed on human rights - pursued essentially the same line.)

If, in the long run, the extreme irrationality of the Pol Pot regime condemned it to disintegration, the recipe which ensured its absolute authority in the short term can be described with a single word: terror.

Regarding the system of terror established by the Khmer Rouge, we are rather well informed. At the highest level, the main centre for organised torture and death in Phnom Penh, the prison of Tuol Sleng, kept voluminous, detailed and meticulous archives. Its director, the chief torturer Duch, is also well known: on this subject, we already have the invaluable testimony of the French orientalist scholar François Bizot, who, before the Khmer Rouge

came to power, was Duch's prisoner in the forest for several months in 1971. To Bizot's earlier report, first published in French in 2000 and later in English as *The Gate*, should now be added the statements and confessions which Duch himself has made since his arrest in 1999.

All the prisoners sent to Tuol Sleng were destined to be executed (of the 15,000 inmates that were successively processed in the prison during its three years of activity, there were only 14 survivors). The task of the centre was to extract from these people confessions that would retrospectively justify their arrest and provide evidence and names for further arrests. They were not arrested because they were guilty: they were guilty because they were arrested. Guilty of what? Their confessions would tell. Quite often, their transfer was accompanied with instructions regarding the sort of crime it was required they should confess, and then torture would ensure that an adequate confession be obtained. For the accused person, the final outcome was already decided; only one thing still depended upon his own choice: the length of his suffering under torture. The only way of shortening this was to produce a confession with names of accomplices, as suggested by the interrogator. All this senseless rubbish was minutely collected and stored in files - with some confessions being 100 pages long!

At the very beginning, Tuol Sleng still dealt with genuine enemies: former collaborators of the inept pro-American regime of Lon Nol. Very soon, however, such customers became scarce and, by the second year (1976), inner purges of the Khmer Rouge movement began to occupy all the attention and energy of interrogators and executioners. Eventually, during its last months of activity, the prison began to devour its own jailers!

When Phnom Penh fell into the hands of the Vietnamese, Duch, who had organised and supervised with tireless and scrupulous zeal the whole enterprise of interrogation, torture and death, vanished in the chaos of the rout. Twenty years later, someone recognised him by accident: he was employed in a remote town by a Christian association for humanitarian relief - he himself (he said) had converted to Christianity. Right now, he is being tried by the tribunal of Phnom Penh, a court jointly appointed by Cambodia and the United Nations to judge the crimes of the Khmer Rouge. He has already confessed: "I am profoundly sorry for all the murders, for the past. *My only desire was to be a good Communist.*" Indeed.

Tuol Sleng was merely the highest organ of a vast repressive system whose tentacles embraced the entire country. In the south-west area alone, 38 small Tuol Sleng centres for interrogation and torture have been counted, at a level immediately subordinate to that of Phnom Penh; furthermore, 78 'killing fields' have been identified, as well as 6000

charnel-houses. The slaughtering of condemned people was a dreary task, done by hand: the victims had their skulls smashed with a heavy club (their children were disposed of with less effort: they were thrown from the upper floors of buildings). In the conclusion of his book, Deron quotes the testimony of an American officer, Rick Arrant, who, attached to an information service, had to collect reports from Cambodian refugees at the Thai border; he remained haunted by what a woman had told him of the *sound* of those clubs smashing the skulls of prisoners kneeling on the edge of a freshly dug pit: "just like the sound of fallen coconuts hitting the ground". In 2003, this same officer was to take part in the American invasion of Iraq, where he was sent to ... the prison of Abu Ghraib! (He has since changed his occupation: back in the Far East, he is pursuing field research for a work on the martyrdom of Cambodia.)

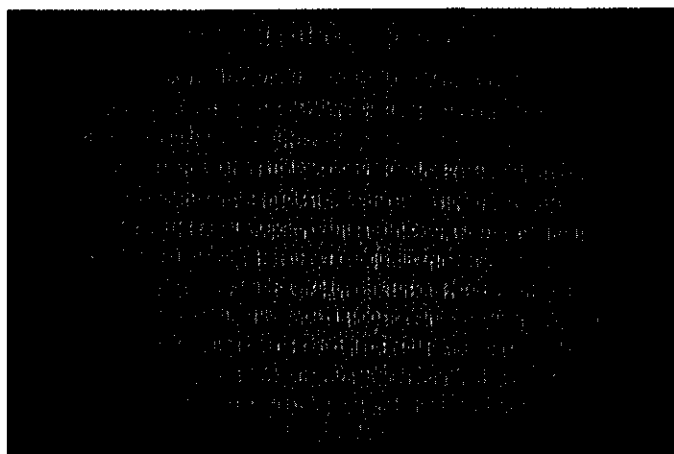


One mistake must be avoided. Descriptions of the Cambodian genocide strike our imaginations and shock our feelings – the horror is unbearable, and precisely because it is unbearable, we instinctively attempt to dismiss it from consciousness by supposing that these events, in their exotic remoteness, are so foreign to us that they might as well belong to another planet.

In fact, they concern us directly.

When the Khmer Rouge entered Phnom Penh, several Cambodians took refuge in the French embassy. The Khmer Rouge soon came to the embassy and demanded that these people be handed back to them, with the only exception being those who were carrying French passports. They menaced the *chargé d'affaires*: if their demand was not met within 24 hours, the embassy would be invaded and *all* its occupants would be arrested. In order to protect at least the 200-odd French and other foreign nationals who were sheltering in the embassy, the *chargé d'affaires* surrendered all his Cambodian guests into the hands of the Khmer Rouge – thus sending them to their deaths. He made a dreadful decision; but what was the alternative? Who would dare to judge him? A French journalist, however, in order to save one Cambodian woman (whom he did not know: he merely saw her despair) suggested that he marry the woman on the spot. The *chargé d'affaires* still had some 200 blank passports in his office – but he refused to proceed; he knew the journalist was already married, therefore this would be bigamy – which the law prohibits.

The Khmer Rouge perpetrated some two million murders. However, one of these at least should be put on the account of a Western diplomat, a man unable to perceive that, under a criminal authority, respect for the rules



also becomes a crime. This conscientious bureaucrat was truly one of us.



Coincidence: as I was finishing my reading of Deron's book, I received a letter from an old Parisian friend – a faithful correspondent who, from time to time, keeps me informed of the latest happenings on the French literary and intellectual scene. He was commenting upon the return to fashion of a certain form of trendy Maoism:

I cannot repress a feeling of apprehension when I consider how criminal Maoist lies manage to endure and to revive with complete impunity ... Look for instance at the popular success now enjoyed by the 'radical' thinker Alain Badiou, who prides himself on being an emeritus defender of the 'Cultural Revolution'. Badiou now writes, for example: "Regarding figures such as Robespierre, Saint-Just, Bakunin, Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, Mao Zedong, Chou En-lai, Tito, Enver Hoxha, Guevara and a few others, *it is of essential importance that we do not allow reactionary critics to neutralise and negate them, by means of outlandish anecdotes aiming at creating a context of criminalisation.*"

It is probably wrong of me to quote here this illustrious philosopher – whose works I never read (and I do not forget the old Chinese proverb – in fact invented by Jacques Maritain – "Never take stupidity too seriously"). Yet I am shocked: what an injustice! *The name of Pol Pot has been omitted from Badiou's little pantheon.* He fully deserves a place there, especially at this precise moment: the "outlandish anecdotes" collected in Deron's book and "the context of criminalisation" now created by the Phnom Penh trial might otherwise "neutralise and negate" his glorious memory.

M