POL POT’S TOTAL REVOLUTION:
AN INQUIRY OF DEMOCRATIC KAMPUCHEA AS A POLITICAL RELIGION

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Employing Eric Voegelin’s concept of ‘political religions,’ this dissertation constructs a narrative based on published memoirs and autobiographical reflections, as well as philosophical and historical texts, in a quest for an alternate understanding of the violence produced by Pol Pot’s Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) during the political existence of Democratic Kampuchea from 1975-1979. Its goal is a discussion of the veiled aspects of the regime scholars may have only glossed over, those aspects mainly being politico-religious, spiritual, metaphysical, and aesthetic. Depicting certain vignettes, this work merely pieces together the hybrid assemblages that make up the Cambodian revolutionary aporia, or unresolved paradox.

It tells the story of the physical and socio-spiritual destruction of the previous faith – Khmer Buddhism. This despiritualization creates a vacuum into which the CPK leadership, or Angkar, reconfigures itself as the new ‘god’. It examines the spiritual, mystical, and aesthetic disintegration of the society and Angkar’s implementation of itself as the substitutive source of transcendence, truth, beauty, and knowledge.

The dissertation then veers off to consider, not only the mechanisms of the regime itself but the individual within the regime, the perpetrators of the violence, and more specifically the pneumopathology, or spiritual sickness, of individuals that operated within the government’s secret Phnom Penh prison and extermination facility Tuol Sleng. The ideologies and primacy of the regime are also studied, enabling for the construction of an alternate, or secondary reality, to exist within Tuol Sleng – a secondary reality where the acts of torture and murder become banal tasks for the maintenance of the
government. It also goes on to describe the forging of the aesthetic state pursued by
Angkar and its similarities to other regimes of terror. It also explains how Angkar shared
revolutionary teleology with Mao Tse-tung thought, and more specifically how the
peasant was used as an instrument of revolution. Finally, the role of ethnic-nationalism
and the anti-Vietnamese sentiment is touched on, and how this ultimately led to the
demise of the Khmer Rouge totalitarian political experiment.
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CHAPTER 1. PREAMBLE

“The spade is your pen, the rice field your paper.”¹

Professor Karl D. Jackson was more than correct when he articulated that the “massive bombardment that fell on the Kampucheans between 1969 and 1973 supplied the insurgents with a potent hate-object and undoubtedly delivered to the revolution thousands of recruits and sympathizers” (Jackson 1989, 37). New information from that period has emerged adding to the already incomprehensible figures to support Jackson’s claim. According to Ben Kiernan and Taylor Owen in 2006’s “Bombs over Cambodia”, “The still-incomplete database (it has several “dark” periods) reveals that from October 4, 1965, to August 15, 1973, the United States dropped far more ordnance on Cambodia than was previously believed: 2,756,941 tons’ worth, dropped in 230,516 sorties on 113,716 sites. Just over 10 percent of this bombing was indiscriminate, with 3,580 of the sites listed as having ‘unknown’ targets and another 8,238 sites having no target listed at all” (Kiernan & Owen 2006, 62-63). “To put 2,756,941 tons into perspective, the Allies dropped just over 2 million tons of bombs during all of World War II. Cambodia may be the most heavily bombed country in history” (Ibid., 67). Another intriguing feature is that the database shows the bombing began four years earlier than was widely believed — not under Nixon, but under Lyndon Johnson (Ibid.). The impact of this bombing, the subject of much debate for over thirty years, is now clearer than ever. “Civilian casualties in Cambodia drove an enraged populace into the arms of an

¹ Pol Pot’s Little Red Book, (Locard 2004, 96)
insurgency that had enjoyed relatively little support until the bombing began, setting in motion the expansion of the Vietnam War deeper into Cambodia, a coup d’état in 1970, the rapid rise of the Khmer Rouge, and ultimately the Cambodian genocide” (Ibid., 63).

According to Ben Kiernan, “The unverified official estimate of 50,000 dead may be regarded as a minimum, in a possible range of 50,000-150,000 Cambodian civilians killed by US bombing from 1969 to 1973” (Kiernan 2004, xxiii). However, during the commencement of the United States Strategic Air Command’s “Operation Menu,” by 1967 full-scale civil war had erupted in the Cambodian countryside. The newly renamed Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK), led by Saloth Sar under the nom de guerre Pol Pot, mounted a violent domestic insurgency first against Sihanouk’s Royalist troops and later the Republican forces of Lon Nol. And after the nearly decade long conflict Cambodia emerged from the ashes as Democratic Kampuchea (DK)—a phantasmagorical agrarian-communist regime that fell neatly into no category. Directed by the mysterious and omnipresent Angkar (‘the Organization’) command, its stranglehold on the nation from April 17, 1975 to January 7, 1979 was so totalizing, regimented, and laborious in its violence, that in response to its own horrors, apologies have yet to be spoken and justice has yet to be achieved. Although many of DK’s leaders have since died, and few are standing trial at the Khmer Rouge Genocide Tribunal for crimes against humanity in the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), most of its executioners continue to walk the streets and paths of the Kingdom today. The CPK (or as it was later coined by the Cambodian head of state Norodom Sihanouk as "Khmer Rouge," French for "Red Khmer", and was later adopted by English speakers) was led by a small group of Parisian-educated Khmer elites; or as Southeast
Asian war correspondent Neil Davis later described the Khmer Rouge (KR), a “xenophobic clique of disenchanted, radical so-called intellectuals” with a “vitriolic hatred” (Davis from Bowden 1987, 265). And not unlike other twentieth century totalitarian movements, it was responsible for campaigns of eliminating “enemies” of the revolution. The DK government conducted selective and systematic annihilation of political, ethnic, racial, and religious groups, as well as their own cadres and privileged classes they believed to be counterrevolutionaries. The Communist Party of Kampuchea marched triumphantly into a ‘liberated’ Phnom Penh, and “chose to direct the fire of war against their own people, singling out for eradication army officers, bureaucratic functionaries, royalty, Western-educated professionals, landowners, skilled laborers, Buddhist monks”, and the Chinese, Thai, Cham, and Vietnamese-Khmer ethnic minorities (Jackson 1989, 37). In just three years, eight months, and twenty days, the Democratic Kampuchean regime extinguished approximately 1.7 to 2 million lives, and “may have witnessed the greatest per capita loss of life in a single nation in the twentieth century” (Ibid., 37). Nearly 1/4 of the country's total population was liquidated under the Khmer Rouge’s “experiment in Stone Age communism” through execution, torture, starvation, disease, and forced labor (Maguire 2005, 1). The sheer number of deaths, and because ethnic groups and religious minorities were targeted, the rule of the Khmer Rouge is widely considered genocidal as defined under the United Nations Convention of 1948.

The chapters that follow do not attempt an aetiological exploration of the atrocities that befell the citizens of Democratic Kampuchea. Instead it follows a more symptomatological path, searching to uncover and re-conceptualize the symptoms and
affects associated with a particular regime of terror. It seeks not to propose an entirely new idea as to the origins of Democratic Kampuchea, or why the country suffered such mass loss of life, or whether or not it should be labeled ‘genocide’ legally. As an alternative, the study proposes to examine what had, to paraphrase Louis Althusser, ‘always already’ been present. Employing albeit loosely connected philosophical vignettes, this work merely pieces together the hybrid assemblages that make up the Cambodian revolutionary aporia, or unresolved paradox; aspects of the regime of terror historians and political scientists have been unconcerned with, or chose not to explore. It is, as Peter Maguire wrote in *Facing Death in Cambodia*, a study “with few heroes, plenty of villains, and no easy answers” … “This is a sad story with an inconclusive ending” (Maguire 2005, 1).

The theme of this study interprets the thoughts articulated by certain philosophers and theorists in a quest for an alternate understanding of the violence produced by Pol Pot’s Communist Party of Kampuchea during the political existence of Democratic Kampuchea from 1975-1979. The work is an attempt to conceptualize a politically totalizing regime from the philosophical gaze. It seeks not to write a new history of the time-frame, instead its goal is a discussion of veiled aspects of the regime others may have only glossed over, those aspects mainly being politico-religious, spiritual, metaphysical, and philosophical. The schizophrenic nature of stylized argument, language, and extensive citation use is intentional, a method employed to facilitate the reader into a bewildered state, almost a ‘secondary reality,’ a state conducive to consuming the brutality of the subject matter.
The historical existence of Democratic Kampuchea allows for one to examine an unusual form of a totalizing regime in an alternative way. The terms ‘totalitarian’ and ‘totalitarianism’ entered political debate in the 1920s, primarily referring to Italian fascism, but later moved into academic debate in the late 1940s with a distinct focus on Germany (Geyer 2009, 4). ‘Totalitarian’ gained popularity and academic currency during the Cold War in reference to the Soviet Union as well (Gleason 1995). “Concurrently, they became a staple of secondary and postsecondary teaching and of media debate with works like Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon* and, more prominently, George Orwell’s *1984*, which made the image of the ideologically driven, mind-altering police state pervasive” (Geyer 2009, 4). Totalitarianism also lumped together the two most prominent European dictatorships of the 1930s and 1940s, Nazi Germany and Stalinist Soviet Union, as expressions of absolute evil rather than form of rule (*Ibid.*, 4). Historians, especially German historians, initially showed considerable enthusiasm for the ideas of totalitarianism and held the first-generation master thinkers of the concept, like Hannah Arendt or Carl Friedrich, in high esteem. Carl Schmidt was also influential. But in comparison to the “‘theoretical’ excitement and the universalizing intellectual horizon of the German debate, Soviet studies was more indebted to political and political-science formalism” (*Ibid.*, 6). Indebted more to the national – focusing on party structure, levers of control, ideology, propaganda, and the leadership cult, as well as police and labor camps – the Soviet study sought to reproduce Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinki’s six characteristics of totalitarianism from their *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (*Ibid.*). Later theorists were more concerned in the totalitarian model as a way of
understanding political structures and processes, as in Raymond A. Bauer, Alex Inkeles, and Clyde Kluckhohn’s 1956 volume _How the Soviet System Works_.

My principle concern, however, is less related to national histories – devoid of grand narratives and explanations – and is more indebted to the German historiographical approach, and the modern phenomenon of comparative genocidal studies. Moreover, the totalitarian philosophical understanding this study proposes traces its lineage from a relatively unknown ideology that may have been first conceptualized by German-born philosopher Eric Voegelin in his 1938 treatise _Die politischen Religionen_, later published in English as _The Political Religions_, as “political religion”. A term applied to describe a cultural and political power equivalent to those of established religion, and often having many socio-spiritual, iconographical, and ideological similarities with religion. It argues for the “essentially religious character of what at first may have appeared to be a purely secular phenomenon” (Wiser 1998, 1). Italian cultural historian Emilio Gentile wrote of “comparative analyses of the principal manifestations of the sacralization of politics in both democratic and totalitarian states” in his 2001 work, _Le religioni della politica_, later published in English as _Politics as Religion_ (Gentile 2006, 3). In it, he explores political religions as political manifestations in religious terminology. “[R]eligion as a social and cultural phenomenon, namely a system of beliefs, myths, rituals, and symbols that express the common principles and values of a collectivity” (Ibid., 3). Such politico-religious configurations rely on fear, propaganda, personality cults, and externalized blame to vie with existing religions, and try violently to replace or eradicate them. The
leaders of these movements emulate religious people and “want to describe the experience of being bound to a suprapersonal, all-powerful something” (Voegelin 2000, 31).

A political religion is quite different than a civil religion, in that it does not contain the “forms of sacralization of a political system that guarantee a plurality of ideas, free competition in the exercise of power, and the ability of the governed to dismiss their governments through peaceful and constitutional methods” (Gentile 2006: xv). A political religion, on the other hand, is a “political system founded on an unchallengeable monopoly of power, ideological monism, and the obligatory and unconditional subordination of the individual and the collectivity to its code of commandments” (Ibid., xv). It does not respect personal freedom or coexist with other ideologies. It seeks to destroy them. A “political religion is intolerant, invasive, and fundamentalist, and it wishes to permeate every aspect of an individual’s life” (Ibid., xv).

The modern era has become in part a “place for the creation of the religious,” in that “while modernity has undoubtedly secularized traditional religions, it is not however irreversibly antagonistic to religion and the sacred in general.” On the contrary, “modernity’s restructuring favors in turn the emergence of rationales and dynamics based on sacredness and religiosity that never disappeared” (Filoramo from Gentile 2006, 14). Gentile articulates that “[i]n the modern era, expressions of the sacralization of different aspects of human life have multiplied using history, philosophy, art, and, last but not least, politics” (Gentile 2006, 14). And political philosopher Manuel Garcia Pelayo agrees “that there are eras or certain social groups within a particular era that do not perceive politics solely as ‘an order in which human life has to develop and an essential
field like any other, but as the ontological foundation and root of human existence.””

Consequently, politics is “the entire problem of existence” (Pelayo from Gentile 2006, 14). As Gentile translates Pelayo:

“In short, by introducing religious practices into politics, they experience politics as a life and means of salvation, either because they believe, as the ancient world did, that salvation, although the work of the divine, is revealed through a political system established by a charismatic figure with a scared nature or because man, in spite of having lost his belief in God, has not lost his sense of being an unfortunate soul and he still places all his hopes of salvation in a political doctrine or system. This phenomenon has given rise to what some people call “political religions.” We will not dwell upon the rights and wrongs of this term, but it is at least clear that certain ideologies and certain political movements cannot be fully understood without the assistance of definitions that were originally religious although now translated into non-religious categories. (Pelayo from Gentile 2006, 14-15)

Therefore, “it appears entirely legitimate to consider the sacralization of politics a modern ieropahany, that is, a manifestation of the sacred in modernity and to study civil and political religions as new forms of religiosity that originated during the modern era and belong to it” (Gentile 2006, 15). For Gentile, “The experience of totalitarian religions authorizes us to argue that politics was the battlefield where the new gods fought for supremacy over men during the twentieth century” (Ibid., 15). And those who witnessed the advent of these political religions and survived its totalitarian policies, such as Haing Ngor, U Sam Oeur, and others, consider “such religions to be a deadly danger to
humanity” (*Ibid.*, 15). But these totalitarian political religions pose not only a “deadly danger” but a total physical and socio-psychological destruction of the previous faith.

The dissertation project flows out from this philosophical source and meanders its way outward, spreading into many different intellectual areas, just as the Mekong delta meets the South China Sea. For lack of better terminology, it is a hermeneutic horror show. It examines the memoirs, survivor stories and autobiographical reflections. It projects philosophical inquiry, from the religious, spiritual, metaphysical, and aesthetic. And it confronts the ideological wanderings of a peasant led revolution and the role of ethnic-nationalism. It explores the connections of Pol Pot with the thoughts of Karl Marx and Mao Tse-tung. And it touches on aspects of the supernatural, alternate realities, contagion, imagery, pain and suffering. To paraphrase Eric Voegelin, it is a “descent into the academic abyss” (Voegelin 1999, 110).

As the Khmer Rouge Genocide Tribunal unfolds in the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia a study of this substance arrives at no more consequential time in the Kingdom’s history. It will hopefully serve as not only a contribution to the scholarship, but an alternative ontological characterization of one of the most totalizing regimes of terror in the 20th century – a regime where “[t]here were no more cities. No more markets, stores, restaurants or cafes. No privately owned buses, cars or bicycles. No schools. No books or magazines. No money. No clocks. No holidays and religious
festivals. Just the sun that rose and set, the stars at night and the rain that fell from the sky. And work. Everything was work, in the empty, primitive countryside” (Haing Ngor 2007, 214).
CHAPTER 2

“Religion is the opiate [of the people].”

Locating the Political Religious in Survivors’ Memoirs

The processing of traumatic memory has changed what everyone has inside them, as articulated in Martin Amis’s *Experience*, “these days, it is not a novel, but a memoir.” “Nothing, for now, can compete with experience – so unanswerably authentic, and so liberally and democratically dispensed. Experience is the one thing we share equally, and everyone senses this” (Amis 2000, 6). It is now that “[t]he age of the memoir and the age of trauma may have coincided” (Gilmore 2001, 16). Kampuchean revolutionary experiences are no stranger to the memoir boom, and to dismiss them in an academic exercise is a huge disservice. A memoir has the ability to outstrip the narrative conventionality of fiction in responding to what might be called the “pressure of the real” (Luckhurst 2008, 118). It can illuminate the human experience within the totalitarian mechanism. Memoirists Haing S. Ngor, Pin Yathay, Francios Bizot, U Sam Oeur, Chanrithy Him, Luong Ong, Laurence Picq, Denise Affonco and others want their memories to live on. The authors’ and their families’ suffering represents what happened to millions of those who toiled during the Khmer Rouge regime. Articulated brilliantly by Pin Yathay in *Stay Alive, My Son*, “I pray that these memoirs may contribute to prevent such horrors recurring. Then, in one way at least, my family and millions of other Cambodians will not have died in vain” (Pin Yathay 2000, xxii).

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2 Pol Pot’s Little Red Book, (Locard 2004, 171)
Through the employment of memoir text analysis and comparison, the goal of this chapter is to introduce the reader to my thinking, and to the individual’s life within Democratic Kampuchea. Philosophically investigating the political apparatus will be explored later, however, the firsthand accounts of a life-world destroyed and anew created tempts the reader to reconsider the classical state-centered views of totalitarian regimes and instead look at alternative understandings. And for the sake of this chapter and the ones that will follow, one of the alternative methods of understanding involves locating the political religious.

Due to the National Socialist provisional management of the Vienna publishing house, Eric Voegelin’s 1938 treatise Die politischen Religionen, or The Political Religions, fell mostly on deaf ears. However according to its author, “it did become well enough known to find as critical a response among knowledgeable readers as my earlier writings” (Voegelin 2000, 23). Its critics commented that it lacked the decisiveness of making a condemnation of the conceptions of the world and its movements, in particular National Socialism, which it intended to combat. In the preface Voegelin writes that “[t]oday there is one type of politicizing intellectual” … “who proclaims his deep aversion to National Socialism through strong ethical judgments. He considers it his duty to battle it with any literary means. I can do the same” (Ibid., 23).

But deciding to take up the struggle by literary means “will become questionable when it hides the essential” (Voegelin 2000, 24). To Eric Voegelin, “Political collectivism is not only a political and moral phenomenon. To me its religious elements seem much more significant” (Ibid., 23). And it is this religiousness wherein lies its essentialness. To merely avoid the essential “diverts attention from the fact that a deeper
and much more dangerous evil is hidden behind the ethically condemnable actions” (Ibid., 24). “Thus, although I do not mean to imply that the struggle against National Socialism should not also be an ethical one, it is, in my opinion, not conducted radically enough, because the radix, the root in religiousness, is missing” (Ibid., 24).

When considering National Socialism from a religious viewpoint is to “battle it with literary means.” This battle can be waged against other politically totalizing manifestations as well. Pol Pot’s total revolution of Democratic Kampuchea from 1975-1979 should not be left out of this clash. To do so is to avoid the Voegelinian essential. For even “movements that want to be anti-religious and atheistic refuse to concede that religious experiences can be found at the root of their fanatical attitude” (Voegelin 2000, 32).

However the literary battle in opposition to the Khmer Rouge regime does not start with what you are reading now. Perhaps unbeknownst to its authors at the time, it began with survivor stories. The memoir has become the front lines of the conflict from which the following chapters merely provide theoretical air support.

It may have been Sydney H. Schanberg’s account of his friend and colleague that originally appeared in the January 20, 1980 issue of The New York Times Sunday Magazine, of which the 1984 film The Killing Fields is based, that introduced the world to the horrors of the DK ruling mechanism—Angkar. The story, later published in 1985 as The Death and Life of Dith Pran, describes Angkar as a word with a “dehumanizing ring, a mechanical robot-like quality, euphemism[s] for atrocity” (Schanberg 1985, 49). “[T]he omnipresent Angka—the word for the Khmer Rouge regime itself. It means simply ‘the organization.’ No explanations were ever given for policy, just ‘Angka says’
or ‘Angka orders’” (Ibid., 49). It would “sneur” which means “invite” or “ask” its citizens to comply with its commands. “Lulled by the gentleness of the request, many went without protest. But people quickly realized that those who had been sneured never came back; the word took on a new meaning: ‘take away and kill’” (Ibid., 49).

Schanberg writes of Dith Pran describing life under the Khmer Rouge as “true hell,” “more than insane,” “below zero” (Schanberg 1985, 61). Yet Schanberg’s gripping account of Dith Pran’s perils lack the detailed description many other memoirs contain. Although The Death and Life of Dith Pran, of course, concerns its namesake, it is really the story of the man who acted as Dith Pran in the theatrical adaptation The Killing Fields that marks the autobiographical battlefront.

Ngor Haing Samnang, or as he later changed it after resettling in America, Haing Samnang Ngor, wrote the seminal account of struggle and redemption in his 1987 memoir A Cambodian Odyssey. Later re-printed in 2007 as Survival in the Killing Fields, Haing Ngor, a young doctor in his native Cambodia, retells the story of a life transformed by the Khmer Rouge. As the publisher’s description explains, “He and his family, along with entire populations of cities and towns, were forced into the countryside to become ‘war slaves’ in a vast gulag policed by brutal enforcers and spies.” There alongside his father, Ngor Kea, his mother, Lim Ngor, his wife, Chang My Huoy, and his extended family, Haing Ngor suffers the country’s descent into a hell beyond our imaginings. It reveals a shared experience of the life-threatening ordeal common to millions of Cambodians. As he had always exclaimed, “nothing has shaped my life as much as surviving the Pol Pot regime. I am a survivor of the Cambodian holocaust. That’s who I am” (Haing Ngor 2007, 1).
The five hundred-page memoir starts as Haing Ngor gazes at the rice fields from the back door of this parents’ home in Samrong Yong. “Those are my first memories, the rice fields changing with the seasons and the monks coming to our house each morning. And that is how I would like to remember Cambodia, quiet and beautiful” (Haing Ngor 2007, 7-8). He goes into detail about his early rebellions as a child, to his education in Phnom Penh, to his whirlwind romance with his beloved Huoy. But even before the 1970 coup of Sihanouk by General Lon Nol and the outbreak of civil war, Haing Ngor warns his readers as to the extent of trouble to come.

The wide boulevards and the flowering trees of our national capital, Phnom Penh. All that beauty and serenity was visible to the eye. But inside, hidden from sight the entire time, was kum. Kum is a Cambodian word for a particularly Cambodian mentality of revenge – to be precise, a long standing grudge leading to revenge much more damaging than the original injury. If I hit you with my fist and you wait five years and then shoot me in the back one dark night, that is kum. Or if a government official steals a peasant’s chickens and the peasant uses it as an excuse to attack a government garrison, like the one in my village, that is kum. Cambodians know all about kum. It is the infection that grows on our national soul.

(Haing Ngor 2007, 9-10)

As we will see in later chapters, revenge was an important motivation behind some of Angkar’s violence. “In fact, revenge was invoked repeatedly by perpetrators and victims,” according to anthropologist Alexander Laban Hinton in 2005’s Why Did They Kill?, “to explain why the Khmer Rouge killed so many people” (Hinton 2005, 46). This “disproportionate revenge” or as Hinton labeled it in contrast to the oft-cited Biblical
conception of “an eye for an eye” – “a head for an eye,” would influence many of the CPK cadre to incite anger and enact retaliation for what happened with the American B-52’s and Lon Nol’s coup that had killed “their husbands and wives before 1975” (Ibid., 46). The Strategic Air Command (SAC) of the United States’ “Operation Menu” that showered bombs over the Cambodian countryside along with its support of Norodom Sihanouk’s ouster, pushed many disenfranchised peasant youth to the maquis where they would join the Khmer Rouge movement and later take their revenge on those from the city who were said to be tainted by Western imperialism and foreign influence.

After the fall of Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975 to CPK forces, Haing Ngor, his family, and the entire population of the capital were evacuated from the city by the “wheel of history.” As a “mit neary”³ with a pistol addressed the crowd:

‘The wheel of history is turning,’ she declared. ‘The wheel of history rolls on. If you use your hands to try to stop the wheel, they will be caught in the spokes. If you use your feet to try to stop it, you will lose them too. There is no turning back. World history will not wait. The revolution is here. You must make your choice, to follow Angka or not. If you choose not to follow Angka, we will not be responsible for your safety.’

‘Everyone is equal now! Everybody is the same! No more sompeahing! No more masters and no more servants! The wheel of history is turning! You must follow Angka’s rules!’

(Haing Ngor 2007, 89)

This “wheel” spun by Angkar’s momentum. As Haing Ngor wrote, “Angka was the Organization-logically, I supposed, the Khmer Rouge command group”, and it now held

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³ *mit*, a word that traditionally meant ‘friend’ or ‘comrade’ in Khmer language; *neary*, is a female signifier, i.e. ‘female comrade’
ultimate power over life and death (Haing Ngor 2007, 88). The next four years “in the shade of Pol Pot’s umbrella” Ngor experiences the exodus from Phnom Penh, the aimlessness of relocation, the harshness of labor, sickness, death, and survival (Hinton 2005, 126). From an educated man that had “been many things in life: A trader walking barefoot on paths through the jungles. A medical doctor, driving to his clinic in a shiny Mercedes” … and an academy-award winning “Hollywood actor”, Haing Ngor’s story tells of the very depths of suffering that people like himself saw and endured under the red flag of Democratic Kampuchea (Haing Ngor 2007, 1). A Cambodian Odyssey is truly the gold standard of eyewitness accounts of the killing fields. It is both a book that exposes the horrors of war and celebrates the resilience of the human spirit.

Trained as a gynecologist yet unable to operate under fear of exposing his privileged past thus signing both their death warrants, Haing Ngor watched as his wife My Huoy died during childbirth. The remainder of his family, save his niece Ngim and a few distant cousins, perished from either starvation, disease, or execution under the Khmer Rouge. But even after all of that he managed to successfully write a detailed memoir of cultural disintegration and personal triumph.

However, one particular aspect of the cultural disintegration that Ngor recounted has since propelled me to pursue an alternative understanding of the regime. By the time Haing Ngor’s family arrived in Tole Bati in mid-May 1975, “the Khmer Rouge had forced the monks out of the wat, stripped them of their saffron robes and made them change into black pajamas” (Haing Ngor 2007, 148-149). The cadre proclaimed that the monks were parasites living off the labor of others. Or, as a mit neary explained, “The
monks use other people’s noses to breathe. It is Angka’s rule: Breathe by your own nose” (Ibid., 149). For Ngor this was a sign of the abomination of the years to follow. He writes:

Buddhism was the old religion we were supposed to discard, and Angka was the new ‘religion’ we were supposed to accept. As the rainy season began – normally the time when youths from the surrounding villages would shave their heads and join the monkhood – soldiers entered the empty wat and began removing the Buddha statues. Rolling the larger statues end over end, they threw them over the side, dumped them on the ground with heads and hands severed from their bodies, or threw them into the reflecting pond. But they could destroy only the outward signs of our religion, not the beliefs within.

(Haing Ngor 2007, 149)

What type of regime would go this far out of the way to destroy the sacredness of religion for the “glorious rule of Angka”? How was this Angkar to be seen as the new ‘religion’? Would Angkar become the new narrative that would guide the Khmer people into the future? Here we can employ Voegelin’s conception of a political religion to explore these questions.

Haing Ngor recalls this new religion of Angkar when, after “squatting on the mountainside in the afternoon heat, hitting rocks with our hammers”, a soldier came up and told us, “Angka invites you to a bonn” (Haing Ngor 2007, 143). “Bonn is an ancient religious word meaning a celebration or ceremony at a temple” (Ibid., 143). These bonns, however, were sacred sessions where “[y]ou must maintain a revolutionary attitude, and
you must keep in mind the guiding principles, the ‘Three Mountains.’” (Ibid., 145). As the mit neary exclaimed:

“Attain independence-sovereignty.” That is the first principle.

“Rely on our own strength.” That is the second.

And “Take destiny in our hands” Those are the “Three Mountains.”

Don’t think back. Don’t think about houses, or big cars, or eating noodles, or watching television, or ordering servants around. That age is over. The capitalists destroyed the country. Right now, our economy is underdeveloped and we must build it up.

(Haing Ngor 2007, 145)

These bonns are reminiscent of “thought reform environment, the psychological current upon which all else depends,” or as Robert Jay Lifton articulates in his Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism as “milieu control,” where the “totalist environment seeks to establish domain over not only the individual’s communication with the outside (all that he sees and hears, reads and writes, experiences, and expresses), but also—in its penetration of his inner life—over what we may speak of as his communication with himself” (Lifton 1960, 420). The mit neary at the bonns talked on and on about the development of the economy and how the population had to sacrifice. “She used the same jargon over and over again about starting with an empty hand and struggling with the elements, and about the ant that killed the elephant, in case we didn’t hear it the first time” (Haing Ngor 2007, 145). The very tradition of the bonn lost its meaning. It was replaced by the new bonn of Angkar. Haing Ngor remembered saying after a long
evening of indoctrination, “‘Sweet,’ I said to Huoy, half-jokingly, ‘we have just taken the
first step on the road to hell. We have gone to a bonn where all they talk about is war and
economics’” (Ibid., 145).

At approximately the same time as Haing Ngor wrote those words, memoirist Pin
Yathay composed a searing autobiography of his own. 1987’s Stay Alive, My Son is at
once a powerful tale of individual survival and a compelling chronicle of unimaginable
horrors. As historian David Chandler describes in the foreword, “It is also a grimy,
intimate, and barely triumphant story of one man’s survival, achieved with courage and
skill and at an almost insurmountable cost” (Chandler 2000a, xvii). At the time the black-
clad Khmer Rouge guerrillas marched into Phnom Penh in April 1975 waving AK-47s
and draped with bandoliers, Pin Yathay was a successful and highly educated engineer in
the Ministry of Public Works. But he and his family too would be forced from there
home in the capital and moved from camp to camp, their possessions confiscated or
abandoned, destined to become ‘new people’, the displaced urban-dwellers, compelled to
toil as peasants in the countryside. To avoid execution Pin Yathay, just as Haing Ngor,
hid his intelligence and bourgeois history, remained quiet, and slogged through days
filled with manual labor and meager communal rations – all in the name of what writer
Henri Locard called “god-Angkar”, the ominous all-pervading authority of Democratic
Kampuchea (Locard 2004, 173). “In the meantime, reduced to skin and bones, he bore
witness to an ineptly administered and murderous utopia. All around him, people with
less physical strength and willpower, including many whom he loved, succumbed to
despair and slipped away from the world” (Chandler 2000a, xvii). In Pin Yathay’s case,
Khmer Rouge policies led directly to the deaths of sixteen of his family members,
including his parents, his wife, and all but one of his three children. Reduced to just himself – now known simply as ‘Thay’ – after twenty-seven months he reached freedom in Thailand and his harrowing ordeal came to an end.

Before Thay escaped west through the Cardamom Mountains to Tambon Mai Rut, he cowered before Angkar, just as Haing Ngor. In *Stay Alive, My Son* Pin Yathay is summoned to attend a political meeting in the hall of a pagoda. As the grim faced Khmer Rouge officers with their same black uniforms, black rubber sandals, and red and white *kramars* (traditional checkered scarves) filed in, Thay and his family took their places submissively. He looked around the room. “No one was smiling. Everyone looked like zombies. There was no conversation. Only a few young children broke the silence with their crying. A sort of religious calm settled on us as we waited for the speech to begin” (Pin Yathay 2000, 45). The litany of that occasion, as well as many others, praised *Angkar*.

Angkar instilled in itself the power of an omnipotent god-like incarnation. It was to have “all-pervasive clairvoyance” … “linked to enlightenment” (Hinton 2005, 128). Pin Yathay recalls a local Khmer Rouge chief haranguing that, “Angkar requests that you
stay here. Naturally, Angkar will accommodate you and feed you. It will take care of everything, do not worry. However, Angkar requires that you respect its orders and its discipline” (Pin Yathay 2000, 58). But for Thay its orders and discipline were always changing. “Angkar was not to be predicted, but was also infallible. Its unpredictability was part of its infallibility” (Ibid., 107). A Khmer Rouge officer by the name of Mit Pech told Thay, as he spoke allusively, in parables, like a monk:

‘Angkar is the master of your destiny. It is important that you know it. Angkar has many detours. Angkar is not to be predicted. It might bypass different stages without prior notification. Do not believe that what Angkar says will be for ever. It may change at the next turn. It may proceed in leaps and bounds. But Angkar always has its reasons.’

(Pin Yathay 2000, 66)

Hoping to keep his stomach full and avoid ‘re-education in the woods,’ Pin Yathay and others had to confess their sins to Angkar. Held every three days or so was a “self-criticism session” where a “Khmer Rouge would remind us of our duties to Angkar and invite us to admit our shortcomings” (Pin Yathay 2000, 113). Soon Thay learned the formulae and would utter:

I humble myself before the supreme Angkar. I humble myself before those gathered here so that they can see me. Before me I see the mud that stains me, but only my comrades can see the mud that stains my back. Comrades, I need your help to become aware of my faults and my errors. I humble myself before Angkar. I must be a good revolutionary. I thank Angkar … I humble myself so that Angkar can purify me, criticize me, and educate me to be even more submissive.

(Pin Yathay 2000, 113-114)
Even though the omnipresent being supposedly knew everything already, as a saying goes, “The Angkar has [the many] eyes of the pineapple” (Locard 2004, 112), Thay was to reveal all to Angkar, “what work had been done, how hard we had worked, how much rest had been taken, even how many times we had crapped” (Pin Yathay 2000, 114). The self-criticism sessions were a form of surveillance. It allowed for self-punishment in a politico-religious arena where everyone was warned to be vigilant and invited to denounce friends. Individualist leanings could surface at any time, and all were compelled to watch each other in order to detect them. It was to help purify and support the revolution. If you were denounced, you were punished. And punishment was one of the CPK’s proudest boasts.

How unlike capitalist society, where punishment wasted labour and resources! And how different from Buddhism! In Buddhism, punishment was meted out later in a supposed afterlife, an indefinite postponement of retribution that encouraged people to commit other sins. The Revolution had abolished all that. The man guilty of a serious offence was punished immediately. No delay – that was true justice. The Revolution purified the individual faster than religion did.

(Pin Yathay 2000, 169)

In order to avoid the “immediate punishment” laid down by the CPK, Pin Yathay had to execute the missions Angkar requested of him, correctly, without cheating. He had to be “purified.” While unloading his bags on the compound of an ancient pagoda in Sramar Leav, the local Khmer Rouge chief began to lecture him about his purification in the fields of Cheu Khmau. “Purification: we were to hear that word many times in the sermons of the Khmer Rouge officers” (Pin Yathay 2000, 58).
When Angkar’s forces swept into Phnom Penh U Sam Oeur and his family were banished to the countryside to begin purification as well. His 2005 memoir, *Crossing Three Wildernesses*, details the “over three years U Sam Oeur kept his head down, concealed his background, and relied on reawakened peasant know-how to withstand the rigors of the regime” … “including the tragic deaths, at birth, of his twin daughters, at the hands of a midwife who was under orders to kill all newborns” (Chandler 2005, 10).

Written from the perspective of a poet educated at the prestigious Writers’ Workshop at the University of Iowa in the United States of the 1960s, U Sam Oeur depicts the Pol Pot era in a new light; one that emphasizes the customs and beliefs of everyday Cambodian life, sustained by a confidence in democratic ideals and a yearning for individual freedom. Although his immediate family survived, he tells us, “because an array of guardian spirits was always there to help them”, after the fall of the regime in 1979, “he discovered that twenty-three members of his family, including his parents, two sisters, three brothers, and fifteen nephews and nieces had been killed or died of overwork and starvation in the Khmer Rouge period” (*Ibid.*, 11).

U Sam Oeur’s “three wildernesses represented death by execution, by starvation, or by disease, which almost all Cambodians faced during Pol Pot’s regime” (U Sam Oeur 2005, 31). Yet he crossed them all. In a country where organized religion was banned, he relied on his unrelenting Buddhist faith, sites of spirits, mediums, and secret prayer to survive. “Regarding religion, they made it clear that under Marxism-Leninism there was no room for Buddhism” (*Ibid.*, 330). Yet “even though Pol Pot had smashed statues of Buddha, killed Buddhist monks, and destroyed Buddhist temples, Buddhism still remained in the minds of the people” (*Ibid.*, 330).
Besides desecrating Buddhist statuary and transforming temples into prisons and execution centers, Angkar tried ruthlessly to eradicate the spirituality that lurked in the minds of Cambodians. According to U Sam Oeur “life meetings” took the place of worship every three days. The only English word the Khmer Rouge used was “meeting.” However, “If any of the new people used English or French words other than ‘meeting,’ it was as good as a death sentence” (U Sam Oeur 2005, 208). At these “meetings” the cadres conducted a pseudo-worship service where the participants would pledge their devotion to Angkar.

Respected Angkar,
Respected collective,
Respected Comrade Chieftain,
I am ever-honest, loyal, and love Angkar.
Angkar is my only benefactor.
Today I woke up early; I took care of water buffalo;
I bathed them, kept watch over them while they grazed,
Then brought them into their stalls.
I always obey Angkar’s instructions.
If I was reckless in any way, may the collective help straighten my mind,
so that I can be a good member of Angkar.
(U Sam Oeur 2005, 208)

U Sam Oeur survived by not giving in to the cult of Angkar. Although he attended the “meetings” and pledged his allegiance to the new regime, he being over the age of forty, was far too astute to succumb to spiritual usurpation. U Sam Oeur sought out the visions of mediums, the wisdom of fortune-tellers, and followed the great power of his personal
guardian spirit whom he first met one day in late November 1972 when he decided to visit Auntie Yen’s house, a trusted friend and medium. U Sam Oeur describes that “[o]nce we were seated in front of her, she became possessed by a spirit who introduced herself to me as Bido Mean Roeuddhi, my Invisible Sister from Indtanimit Borei, the Magic City, which is an invisible island here on earth, possibly in the Indian Ocean, although no one is exactly sure of its whereabouts” (U Sam Oeur 2005, 161, author’s italics). Many times over the four years of Angkar’s rule, he would consult Bido for strength and direction. It was in these moments of quiet defiance that U Sam Oeur managed to stay alive. He avoided the “three wildernesses” by consulting this vital force.

For U Sam Oeur:

*Bido has great power—she is capable of sneaking anywhere to spy on or to communicate with other realms, such as Heaven, the Naga Realm, the realm of the deities in Cambodia or the United States or in Spain to gather information concerning my safety. Since Bido met me that first time she has been taking care of me, helping me acquire, at various times, wealth, security, healing, and even arranging for other lives to be exchanged for my own.*

(U Sam Oeur 2005: 162, author’s italics)

U Sam Oeur referred to the Khmer Rouge as “Utapats (The Unbelievers)” (U Sam Oeur 2005, 290). Taking over the duties of the God of Death and having “The Red Eyes” from the practice of “removing their livers, grilling them and eating them” staining “the whites of their eyes permanently red-yellow”, the Utapats “rounded up the babies and murdered them because they had become a burden” (Ibid., 281, 290). At the edge of Wat Prek Dambok U Sam Oeur tells of a dead krasamng tree that he presumed had “died because
of the concentration of blood that soaked the ground—all the salt was too much for the
tree to survive” (Ibid., 290). As he gazed at the krasamng tree he “could hear its choked
voice, drowning in the blood of infants. The voice was faint, and its meaning
indistinguishable. The Utapats had killed the fruit of the tree with the fruit of our
countrymen and women” (Ibid., 291).

“The Unbelievers” were not like U Sam Oeur. He was a believer. After the
Vietnamese toppled Democratic Kampuchea in 1979 he emerged from the experience as
a person who seeks and finds, what Eric Voegelin referred to as “[n]ew manifestations of
keen perception and broadness of vision, of emphasis of volition and emotion, of
spirituality and instinctiveness” (Voegelin 2000, 33). On September 1, 1992, U Sam Oeur
stepped off a plane at the Cedar Rapids airport, the same airport he had left back in 1968.
He was grayer, but after being “through three howling wildernes ses”, “his hope for peace,
freedom, the power of literature was unshaken” (U Sam Oeur 2005, 356, back cover).

Loung Ung felt the “power of literature” first hand when her 2000 memoir First
They Killed My Father became a national bestseller. Reviewed by Dith Pran as “an
eloquent and powerful narrative as a young witness to the Khmer Rouge atrocities.”
Loung Ung’s memoir is a harrowing true story of a nightmare world. A story that the
author notes, “mirrors that of millions of Cambodians. If you had been living in
Cambodia during this period, this would be your story too” (Loung Ung 2000, author’s
note).

First They Killed My Father is a narrative quite different from those of Haing
Ngor, Pin Yathay, and U Sam Oeur. It is account of Democratic Kampuchea, not through
the eyes of an accomplished older man, but from the gaze of a young girl. Loung Ung
was only five years of age when the armored vehicles of the Khmer Rouge rolled through the streets of Phnom Penh forcing her family to flee. After her sister’s death and her father’s execution, Loung Ung and her siblings were dispersed to different labor camps. Later she would be forced to run away, leaving behind her mother and Geak, her baby sister.

Even as a young person Loung Ung’s experiences with *Angkar* were much the same as her older memoirist peers. The first time she heard the word “Angkar” she was told never to lie to it. “If you lie to the Angkar, we will find out! The Angkar is all-knowing and has eyes and ears everywhere” (Loung Ung 2000, 31). Loung Ung writes as well about the destruction of religion. Her older brother “Kim says the Angkar do not want people worshiping any gods or goddesses that might take away devotion to the Angkar” (*Ibid.*, 67). The cadres and ‘base people,’ or ‘ancients,’ would be the eyes and ears of *Angkar* at the local level. They could report all activities to *Angkar* and have full power to enforce *Angkar*’s will. *Angkar* and the cadres, Loung Ung remarked, “have the power to teach, police, judge, and execute” (*Ibid.*, 61).

At the first children’s camp that Loung Ung and her older sister Chou stumble into they lay witness to the indoctrinating power of *Angkar*’s political religion. “In a voice full of fury and adulation, Met Bong yells out, ‘Angkar is all-powerful! Angkar is the savior and liberator of the Khmer people!’ Then one hundred children erupt into four fast claps, their fisted arms raised to the sky, and scream ‘Angkar! Angkar! Angkar!’” (Loung Ung 2000, 125). Met Bong continues, “‘You are the children of the Angkar! Though you are weak, the Angkar still loves you. Many people have hurt you, but from now on the Angkar will protect you!’” (*Ibid.*, 126). Loung Ung and Chou gather every
night to hear such news and propaganda, and are told of how Angkar promises to love and protect them. “I sit there and imitate their movements while hatred incubates inside me, growing larger and larger. Their Angkar might have protected them, but it never protected me,” she writes (Ibid., 126).

After three months at the children’s camp in August 1977 Met Bong came to Loung Ung with some “good news.” She is to be trained as a child soldier. “The Angkar needs people like you,” Met Bong says while smiling (Loung Ung 2000, 130).

“No number one duty is to the Angkar and no one else. You should be happy with yourself. This camp is for the weaklings. The camp you are going to is for the bigger, stronger children. There you will be trained as a soldier so you can soon help fight the war. You will learn many more things there than the children here.” Her face beams with pride when she finishes. “Yes, Met Bong, I am happy to go,” I lie. I don’t understand Met Bong’s elation. I do not want to sacrifice for the country that killed my pa.

(Luong Ung 2000, 130)

The new camp is almost identical to the old one. It is supervised by another comrade sister who is just as zealous a believer in Angkar as the previous. It houses about eighty girls. Some with families in nearby villages, others are orphans. There is a similarly operated boys camp not far away on the other side of a rice field. On the first night the two camps merge for a group lesson preaching the message of Angkar. Having heard it many times, Loung Ung knows when to break into the obligatory claps and screams. This time however, the Angkar is not only the savior and liberator of the Khmer people, it warns of the racially inferior Vietnamese enemy. Implementing the pejorative term “Youn,” the comrade sisters exclaim that the “Khmer soldiers today killed five hundred
Youns trying to invade our country! The Youns have many more soldiers, but they are stupid and are cowards! One Khmer soldier can kill ten Youns!”… “Angkar! Angkar! Angkar!” is screamed in reply (Loung Ung 2000, 131).

The Met Bongs pace around the circle of children as if possessed by powerful spirits, their arms shaking furiously at the sky, their lips moving faster and faster as they spit words about the glory of the Angkar and our unbeatable Khmer soldiers—words condemning the Youns and detailing their gory fate. The children’s furor matches that of the Met Bongs.

(Loung Ung 2000, 131)

After long political religious indoctrination yet brief training as a soldier, Loung Ung heads out to fight the invading Vietnamese, barely able to hold her rifle. “I’ll kill them! I’ll kill them!” she screams as she pulls the trigger and the shots go everywhere (Loung Ung 2000, 142). However nothing is out there. A comrade sister berates her not to waste bullets. Later a mortar attack on the girls’ camp burst the straw roof and walls into flames sending the girl soldiers wailing out the door “their faces black from smoke and their eyes white with terror. Many are dripping blood from their arms and legs where shrapnel sliced through their skin” (Ibid., 166). The girls head off in different directions and, after finding her sister Chou and brother Kim in the aftermath of the assault, Luong Ung and the other escapees come face to face with the Youns. They smile and say hello. “The crowd smiles gratefully. I cannot believe it. The Youns did not shoot us. They did not take the children and slice open their stomachs. They even told us where Pursat City is. At last, after three days on the road, we have a destination!” (Ibid., 172).
After the fall of Phnom Penh in 1979 and reuniting with her mother, Loung Ung and surviving family members travel to the Lam Sing refugee camp on the coast of Thailand, then on to the United States. Her story is one of a family shattered yet miraculously sustained, and one of conviction in the face of politico-religious fanaticism.

It was the fanaticism of idealism, however, that led Laurence Picq to the thoughts of Mao Tse-tung and later from Peking to Phnom Penh to meet her husband Sikouen, a high-ranking member of Ieng Sary's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and take part in the Kampuchean Revolution. Although a French woman, and a symbol of colonialism, her story is one written from the other side—within the Communist Party of Kampuchea. In her 1989 memoir, *Beyond the Horizon: Five Years with the Khmer Rouge*, Picq recounts her time spent in a capital compound translating documents for *Angkar* that, at the same time, is murdering her husband’s countrymen and women.

When she stepped on the tarmac of Pochetong Airport in Phnom Penh she forgot about Paris and Peking and “imagined the people there living contently as if part of one big family.” “My future was there, under my eyes, at my feet,” she contemplated. “With our two little girls, we were going to start a life that would be happy and full, useful and generous” (Picq 1989, 8). She was met however by a stark contrast to her idyllic dream. No one was on the runway. Not a soul was around to greet the passengers of the Chinese flight crew. The terminal was desolate. “[N]ot a single movement on the deserted concrete where burned and gutted planes lay stranded, the last souvenirs of battle. The war was still there, it seemed, frozen like the last photos sent out by foreign correspondents before the fall of the city” (*Ibid.*, 8).
Following one of her husband’s comrades, Picq, renamed Comrade Thal, takes a ride away from the terminal and into the streets of an abandoned capital. She writes of the surreal scene:

Houses in the suburbs were also empty, seemingly haunted, doors and windows opening onto darkness. In courtyards, as on sidewalks, we saw a wild tangle of abandoned objects—dishes, pots, furniture, gas stoves, refrigerators, and many other items of daily use that had been dumped haphazardly during the escape and pillage. There was not a soul to be found, not a dog, a bird, or even a flower. Even factories and warehouses were devastated and abandoned. This apocalyptic world seemed to have come straight out of a nightmare, as if life had been destroyed, chased by a brutal blast of wind, a supernatural catastrophe.

(Picq 1989, 9)

After the tour of the ghost town, Comrade Thal is offered a banquet worthy of top leaders. A high ranking cadre, Sirin, addresses the dinner party in a solemn and stentorian tone that “[o]ne might have thought he was celebrating mass.” “I hope you realize the honor Angkar is bestowing on you,” he says (Picq 1989, 12). After tonight everyone will be the same it is explained. “The people are good. They have given everything to Angkar, even the children of their own flesh. You must imitate them” (Ibid., 14).

The community that welcomed Comrade Thal reflected, she was told, “a new society where people preached poverty, the renunciation of worldly belongings, the use of only a single garment, austere eating habits, and a communal and fraternal life” (Picq 1989, 25-26). As Picq later narrates:
I was seduced by this ideal of life and the hopes it seemed to bring. I wished for a world
where social relations excluded competition, jealousy, greed—where simplicity and
impoverishment would put an end to the aggression and tension created by the desire to
possess. I dreamed of a society where honor no longer fell to the greediest but rather to
the most devoted and unselfish. I aspired to a truth without dispute, which no religion or
system of thought had yet given humankind.

(Picq 1989, 26)

Comrade Phal’s idealistic world was short lived. For most of the revolution she was
sequestered in her Phnom Penh compound tending her garden and translating Party
documents. But soon it goes from bad to worse. “Isolation and division reinforced
Angkar’s ideological control. Added to this was the fact that each person was constantly
tormented by hunger” (Picq 1989, 78). Angkar relied on this fact for devotion to the
political religion. “Everyone wanted to become Angkar’s ideal proletarian, motivated by
Angkar and for Angkar” (Ibid., 78, author’s italics).

Within a short period of time most of her friends are murdered by the regime, and
the pregnant Picq and her two daughters are subjected to a twenty-three day forced march
to the Thai border where she suffered the birth and death of her newborn Beng to the
ravages of malaria. The ordeal ended when Picq and her daughters were given refuge in
the Cambodian embassy in Peking. The author later returned to France as her husband
fought on in the Kampuchean countryside with the Khmer Rouge. From 1975 to 1980
Laurence Picq went from the idealistic Comrade Thal to watching here baby gasp his last
breath.
Picq turned her back on the Khmer Rouge and their political religious theatrical performance. In the language of Angkar, Picq commented:

“total control of the country” meant administering a capital emptied of its population, and “the unanimous support of the people” was satisfied by gathering around oneself a few dubious and expedient leaders. The so-called miraculous harvests could be counted on one hand. The happiness of the people remained a pious wish and the cultivated gardens a beautiful fantasy.

(Picq 1989, 177)

Angkar lived in a secondary reality, while its victims a first. As Picq concludes, “What evil schemes had I been an accomplice to? The whole Khmer reality was so very different from what we had fervently believed!” (Picq 1989, 191).

Just as the French citizen Laurence Picq chose to stay in Phnom Penh with her Khmer husband, Denise Affonco, as a French citizen, was offered a choice: flee to Paris with her children or stay in Cambodia with her husband. She chose to stay. There, after April 1975, her family was deported to the countryside and for the remainder of the Pol Pot period they endured, along with millions of their fellow citizens, relentless labor, famine, sickness, and death. This story is told by Denise Affonco in her gripping memoir, To The End Of Hell: One Woman’s Struggle to Survive Cambodia’s Khmer Rouge, first published in 2005. Written as a testimony of her ordeal just months after the Vietnamese liberation in 1979. It is a raw and harrowing tale. From her first labor camp on the island of Koh Tukveal to the second in the hamlet of Loti-Batran, Affonco recounts how her husband was taken away by Angkar and never seen again, and her daughter starved to death at the age of nine.
Mirroring a description by Haing Ngor, Denise Affonco writes how her family was dragged from their sleep by the ringing of a bell to be gathered as a cadre “preaches, for the first time, the ten commandments of Angkar that must be learned by heart” (Affonco 2007, 34). Under the guise of the new political religion of the Communist Party of Kampuchea:

- Everyone will be reformed by work.
- Do not steal.
- Always tell the truth to Angkar.
- Obey Angkar whatever the circumstances.
- It is forbidden to show feelings; joy or sadness.
- It is forbidden to be nostalgic about the past – the spirits must not vivoat (stray).
- It is forbidden to beat children, as from now on they are the children of Angkar.
- The children will be educated by Angkar.
- Never complain about anything.
- If you commit an act in contradiction to the line set forth by Angkar you will publicly self-criticise yourself at the daily indoctrination meetings, that are compulsory for everyone.

(Affonco 2007, 34-35)

The lesson concerning correct behavior is followed by the instructions relating to appearance. From the color of the clothing, to the length of the women’s hair and nails, from having to walk barefoot, to not wearing spectacles. Every aspect is covered. The new way of life, working hours and new terms are explained as well. Everyone is to “work every day from sunrise to sunset; Saturdays, Sundays and public holidays are
abolished” (Affonco 2007, 36). Trade no longer exists, rice will be distributed, everyone will call each other mit or comrade, and everyone will speak Khmer. “It is forbidden to speak French, Chinese or Vietnamese” (Ibid., 36).

“Disciplining our children is absolutely forbidden, as from now on they are ‘Angkar’s children’, and like all children, Affonco’s “have been indoctrinated and talk only about what Angkar Pakdewat wishes” (Affonco 2007, 63, 78). As the author explains:

All the education we’ve implanted in them is wiped out; no politeness, no respect, no more, “Bonjour Monsieur” or “Bonjour Madame”, no “Merci”. They mustn’t obey their parents any more, but only Angkar; they’re no longer our children, but theirs.

Thus, I no longer have any authority over my son, who makes it quite clear that he has no need of me and I none of him. It isn’t me who feeds him, but Angkar, and not he who nourishes me, but Angkar.

(Affonco 2007, 78-79)

Angkar’s nourishment is not enough. Affonco and her family are “tormented, tortured, by hunger – yes, I call this a slow-burning torture, a death sentence by degrees, because who could ever have imagined that men, such as these Khmer Rouge, could be perverted enough to watch us die of hunger without so much as lifting a little finger?” (Affonco 2007, 130). Food is supplemented in secret. Soon rats, black snails, little crabs, and mussels become sources of survival. It was not sufficient however to save her sisters-in-law and her dear daughter Jeannie. Denise did survive though. And her memoir has been a crucial source of information about this tragic period. Another battalion in the “literary
battle.” But unfortunately for her, “the cries, whether they are of hate or mourning, don’t bring back the dead” (Ibid., 197).

On the other hand, these “cries” help shed light on the unspeakable destruction of the Khmer Rouge regime. The memoirs are “about the victims who cope with anguish and disgusting memories. It is about a human experience, with which no one can ever identify because of the incredibility of the tragedy, the nightmare of the concentration camp, the atrocities, and, through it all, the lessons in courage” (Ly Y 2000, 217). Ly Y tells of toil in the brutal cooperatives in her 2000 memoir Heaven Becomes Hell: A Survivor’s Story of Life under the Khmer Rouge. After years of starvation and cruelty, Chileng Pa writes of when he was forced to watch the CPK guerrillas murder his wife and two-year old son in 2008’s Escaping the Khmer Rouge: A Cambodian Memoir.

Torture, near death experiences, and years of Cambodian post-traumatic stress disorder (Cam-PTSD) and recovery is described in his 2011 Out of the Dark Into the Garden of Hope by Dr. Sam Keo. Poetry has also been translated into the library of “literary battle” by U Sam Oeur in Sacred Vows from 1998. And Bunheang Ung illustrates his story of villagers being tied up and beaten with gun butts and sticks in 1985’s The Murderous Revolution: Life & Death in Pol Pot’s Kampuchea.

One poignant chronicle of the revolution is both illustrated and written by one of only seven survivors to walk out from behind the gates of Pol Pot’s secret prison and extermination facility, Tuol Sleng, or S-21. Although other DK prison descriptions have been written, such as Francois Bizot’s 2003 work, The Gate, it is Vann Nath’s 1998 accomplishment, A Cambodian Prison Portrait: One Year in the Khmer Rouge’s S-21, that heart-wrenchingly recounts “the terror and shock, the ghost-like emaciated people,
the screams of pain echoing through the prison, the brutality of the prison guards. The pale faces of the prisoners seem to look at me from every corner, crying, ‘Help! Please help me…’” (Vann Nath 1998, Introduction). Vann Nath’s work also introduces us to the cult of personality Pol Pot was secretly cultivating within his political religion. As we will see in later chapters, Vann Nath and others were allowed to live while incarcerated in Tuol Sleng due to their artistic endeavors. While the Vietnamese were invading Phnom Penh in January 1979, Vann Nath was working on a series of portraits of Pol Pot as well as busts to be displayed prominently in the future.

All the memoirs mentioned above, as well as many others, have led me to the “literary battlefront” where the chapters that follow become only one foot soldier in the fight against regimes of terror. For it is time, and it is possible, for the Khmer Rouge as a political religion, to come out from the intellectual cold, join the great critical tradition of Voegelin and Gentile and others, not in an attempt to simplify the regime of terror, but to add another literary bandolier to an arsenal that swings from our shoulders.
“If you destroy a statue of the Buddha, you will be rewarded with a sack of cement.”

The Rise and Demise of Khmer Buddhism

According to Francois Ponchaud, a missionary in Cambodia from 1965 until he was forced to flee Phnom Penh after the total victory of the Khmer Rouge, “until April 1975 the word for ‘race’ and ‘religion’ in Cambodia were the same, and in everyday language ‘Khmer’ implied ‘Buddhist’” (Ponchaud from Hawk 1990, 131). This implication supports the statistics. Of the 13.4 million inhabitants of the Kingdom, 90 percent are Khmer with the others being small percentages of ethnic Vietnamese, Chinese, and small numbers of hill tribes, Cham and Lao (2008 Census). Of those 13.4 million, more than 95 percent are Theravada Buddhists, with Islam, Christianity, and others rounding out the 5 percent (2008 Census). In less numerical terms, “Like Roman Catholicism in Poland, Theravada Buddhism in Cambodia embodied and represented Cambodia’s tradition, culture, and identity. For centuries it was the main source of learning and education” (Hawk 1990, 131). Buddhism, manifested in one form or another, has been weaved intrinsically into the fabric of the Khmer cultural narrative schema for nearly two millennia, over a number of successive kingdoms and empires. It conceives of the social orders and explains the knowledge and experience in which the Khmers live “as manifestations of a cosmological system based on the principle of kamma (karma in Sanskrit)” (Keyes 1994, 44).

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4 *Pol Pot’s Little Red Book*, (Locard 2004, 171)
The initial forms of Buddhist cult activity came by way of Hindu merchants into the earliest known settlement and first significant polity in Cambodia generally known as Funan (Harris 2005). It is impossible to be certain about when Buddhism first arrived. However, according to the evidence, which is “at best sketchy,” we can assume it penetrated Funan’s influence due to the discovery of “around forty carved Buddha images from the Mekong Delta region and from areas of Thailand associated with Funan” which “have been found in a variety of materials, including stone, wood, glass, clay, bone, and metal” (Skilling 1997, 93), (Harris 2005, 4). Although dating is tentative, “other significant discoveries include a fine standing Buddha in varamudra, probably dating from the seventh century, discovered at Tuol Tahoy, Kampong Speu Province; two images of buddhas in parinirvana, dating from the fifth-sixth centuries, one from Oc Eo and the other from Angkor Borei” (Harris 2005, 4). The second wave of Buddhism made its way into the Khmer land during the height of the Angkor period. “Epigraphical, archaeological, and associated sources tend to point to the direction of the Mahayana” as the main influence at “specific points in the history of Angkor (802-1431)” (Ibid., 225). Nevertheless, Mahayana Buddhism should be “regarded as the poor relation of a variety of more dominant Brahmanical cults during most of the Angkorian period” (Ibid., 225). At some points in time it left little or no impact on the historical record. Life was largely dictated through the lively presence of Hindu-Buddhist syncretisms.

A considerable exception to this rule can be found during the reign of the last great king of Angkor, Jayavarman VII (1181-c.1220). A Khmer inscription of Preah Khan, Angkor, dated at approximately 1191 suggests that the great king Jayavarman VII had inherited a strong attachment to Buddhism from his father, Dharanindravarman II
(r.c.1160), who “found his satisfaction in this nectar that is the religion of Sakyamuni” (Coedes 1968, 173). And according to professor of Buddhist studies at the University of Cumbria, Ian Harris, in his 2005 work Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice, “Under his patronage, tantric Mahayana concepts permeated the ritual life of the state, while the ancient Indian notion of righteous Buddhist kingship appears to have given shape to some aspects of the polity that Jayavarman used to govern his empire” (Harris 2005, 226). Although Jayavarman VII’s cult of state Buddhism may have been the high-water mark for the Mahayana, the symbiosis of religion with the ritual of the empire did not survive the changing economic and political circumstances. Brahmanism as well followed in its wake. But the Theravada influence began to increase, perhaps due to some of its esoteric elements being present in neighboring geographical areas before becoming established in Cambodia. Or due to other members of Jayavarman VII’s immediate household having a strong attraction to the teachings of the Buddha. “One of his wives, Indradevi, was an important Buddhist patroness, described as having ‘surpassed in her knowledge the knowledge of philosophers’” (Ibid., 23). This new religious dispensation was less oriented to the demands of the state and the requirement of large-scale temple construction and the territorial expansion that made it possible. “Despite the shift in religious regime”, articulates Ian Harris, “Theravada cult activity, for instance, owes a significant debt to quite archaic ways of understanding reality, while basic structural and sociological features of the tradition largely persisted down to the present” (Ibid., 226). In other words, the kingship cult was preserved from the earlier period, “but somewhat shorn of its Brahmanical and tantric garb” (Ibid., 226). The king no longer had to be associated with the future Buddha—Maitreya. He was no longer to regard himself as the
A righteous king, ruling in accordance to these insights, ensures “the moral order (dhamma)—indeed, of the entire cosmos” (Ibid., 227). At the end of Jayavarman VII’s reign a shift away from the concept of the god-king to the Sangha (monastic assembly of ordained Buddhist monks) occurred, redirecting resources that would have constructed temples to building monastic dwellings, and public works projects that would have a direct effect on the common people. This clearly marked a break in the Khmer politico-religious dialectic. The physical layout and the iconography of the successor capitals replicated these important elements of the late Angkorian period. Contrary to the idea that the elaborate Hindu-Buddhist temples were abandoned after the fall of Angkor, many of the important sites remained in use, however appropriated to the new Theravada cult. According to Harris, “Angkor Wat, for example, was remodeled so that it could serve as a beacon of a new faith” (Harris 2005, 227).

Despite the shifting influences of neighbors Thailand and Vietnam on Cambodia after the demise of Angkor, “Theravada Buddhism subsisted in a relatively steady state with no major shocks or shifts to the established religious order for several hundred years” (Harris 2005, 227). Theravada Buddhism endured in spite of incursions by Islam,
the French, the Japanese, and the Americans to name a few. The religion’s only genuine struggle for the continuation of its existence occurred during three years, eight months, and twenty days between April 1975 and January 1979. For the duration of that timeframe, the Communist Party of Kampuchea, or as Prince Sihanouk infamously coined them, the Khmer Rouge, organized one of the most brutal assaults on any religion in modern history. Democratic Kampuchea’s minister of Foreign Affairs Ieng Sary, soon after the Khmer Rouge victory, announced to the world that the Communist Party of Kampuchea’s government “granted freedom to all religious groups, a freedom which was clearly written into the new constitution: ‘Every citizen of Kampuchea has the right to hold any belief in religion and has as well the right to have neither belief nor religion. Any reactionary religion interfering with Democratic Kampuchea and her people is strictly prohibited’ (Constitution of Democratic Kampuchea, chapter XV, article 20). However as he also asserted that the monasteries were opened throughout the country at that time (Newsweek September 4, 1975), the Communist Party of Kampuchea actually aimed to exterminate all religious beliefs (Yang Sam 1987, 67).

This ‘death of God’ started on April 17, 1975 when the country had been “reduced to a Hobbesian state in which all moral standards had been destroyed or abandoned. It was in this moral vacuum that the Khmer Rouge set out to create a wholly new social order” (Keyes 1994, 54-55). Communist Party of Kampuchea general secretary Pol Pot, along with CPK Center members Nuon Chea, Ieng Sary, Son Sen, Khieu Samphan and others from a small group of educated Khmer elites attempted in a ruthless manner to institute one of the most radical revolutions of the twentieth century, completely destroying the ‘old’ and continuously pursuing the ‘new.’ “Not only were
institutions associated with the pro-American government of Lon Nol, the neutralist government of Prince Sihanouk, and the colonial regime under the French to be rejected, but even bona fide Khmer institutions that could be traced to the precolonial past were to be rooted out and destroyed. Foremost among these was the *sangha*, or the Buddhist order of monks” (Keyes 1994, 55). Ian Harris describes in 2007’s *Buddhism Under Pol Pot* that “pressure on institutional Buddhism increased after the fall of Phnom Penh. From a theoretical perspective Buddhism was one of the three mountains alongside imperialism and reactionary capitalism, that, needed to be leveled to the ground. Its elimination, then, would be part of a wider programme to control all aspects of daily existence” (Harris 2007, 106). In this manner, Emilio Gentile articulates that “the totalitarian party itself becomes a church that wants to claim the souls of its supporters. This is why totalitarianism was destined to come into conflict with traditional religions” (Gentile 2006, 67). And political scientist Sigmund Neumann concurs, “Modern dictatorships are ‘political religions’ (inner worldly religions, to be sure). In fact, their very survival depends on their final victory over religion. Because religion represents the supreme challenge to totalitarian rule, religious forces may be the last protection against totalitarian claims” (Neumann 1965, 186).

The way in which the Communist Party of Kampuchea succeeded, although briefly, to successfully destroy and abolish the Buddhist *Sangha* and the *Wat* from the spiritual belief and the daily life of the Khmer people was through the use of violence to forcibly disrobe, exile, or execute Buddhist monks. And with the moral life-world of the *Sangha* eradicated, it was easier to indoctrinate the rest of the population to accept, through the threat of death, the CPK Center as its new ‘Buddha’ – its new ‘God’.
Khmer Rouge leadership, known throughout Cambodia at that time only as *Angkar*,
attempted to destroy any trace of religion and substitute the Party in its place. Buddhism
was to be obliterated from Cambodian society and the Party was “remade into a
disciplined organization” … “that was to be substituted for the *sangha* as the ultimate
source of authority in Khmer society” (Keyes 1994, 57). This type of moral inversion was
feasible not only through the brute force of violence, although that may have been the
most effective, but *Angkar* weaved this new substitute religion into every facet of the
remaining inhabitants’ lives. From sun-up to sundown the toiling Cambodians were never
out of the sight of *Angkar*, they were always in the process of indoctrination and thought
reform, not only to become a ‘new socialist man’ but to become an automaton of the
Party, to think not in Theravada Buddhist cosmological terms but in the terms set by the
Party line. The Party Center, or more specifically *Angkar*, would now hold precedent
over the aspects of everyday life that were once the ritual domain of the *Sangha* and the
*Wat* and the Buddhist religion in general. Under the totalizing hegemony of the
Communist Party of Kampuchea, life-altering experiences were brutally cut from their
religious totem and presided over by *Angkar*.

After a five-year struggle against the pro-American Lon Nol forces, the Khmer
Rouge marched into Phnom Penh victorious on April 17, 1975. Everyone hoped that
peace would finally come to the war ravaged country, however, from the first day of their
total victory the “Khmer Rouge imposed an iron grip in order to control the population
and began the implementation of drastic changes” (Yang Sam 1987, 67). After the
takeover of the capital and other important cities and towns, the Communist Party of
Kampuchea evacuated its inhabitants and forced them to trek for miles to unspecified
locations in remote rural areas. “Monks also took part in this evacuation. Fearing for their
lives, all monks left their monasteries and traveled from one monastery to another,
seeking asylum. Some elderly monks, however, decided to remain in their quarters. The
Superior of the Mohanikay, Huot That, and a few elderly monks of his entourage, who
from the start had decided to stay, were all taken away” (Ibid., 67).

Monk evacuees were treated not unlike any other ordinary Khmer individual. All
those forcibly removed from the cities, later to be dubbed ‘new people’ by the Angkar,
including monks, were subject to starvation, random beatings, arbitrary arrest, and
execution along the route to the countryside. Once there, young monks “were grouped for
reeducation” … “forced to disrobe and were sent to the youth mobile unit where they
were moved from one labor field to another. Elderly monks who seemed to be able to
keep their saffron robe a little longer were repeatedly asked to leave their monastic life”
(Yang Sam 1987, 68). Charles F. Keyes, from his essay “Communist Revolution and the
Buddhist Past in Cambodia,” explains the destruction of Buddhism in more detail:

In 1969/1970, the last time a count was made, there was some 65,000 monks and novices
in Cambodia’s 3,369 wats. Of these, 2,385 monks and 139 wats were affiliated with the
Thommayut order. During the war between 1970 and 1975 more than one-third of the
wats were destroyed; many monks and novices were killed, left the order, or became
refugees …

In the immediate aftermath of its takeover in 1975, the Khmer Rouge did not
immediately move to ban Buddhism (Yang Sam 1987:70-72), but by the end of the year
it had been declared to be a “reactionary religion.” Monks and novices, even those in the
base areas that Khmer Rouge had controlled before April 1975, were compelled to
disrobe …
In 1980 it was estimated that five out of every eight monks were executed during the Pol Pot regime… Major temple-monasteries were destroyed and lesser ones were converted into storage centers, prisons, or extermination camps. The former cremation grounds at Choeung Ek wat on the edge of Phnom Penh became one of the major sites for mass executions… Images of the Buddha were often decapitated or desecrated in other ways; copies of the Buddhist scriptures were burned or thrown into rivers… (Keyes 1994, 55-56)

The eradication of Buddhism under the Khmer Rouge destroyed more than just the religion sanctioned and supported by the previous regime; it destroyed something that was integral to the traditional Cambodian way of life. There is the story of the Venerable Chea Tong who survived the Pol Pot period that sheds light on the typical treatment of many of those who chose the monastic life. In 1975 this monk was forced with around a hundred of his fellow monks and novices to leave their wat in Phnom Penh and walk to a community some fifty kilometers north. Here they were forced to disrobe and were informed that religion was feudal and oppressive and monks were useless parasites, leeches living on the blood of the people. During the existence of Democratic Kampuchea, Chea Tong’s monastic companions disappeared; some he heard were executed. The temple monastery in the community he lived and labored was “turned into a food storehouse and pigs were kept in front of the temple.” Khmer Rouge cadre, in an act of moral inversion, even “shot the giant cement statue of the Buddha inside the temple between the eyes” (Richardson 1981, 104).

The Sangha was viewed as a real threat to the dominance of Angkar. So much so that the CPK leadership included the monks as a target for a number of sayings that
permeated the fabric of Democratic Kampuchean life. For example in Henri Locard’s collection of the sayings of Angkar titled *Pol Pot’s Little Red Book*, “Religion is the opiate [of the people]”; “Monks are parasites”; “Monks are tapeworms gnawing at the bowels of society”; and “Joining hands to greet monks is like joining hands to greet the country children” (Locard 2004, 171-172).

Not only were the newly displaced monks disrobed, and in some cases executed, they were forced to labor in the fields. This is by no means the biggest inconvenience to the lives of monks, or for non-monks for that matter, but if we look at the forced labor through the tradition of Theravada Buddhism we see that its effect may have been more demoralizing than at first glance. The requirement that Buddhist monks be expected to work for their living should not be regarded as an imposition. For the most part, the practice is far from uncommon in cultures where the Mahayana form of Buddhism dominates, such as India or China. However, “in the Theravada, fully ordained monks are prevented from engaging in many types of activity by virtue of their rules of discipline (*vinaya*). The digging of the ground, for example, is a monastic offence on the grounds that it inevitably causes the death and injury of small creatures” (Harris 2007, 114).

In the traditional setting this did not lead to the charge that monks were lazy. Looked at from a purely economic perspective, the removal of significant numbers of potentially active young men from an over-populated labour market can be seen in a positive light. But from the religious perspective the custom makes more sense. The path to enlightenment is regarded as a difficult road that can only be trodden by a minority. Admittedly, only a very few monks can be said to have achieved this goal but all *sangha*
members, almost regardless of the spiritual capabilities, are symbols of the possibility.

Lay people, by contrast, do not possess the ‘spiritual capital’ of the monks.

(Harris 2007, 114)

In the set of relations deeply embedded in Theravada Buddhist culture, the exchange of goods and services between these two segments of society, the *Sangha* and the lay people, ensures a final sense of equity (Harris 2007, 114). The lay person toils in the agricultural lands to produce food, a portion of which is offered to the *Sangha*. In doing so the lay person supports the religious order that valorizes such laborious actions as highly meritorious. “The monk, on the other hand, by temporarily or permanently eschewing worldly success, broadcasts the salvific message of the Buddha and, by acting as a recipient of alms, provides the most common means of lay merit-making” (Ibid., 114). By forcing monks to work, the Communist Party of Kampuchea dissolved these precarious social relations and, in doing so, immensely shocked a large percentage of Democratic Kampuchea’s population.

Evacuation, disrobement, and forced labor are just some of the many obstacles Theravada Buddhist monks faced during the initial stages of the Khmer Rouge political takeover. Deemed a reactionary religion from the onset, Khmer Buddhism as a legal religious practice was forbidden and no longer functioned as an institution. The monasteries were all closed and most were physically desecrated or destroyed. The cultural inclusion of the *Wat* (or *Vat*, a monastery temple, or school) in everyday Khmer lifeworlds’ ceased to exist as well. Pagodas under CPK control often served as locations for propaganda, re-education and planning (Harris 2007). *Wats* were transformed into domains of animal husbandry, grain or rice storage,
fertilizer housing, ammunition and weapons depots, or makeshift prisons for torture, detention, and execution. Monks were not only forced by *Angkar* to disrobe, “which is the affair of fellow monks, not of the secular power”, but they were even under some instances forced to marry (Harris 2007, 122). This practice, unrelated to any need to engineer population growth, had its reasons more likely, on the one hand, in the “desire to humiliate, control and smash and, on the other, an overriding concern for social conformity. This seems also to lie at the basis of the policy to compel Muslims to eat pork” (*Ibid.*, 127).

For the Communist Party of Kampuchea leaders, since Buddhism was forbidden and thus no longer made sense, the *Sangha* could be used for other purposes. The Khmer Rouge conscripted able-bodied monks into the army. “By forcing monks to be soldiers they built on a traditional fear that the *sangha* had the capability to rise up as a locus of opposition while at the same time this potential power was subverted to service the needs of the revolution” (Harris 2007, 129). Most conscription drives appear to have affected small numbers of individuals, but mass conscriptions happened from time to time. Kenneth M. “Quinn, for example, claims that in June 1973 over 1,000 monks from Banteay Meas, Kampong Trach and Chhouk districts, Kampot province were collected and formed into battalions. They were immediately sent to the front” (Harris 2007, 130).

Death was of course the only way out of *Angkar’s* stranglehold of Khmer Buddhism. And death happened frequently to monks. “Min Khin’s estimates were based on the analysis of reports received from 19 provinces and towns, supplemented by an investigation of ‘all kinds of [unspecified] documents.” It holds that the total number of monks killed from 1975-1978 was 25,168 out of 3,202 pagodas. That is an average of
7.86 monk deaths per pagoda (Harris 2007, 222). There were 5,673 monks killed in Takeo province alone. Of the 3,369 active wats in 1969, no available information exists of the active wats in 1979, probably because none existed. As for the number of monks living within the wats, in 1969 the number was 65,062 and in 1979 – 12 (Ibid., 225). Although these numbers can only be estimates, we all know that the Sangha met the same fate as millions of other Cambodians. The religious and spiritual cosmology that guided the Khmer metanarrative was crushed and thoroughly dismantled under the fury of Angkar.

But it was not just the physical annihilation of Buddhist monks that allowed Angkar to successfully destroy and abolish the Sangha and the Wat from the spiritual belief and daily life of the Khmer people. The Khmer Rouge sought to discredit and criticize Buddhism openly. In community meetings held in monasteries every night in every village attended by hundreds of people, cadre of the CPK at the district level would orate, “warning people that everyone must not have any nostalgia or regret about the disappearance of Buddhism. To his view the conduct of the Communist Party’s members was far more perfect than the practices of the monks” (Yang Sam 1987, 70). In other words, Khmer Rouge cadre more closely observed the tenets of Buddhist teachings. The virtues of the Angkar far supersede those of Khmer Buddhism.

He/she persevered in improving his/her personality by loving and respecting people, being honest, protecting people’s interests, confessing his/her misdeeds, using modest and polite words, and avoiding adultery and polygamy, avoiding drinking, avoiding gambling, avoiding thievery. To the positive, they emphasized being servile and self-sacrificing, being constructively critical, being self-reliant, being always alert and conscious, being the master of one’s work and respecting collectivism. These are the
virtues of the ‘true’ revolutionary members who supposedly had far better personalities than monks.

(Yang Sam 1987, 70)

The most intriguing facet of Democratic Kampuchea’s eradication of Theravada Buddhism and the *Sangha* was its rupturing of people’s participation in cosmic ordering, which depended on their ritual engagement. This, in turn, generated a cosmic betrayal that clinical psychologist Peg LeVine, in her 2010 volume *Love and Dread in Cambodia*, underscores as “Ritualcide” (LeVine 2010, 14, author’s italics). LeVine’s work focuses more on how *Angkar* destroyed and blocked individuals from protective, predictable ritual, when distressed. And without ritual and access to safe spirit places, there is no protection. Without protection, people fear unpredictable, vicious forces (*Ibid.*, 14). But what is more fascinating for this discussion is the way in which she details how the traditional Khmer Theravada Buddhist marriage and funeral ceremonies were replaced by new Khmer Rouge revolutionary rituals.

Cadre conducted these important celebrations after the elimination of the *Sangha* instead of monks. Many couples had arranged marriages performed all at one time in one place, presided over by not God, but the omnipotent *Angkar*. Frequently, these ceremonies were organized in a labor field, since everyone was busy in their assignments and were told that there would be no reason to return to the village (Yang Sam 1987, 71). In front of the Khmer Rouge cadre, the sometimes newly met bride and groom proclaimed their promise to live together forever, lock and step with their utmost faithfulness and devotion to the *Angkar*. Parents usually took no part in such ceremonies (*Ibid.*).
Cambodia has maintained a long history of family conducted arranged marriages, even while courtship customs have changed over time due to socio-political circumstances. But for most couples during the Democratic Kampuchean regime, Angkar arranged the marriages, and in some cases people feared annihilation if they did not comply (LeVine 2010, 16). Even “waves of suicides were the result of these forced marriages” (Schanberg 1985, 48). Sarom Prak details the DK practice in Dith Pran’s memoir assemblage Children of Cambodia’s Killing Fields.

In this Communist regime nobody could marry without approval from Angka. Men were not able to propose to any girls. Angka compelled some people to marry even though they had never seen each other before. Angka prepared a wedding party for 70 to 100 couples every now and then in Takeo. The forced marriages were a good way for some of the people who had power—like the soldiers, the chiefs of villages and districts—to molest young girls until they got pregnant. Many of these girls were forced to marry these men, and sometimes they were killed because of being afraid to marry them. Flirtations, adultery, and love affairs were reason for execution. No one could complain or argue with them. If someone dared to do this, he or she would disappear.

(Sarom Prak 1997, 68)

Savuth Penn recalls that after his father was fatally shot by a Khmer Rouge cadre, his “mother was forced to remarry, and if she refused, they threatened to terminate her life” (Savuth Penn 1997, 47). Because of her background with the Khmer Republican Army, she had no choice but to accept the arrangement. Survivor and memoirist Dr. Sam Keo remembers in his 2011 work Out of the Dark Into the Garden of Hope, “the chief of the village, who was also a beautiful, single woman, began to pair up men and women.
She performed eight marriages that day” (Keo 2011, 67). The chief explained to Sam Keo, “The Angkar ordered me to perform as many weddings as I could to pair the young people up. I know that I am no exception to the order of the Angkar. The Angkar will pair me up and marry me to someone who I have never known before, just like I did to the others today” (Ibid., 68).

To date, only two photographs have been archived from this period depicting Khmer Rouge weddings, and no written wedding policy by the Communist Party of Kampuchea has yet been found (Youk Chhang from LeVine 2010, 21). The Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) photographs depict a wedding in Democratic Kampuchea as a somber affair. According to LeVine’s inquiry, the men and women rarely sat next to one another during the ceremony and the descriptions of the events spoke of black garb and folded kramer of red, green, violet, or blue. There were “rows of swollen eyes in dark holes or sockets”. And “three people who wed in Takeo said that there was a flower placed on a table, and various people mentioned black tyre sandals that they saw on others. Only one woman recalled seeing a flag during her ceremony with 25 couples” (LeVine 2010, 21).

Funerary practices were also ritually disrupted during the period of Democratic Kampuchea. Prior to 1975 funerals were ceremonial events presided over by Buddhist monks in order to look after what will happen next to the soul of the deceased. In this matter correct treatment of the corpse is vital. Buddhists believe that without the proper funeral the souls of the dead may wander in limbo for eternity (North 2005, 90). To ensure a safe passage to the next life, Buddhism allows transfer of additional merit from loved ones to the deceased during the period between the moment of death and the

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5 DC-Cam wedding photographs can be seen in (Khamboli Dy 2007, 33-34)
moment of cremation. This belief provides additional purpose to the Khmer funeral (Ibid., 90). Like most Buddhist activities this last increment of merit is achieved by appropriate chanting and praying. After several days the body is usually cremated and the ashes are interred in a small shrine somewhere in the local wat (Ibid., 91).

These ritual practices of course did not take place under the political religion of the Khmer Rouge. When a person died his or her body was immediately buried under the close watch of the cadres. And according to Yang Sam, “Neither procession, nor gathering of relatives, nor prayer was needed since these rituals only wasted time” (Yang Sam 1987, 71). Ian Harris later described this issue of funerary rites under the DK as a microcosm of official attitudes towards Buddhism (Harris 2007).

The economic ramifications of elaborate funerals offended the revolutionary conscience. Death rituals consumed resources that would be better used on the living, they disrupted work routines, and could provide an opportunity for the gathering of large groups who might be encouraged to express emotional, religious or anti-revolutionary sentiments. The dead, therefore, were to be disposed of with the minimum of fuss, lack of concern and no personal recognition. In addition, no attempt was made to replace traditional methods of grief alleviation for those enduring the demise of a loved one. (Harris 2007, 148-149)

These deaths were also those witnessed by certain friends or family members. We are most certainly not taking into account the thousands of executed individuals who were either mutilated beyond recognition and left for the dogs, tossed into mass grave sites that held thousands of victims, or those forced into the forest never to be seen again.

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6 Haing Ngor depicts a grisly scene in *Survival in the Killing Fields* (Haing Ngor 2007, 240)
These unfortunate souls never received the chance to allow for the transfer of additional merit. As Pin Yathay articulated in his brilliant memoir *Stay Alive, My Son*:

‘What sort of a revolution is this?’ Sarun shouted again, to no one in particular, wielding his machete like a madman. ‘Hard work! Hunger! Nothing else!’

The two guards came up to him. ‘What did you say, comrade?’ asked one.

Sarun stopped cutting, turned to him and looked him in the eye. ‘I said: What sort of revolution is this? We have to work too hard and we don’t get enough to eat! There!
That’s what I said!’

My heart sank.

‘Very well. If that’s what you say, follow me.’

The guards led him off into the forest.

Silence.

I waited, my heart racing.

Nothing.

Not willing to take any risks, I returned to my work, hoping against hope that Sarun would reappear.

An hour passed, two hours.

Eventually, I could not deceive myself any longer. I knew I would never see Sarun again.

(Pin Yathay 2000, 99)

Democratic Kampuchea’s funerary practices continue to be a source of contention some thirty-five years after the revolution. Khmer Buddhism is a syncretistic practice that combines elements of Hinduism and animism. Among the many spirits present in the animist world are those of the dead. “The spirits of people that died unnatural deaths are considered to be the most malevolent of these; because their spirits cannot rest, they
haunt the living and cause them misfortune” (Cougill 2007, 38). “In the case of especially inauspicious deaths, such as by violence or accident, it is widely believed that the dead person’s spirit or ghost remains in the place where he or she died, and does not move on to rebirth” (Ibid., 38). Thus many Cambodians consider the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes in Phnom Penh and the killing fields of Choeung Ek (or Choeng Ek) highly dangerous places and refuse to visit the sites. This along with the fact that both locations “have uncremated remains on display is considered by some to be a great offence, and tantamount to a second violence being done to the victims” (Ibid., 38, author’s italics).

U Sam Oeur speaks of the unease, worry, and disturbance of frequenting the mass graves in his Crossing Three Wildernesses.

Today, a visitor to the Killing Fields at Choeung Ek outside of Phnom Penh will get a clear sense of how haunted a place can be, particularly standing in the depression where hundreds of bodies were buried, while schoolchildren recite their lessons at the nearby community elementary school. Their young singsong voices give hope, but they cannot drown out the moans of the dead. There are thousands of such places in Cambodia. A medium, or someone sensitive to spirits, would probably go crazy in short order. (U Sam Oeur 2005, 283)

Shortly after Democratic Kampuchea was toppled by Vietnamese-led forces in January 1979, Chey Sopheara, now director of the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes in Phnom Penh says he saw a spirit of an inmate there. One early evening around 5:30 pm, he recalls sitting on a bench near one of the buildings. Suddenly a “spirit zoomed in and its two hands held my thighs so tightly that I couldn’t move. I noticed the
ghost wore red trousers.” The next morning, he says, guards there found the corpse of a
girl clad in red pants (AFP 2007). 48-year-old Ith Simorn who lives in a house across
from the ramshackle museum describes that “many people, including tourists, told me
they’ve seen spirits disguised as a monk, a prisoner and children” (AFP 2007). “At night
we can see a black shadow walking,” says Kim Sok, a guard at the museum. Former Tuol
Sleng inmate Chum Mey, three decades after he survived electric shocks and beatings,
says he still wakes up sobbing every night. He believes “the spirits of the Khmer Rouge
victims are still there, waiting restlessly around the former prison for justice” (AFP
2007). These are but a few examples of a sentiment shared by many of Phnom Penh’s
population. For those “who work at the museum or live nearby say the place will remain
haunted until the regime’s leaders are punished” (AFP 2007).

As the night descends on Cambodia’s capital, security guards at the Tuol Sleng
Museum of Genocidal Crimes huddle together to protect themselves from ghosts. These
ghosts represent the lives extinguished after arriving at the secret Phnom Penh prison
*Munti Sa-21* (known to the Khmer Rouge by its code name S-21) on the former grounds
of Tuol Svay Prey high school and adjoining primary school called Tuol Sleng (hillcock
of the sleng tree). The name Tuol Sleng has been used to designate the entire compound
after it became a museum in 1980, “perhaps because the sleng tree bears a poisonous
fruit” (Chandler 1999, 4). According to documents found in and around the prison, at
least 14,000 enemies of the state were detained at Tuol Sleng. Of those, only seven
survivors were found when the Vietnamese entered S-21 on January 8, 1979. The others
were either starved, beaten, or tortured to death on the prison grounds, or trucked to the
‘killing field’ of Choeung Ek, which was discovered about a year after the invasion.
of S-21’s inmates, in addition to thousands of other Cambodians—at least 20,000 people—were executed at this site, some 15 km from the prison. “Victims were usually forced to kneel at the edge of the mass graves while guards clubbed them on the back of the neck or head with a hoe or spade” (Cougill 2007, 34).

What is so extraordinary about the DK’s traditional ritualcide is that it effectively erased all that was left of the religious power of the Sangha. Not only were monks being executed or conscripted for battle, the ones that remained, although “legally” defrocked, had no use any longer in Democratic Kampuchea. The monks’ traditional roles as community and spiritual leaders, even presiding over marriage rituals and funeral processions, had been usurped by Angkar. “A significant number of people described Angkar as a mysterious-other or an invisible power that could take many forms in many places. Mostly, Angkar defied nature” (LeVine 2010, 154). From the ashes of the Sangha and Theravada Buddhism arose “a new order in which evil and good were fused in the Angkar and cadres were both subhuman beings with immense magical powers and morally superior beings equivalent to Buddhist monks” (Keyes 1994, 58). Buddhism was crushed and supplanted by ‘revolutionary’ norms and behavior implemented by Angkar’s political religion. The changes were “geared toward the dissolution of certain basic institutions—the family, village, and the wat—that would have competed with the state for people’s loyalties and labor” (Ebihara 1990, 23).

Unlike Theravada Buddhism, the Angkar seemed to mirror Hindu mythology where the combination of gods and demons are more prevalent. As LeVine writes:

For many, Angkar descended from a far away place and, like Vishnu, could transform into a god-like or demon-like image (and potentially possess another human in one of these forms). Khmer Rouge sayings about Angkar conjure a visionary image. Also
devoutness to *Angkar* was expected and some respondents alluded to their marriage as an act of devotion. If one person did not know what the other person’s relationship was to *Angkar*, then suspicion would increase. ‘We promised *Angkar* that we would love each other forever’ was a phrase spoken by many couples as one reason they have stayed together.

(LeVine 2010, 144)

Many of LeVine’s respondents described *Angkar* in these quasi-Hindu cosmological terms with polarized forces. Wherein the creator and the destroyer are one entity (LeVine 2010, 144). Although they may not have fashioned themselves as mythmakers, Democratic Kampuchea’s high organization succeeded in endowing *Angkar* the highest of social positions, overriding all that was before, including the two thousand year old Buddhist tradition, and positioning *Angkar* as the holder of mythical potential and gained power. During the political existence of Democratic Kampuchea, through the use of extreme violence and public condemnation, *Angkar* came as close as any regime in the world has ever come to successfully destroying an organized religion and the spiritual lives of millions of people.
CHAPTER 4

“It was the Angkar who saved your life, neither God nor genii.”

Voegelin and the Political Religion of Democratic Kampuchea

For philosopher Eric Voegelin (1901-85) some kind of spiritual meaning is at the core of all totalitarian politics. In order to describe the meaning construction of the totalitarian “regimes of the twentieth century that, in their opinion, went beyond the analytical reach of traditional concepts such as despotism and tyranny,” Voegelin in his 1938 treatise Die politischen Religionen developed the concept of the “political religion” (Vondung 2005, 88). The Voegelinian idea of political religion has “meant to define the essential meaning of ‘totalitarian,’ namely the claim of these regimes to dominate and control not only the political and social sphere, but all aspects of human existence, and secondly, to explain the outrageous and unprecedented use of violence against foreign enemies as well as against members of their own societies” (Ibid., 88). Germany’s National Socialism (see Burleigh 2000) and Italian Fascism (see Gentile 1996) have equally been described as political religions by numerous international scholars. But even “followers of movements that want to be anti-religious and atheistic” can be political religions because they “refuse to concede that religious experiences can be found at the root of their fanatical attitude, only venerating as sacred something else than the religion they fight” (Voegelin 2000, 32).

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7 Pol Pot’s Little Red Book, (Locard 2004, 175)
One such instance of a totalitarian project that described itself as being anti-religious and atheistic yet still operated as a political religion was the Khmer Rouge regime of Democratic Kampuchea under the leadership of the Communist Party of Kampuchea headed by Pol Pot. Although our knowledge of Democratic Kampuchea is still incomplete and perspectives on this period differ amongst historians, anthropologists, and political scientists, information of events and conditions during this time have concluded that the policies of the CPK “aimed at radically reformulating Khmer society and culture into a new revolutionary order” (Ebihara 1990, 22). As we will explore in later chapters, it is because of the implementation of Marxist-Leninist political theory, Maoism, and other strands of communist revolutionary thought that the CPK leadership formulated the radical agrarian utopianism of Democratic Kampuchea as a political religion. Just as Voegelin understood National Socialism as a genuine religious phenomenon, which means that at its root lay religious experiences that lead to a manifestation of a new faith, Democratic Kampuchea too, can be examined as a political religion in the same way (Vondung 2005). DK’s totalitarian ideological claim can be viewed as an authentic religious phenomenon which exhibited the trappings of many Khmer Theravada Buddhist religious experiences yet ultimately led to a construction of an entirely new spiritual identity. As the preceding chapter referred, the Democratic Kampuchean regime violently implemented a total overthrow and reformation of traditional Buddhist beliefs and substituted a new belief system in its place. A spiritual revolution of this magnitude, to vulgarly employ Voegelinian terminology, “radically de-divinized” the previous religious state and violently conducted a “re-divinization of man and society” (Voegelin 2000, 174-175).
For the DK regime to realize their vision of attaining an agrarian based utopian communism, a complete break from the past had to be accomplished. According to historian David Chandler the DK totalitarian project was unique. “No other regime tried to go so quickly or so far” … “the revolution was a courageous, doomed attempt by a group of utopian thinkers to break free from the capitalist world system, abandon the past, and rearrange the future” (Chandler 1999, 3).

Charles F. Keyes believes “the attack on Cambodian Buddhism went well beyond the Marxist notion that religion serves to disguise class relations. The Khmer Rouge sought, by eliminating the institution that had for so long served as a basic source of Khmer identity, to create a new order with few roots in the past” (Keyes 1994, 58).

Similar to the principle of ‘normative inversion,’ employed by Jan Assmann (1997, 31) to portray ancient Egypt, used to describe the “inverting of abominations of the other culture into obligations and vice versa”, the “Khmer Rouge sought to create a world that was the moral inversion of that of Buddhism” (Keyes 1994, 57, *my italics*). Mirroring the persecution instigated by Pharaoh Akhenaten (or Amenhotep IV) in Egypt during the fourteenth century BCE specifically against Amun and his divine consort Mut that eradicated the iconography of the previous Egyptian religion; Democratic Kampuchea’s radical attempt to eradicate all religion and replace it with a new revolutionary political religion not only involved rhetorical attacks but, as we have seen in the previous chapter, the symbolic and literal destruction and desecration of the two most important elements of Buddhism, the *sangha* and the *wats*. This crushed the population’s moral and spiritual life-world. All aspects of the people’s previous lives were drastically turned upside-down. Buddhist holy places that had served as moral and ceremonial centers for the
The populace were either physically demolished or profaned and their significance replaced by a revolutionary political ideology upholding new and different values and codes of behavior (Ebihara 1990, 33). “Democratic Kampuchea undertook an active program of indoctrination into their new ideology” (Ibid., 33). “[T]hey attempted to instill this revolutionary and socialist consciousness through self- and mutual-criticism sessions, speeches, songs, and the like” (Ibid., 33).

First hand accounts of the horrors that clouded this most serene of nations, like those of DK survivors Haing S. Ngor (1987), Pin Yathay (1987) and U Sam Oeur (2005), tell of the harshest of existences. Khmer Rouge soldiers not only destroyed traditional religion and culture, they also evacuated the cities and towns, forced the populace to march to rural areas for agricultural labor, collectivized the modes of production, communalized living and eating, abolished the monetary system, conducted widespread summary executions, and promoted starvation and disease.

Looking further abroad, the whole DK project reflected what the Bolsheviks attempted to accomplish in 1920s Russia. Through the execution and/or disrobement of priests and bishops, they too attempted to eradicate religion and substitute the Party in its place. Gentile describes:

Bolshevism never defined itself as a religion, although there had been some Bolshevik leaders, such as Lunacharsky, who had been old exponents of the movement “God-building” and interpreted Marxism as a new religion. They argued that socialism had to become the religion of the modern man, of God-Man and a humanity entirely free from myth of transcendence and supernatural being. …Bolshevik Russia also quickly embarked on a process of sacralizing politics, which developed over the coming years through the dogmatization of ideology and the imposition of absolute power on behalf of
communism, along with the establishment of a system of beliefs, rituals, symbols, and ceremonies that conferred sacredness on events and on leading figures connected with the Russian Revolution.

(Gentile 2006, 39)

But what separated the two revolutions’ practices was that in its attempt to control all aspects of everyday life and transfer the authority and loyalty from the spiritual world of Buddhism to a new order based on total acquiescence to the omnipotent Angkar, DK leaders attacked not only the religion they fought, but the social unit of the family and its spiritual beliefs at the core.

Anthropologist May Ebihara writes, “The village family in the old society was a unit of parents and children (and often other relatives as well) who lived and worked together, shared resources, and were emotionally attached to one another” (Ebihara 1990, 28). Under the DK political religion this “village family” was remolded and suppressed. In an effort to substitute itself in the parental role, Angkar changed the social unit of the family, first by the physical separation of family members, relocating children away from their parents to different labor camps for purposes of indoctrination. This separation from their parents made it easier for the Party to mold new forms of thought and behavior in the children. Thus while the children were “no longer under the authority of their families but rather of the representatives of the government and party” … “the customary relationship between the old and young was reversed” (Ibid., 29). The parents and elders that were once respected now became viewed as survivors of the reactionary old regime, and the young were the bearers of the new revolutionary culture (Ibid.). In DK the young were referred to as “Comrade Child,” “for all children are regarded as the infants of the
Angkar” (Ponchaud 1978, 121). Since Angkar became the father and mother of the people, it follows that all children belong to it and not to their true parents.

Ben Kiernan speaks of Angkar’s familial repression as “a world turned upside down” in his introduction to Dith Pran’s 1997 compilation of memoirs by young survivors, Children of Cambodia’s Killing Fields. “From 1975 to 1979 the Khmer Rouge regime not only upended the entire Buddhist religion but also mounted history’s fiercest ever attack on family life. In the pre-revolutionary Khmer language, the word kruosaa meant family. But under the Khmer Rouge it came to mean spouse. As the Khmer Rouge redefined family, they simply excluded children” (Kiernan 1997, xi). Almost all of Democratic Kampuchea’s families were broken up. Children were taken away and sent to worksites to live in barracks and to be indoctrinated. Extended or even nuclear families could not live together, “since family ‘influence’ – pernicious word for love – threatened the regime” (Ibid., xii). New cadres in the Eastern Zone, according to a local peasant, “told us to forget about ‘familyism’ [kruosaa niyum] and not to miss our wives and children, whom we were allowed to visit for only three days every three months.”

‘Familyism,’ the Khmer Rouge term for missing one’s loved ones, became a crime. It was often punishable by death” (Ibid., xiii).

Although it is not possible to accurately assess the death toll of children’s families, we are aware through survivor’s stories, like those in Dith Pran’s compilation, that Angkar upended the Cambodian world in various ways. All children no longer breastfeeding were forcibly taken from their mothers and permanently cared for by female members of the CPK. The reason was to “enable the mothers to work more effectively” (Kiernan 1997, xvi). At the age of about eleven most boys were sent to do
forced labor, building roads through jungles, or clearing brush through forests. As Ben Kiernan articulates:

Children had to work like adults. Adults, given instructions like children, were treated like animals. Animals received better rations than workers. Adults became so alienated from the regime that young children became the only hope for the Khmer Rouge revolution to reproduce itself. Children were employed as militia, to spy on their families, and as soldiers and executioners. The Khmer Rouge hoped to use children as the basis of a new society without memory.

(Kiernan 1997, xvi)

DK also exercised a “puritanical streak: men and women were strictly segregated in various spheres of life such as work teams, associations, and dining halls; illicit affairs were punished” (Ebihara 1990, 30). Sam Keo wrote that there was no way to become romantically involved because there “was no such thing as a lover or a boyfriend or girlfriend” (Keo 2011, 66). “In the Khmer Rouge regime, if you had sex outside of marriage, you had gone against the Angkar morals, and you would be subject to execution” (Ibid., 64). These ‘puritanical’ codes also controlled other aspects of life. For example, womanizing, liquor, and gambling were viewed as aspects of delinquency.

Reflecting other communist systems, the Democratic Kampuchean regime was analogous to a spiritual movement by virtue of its ambition to create a wholly New Man. And in order to do so Angkar imposed the highest degree of regimentation and discipline to their new political religion. Khmer Rouge base camps had ‘life style meetings’ that imposed the proper modes of ‘drinking, sleeping, walking, and talking’ as part of molding individuals to become ‘robot(s)’ in the service of Angkar (Ebihara 1990, 34).
Deviation from or infraction of rules in DK, similar to the Christian ‘sin,’ were dealt with by ‘critical sessions,’ one-on-one censure by a Party official similar to Catholicism’s ‘confession;’ or more severely by punishments that could include labor, beatings, imprisonment, torture, and execution (Ibid., 34). Individuals in Democratic Kampuchea were not allowed to make mistakes, “because the party does not make mistakes” (Ibid., 34). “‘Laziness, resistance, even verbal, to policy or instructions, and boasting or pretension’ were considered ‘crimes’ punishable by death” (Ibid., 34).

This regimentally made the codes and behaviors of previous religious institutions insignificant. Yet despite the fact that the CPK banned religion and executed monks, DK political models may have preyed upon Khmer Buddhist themes. If we are to examine further through the use of this lens, Angkar became the center of the new spiritual movement and its members became the high monks, with the Khmer Rouge soldiers its lesser monks. Frank D. Smith has recorded observations of Khmer refugees who viewed the CPK cadre in Buddhist cosmological terms as belonging to another realm—as animals, yeak, or spirits. To Father Ponchaud, these beings, belonging to the forest, outside of society, were seen as having ‘black powers.’ Thus the Khmer Rouge policy of evacuating the cities and towns and forcing the population back to the countryside and forests represented a spiritual journey back to the roots of Khmer Buddhist culture and away from Western influences. Echoing kindred themes of traditional Khmer literature, “the forests represent the ‘non-domesticated’ in contrast to the ‘domesticated,’ the ‘wild’ in opposition to the ‘civilized.’ It is also the home of hermits and a place of regeneration” (Ponchaud 1989, 161). In this rural society, “it was not to the literate that veneration was due, but rather to the ‘saintly’: to the hermits, central characters in Cambodian folktales,
to the monks and the ex-monks who were ‘knowing’ [bander], the achars [laymen in charge of the pagodas], and, more generally, to the ‘old ripe ones’ [chas-toum] who were held to be rich in human and spiritual experience” (*Ibid.*, 154). Driving DK’s population into the countryside and forests was aimed at ‘regenerating’ the people. Forcing the citizens to forget about their previous lives in the cities and pushing them to do backbreaking labor in the forests substituted for a Buddhist religious retreat of meditation in order to find oneself and one’s culture. It was a forced rejuvenation of spirituality. Former urban dwellers had to transform themselves into ‘people of the forest,’ as they referred to the revolutionaries.

Ponchaud’s discussion of the ‘return to the forest’ is echoed by one of Pol Pot’s biographers Philip Short. Short writes, that to Pol Pot the city-dwellers had to be rejuvenated by the physical labor of the countryside. For Brother Number One, “Only when they had been subjected to the regenerative power of manual labour and the rude battering of peasant life would the survivors emerge from purgatory, just as the Khmers Rouges themselves had emerged, toughened and purified, from their own years in the maquis” (Short 2004, 284). Thus the emptying of the cities’ inhabitants to the forests and countryside became a spiritual exodus.

This return to the forest and countryside, leaving your material life and individualism behind, reveals many similarities to the life of a monk. As Ponchaud explains:

Cadres espousing radical egalitarianism were wont to recall in their pre-1975 propaganda that Buddha had said, “All men are equal, princes and the powerful must purify themselves like each and all.” The essence of being a monk, a *bikkhu*, is being a wandering beggar with minimal possessions whose collected donations of food are
shared equally among monks of the same monastery or temple. Buddha instructed his followers to take their robes from the charnel fields, to dress alike, to live from donations, and to have few, if any, possessions. Certainly the egalitarianism and asceticism of Buddhist monastic life found echoes in the abandonment of home, family, and all possessions practiced by the mobile work brigades of Pol Pot’s Cambodia.

(Ponchaud 1989, 173-174)

Just as Michael Burleigh declared in 2000’s *The Third Reich*, “Mussolini and Hitler explicitly, and repeatedly, identified themselves as agents of Providence, dispatched to lead their respective chosen peoples from helotry and ignominy”, Pol Pot and his *Angkar* believed themselves to be visionaries and the carriers of the new faith that would lead the Khmer people from slavery to liberation (Burleigh 2000, 8). Burleigh, when describing patterns of fascist and Nazi faiths, identified a form of “political eschatology: from perdition to redemption, abject misery to glory, from tiny sect to mighty mass movement, from fractiousness to harmony” (*Ibid.*, 9). This portrayal exemplified *Angkar*’s sentiment as well. By the use of violence the Khmer Rouge not only re-visioned, they *forced* a new eschatological belief system.

Democratic Kampuchea was akin to a religious movement by imposing its radical utopian egalitarianism on its citizens as if it were a spiritual journey from the ‘old world’ of reality into the ‘dream world’ of *Angkar*. The CPK’s policies and practices were the attempt to construct their ‘dream world’ into reality. As Voegelin elucidates in his *The New Science of Politics*:

> With radical immanentization the dream world has blended into the real world terminologically; the obsession of replacing the world of reality with the transfigured
dream world has become the obsession of the one world in which the dreamers adopt the vocabulary of reality, while changing its meaning, as if the dream were reality.

(Voegelin 2000, 226)

And in *The Political Religions*:

Instead the state takes over the reality and makes itself into the only true reality, from which a stream of reality is allowed to flow back to the people, providing them with new stimulus in their role as parts of the suprahuman reality. We are caught in the innermost heart of a religious experience, and our words describe a mystical process.

(Voegelin 2000, 30)

As described above, the political religion of Democratic Kampuchea possessed many similarities to the very Buddhist roots it wanted to eradicate. Mirroring Mao’s China, the re-visioning of the DK movement into a political religion, “which is inherent in the ideological dogmatism and political monopoly of the Communist Party,” resulted from an initiative from above, but not the spontaneous participation of the masses from below (Gentile 2006, 124). In Democratic Kampuchea what occurred was a *violently forced* participation of the masses. This produced what Emilio Gentile illustrates as “politico-religious syncretism,” in which totalitarian ideology mixes with characteristics of popular religiosity (*Ibid.*, 124). For some, it is precisely those similarities that allowed *Angkar* to rule its citizens. As quoted previously, Father Ponchaud proclaimed that “some (but by no means all) Buddhist beliefs facilitated the rise and dominance of the Khmer Rouge” (Ponchaud 1989, 152). For example, the egalitarianism of the *sangha* was used to justify the radical egalitarianism imposed by *Angkar*. Also the mystical ‘regeneration’ of the countryside and forest mirrored the wondering and contemplation of a monk. So too
the loss of material possessions and money is part of Buddhist monkhood. In other words, while the transition from the ‘old world’ to the ‘new world’ was radically different it was not a completely new understanding of reality. Whether or not Angkar actively implemented the connections, the Kampuchean Revolution maintained a few of its roots in the Buddhism of pre-1975 Cambodia.

Alexander Laban Hinton in his 2005 work *Why Did They Kill?* further explores the relationships that connect traditional Khmer culture to its totalitarian project. In a sense, it is an exploration into the connections between the pre-revolutionary ‘old world’ and the post-revolutionary ‘new world’. Hinton’s book is an anthropological study into the origins of how and why perpetrators commit murderous acts in situations of totalitarian control. This phenomenon is known as the paradox of perpetration. His “project builds on the invaluable work of historians and political scientists who have provided crucial insights about the many ways in which political dynamics, international affairs, socioeconomic conditions, and historical processes (‘macrolevel’ analysis) contributed to the Khmer Rouge genocide,” however “they have paid less attention to the local, experimental, and motivational aspects (‘micolevel’ analysis) of the genocide” (Hinton 2005, 22). The work focuses explicitly on the cultural dimensions that led to the CPK operation of annihilation. Hinton agrees with other scholars that DK ideologies were introduced through the global flows of Marxist-Leninist and Maoist ideas, however, these bodies of knowledge are always localized. They are “dependant on their ability to play upon a variety of emotional laden local understandings” (*Ibid.*, 22). The study’s implicit line of thought shows “how cultural models are strategically manipulated by or more tacitly motivate genocidal regimes” (*Ibid.*, 22). Hinton writes that the “Khmer
Rouge attempted to motivate its minions – who were differentially constrained in various contexts – to kill by invoking ideological discourses that played upon Cambodian cultural models related to revenge, power, patronage, status, face, and honor” (Ibid., 23). It is a fusing of worldly ideologies with local preexisting emotional and cultural models.

Although Hinton’s work is brilliantly written and many of his analyses pepper the previous chapters and those that follow, the use of “Cambodian cultural models” cannot explain why killers kill. In Hinton’s analysis one can find ideas that suggest that the totalitarianism of the Khmer Rouge happened, and millions of human lives were eliminated, because of the cultural and spiritual makeup of the Khmer people. It is as if a regime of terror was predetermined to exist in the nation because of the religion and culture of its populace. Hinton fails to take into account the overwhelming political and spiritual omnipotence Angkar had over all aspects of the population’s social and cultural lives. The forced migration to the forests and countryside may have been similar to the spiritual journeys of monks but the leaders of Democratic Kampuchea did not manipulate aspects of Khmer Buddhist spirituality for the maintenance of their regime – they instead constructed a new spirituality. Angkar destroyed the traditional Khmer Buddhist cultural reality and replaced it with an alternate one. Just as the Buddhist teachings restrained the animal in man, the DK ideology freed it.

But statements of the sort do not prevent us from exposing the similarities that existed between traditional Khmer Buddhist spirituality and the CPK’s political religion. To the Buddhist, the greatest ‘demerit’ stems from killing either animals or humans, the karmic doctrine and the belief in reincarnation, which both underlie the Khmer Buddhist vision of the world, can shed some light on the enigma of the massive executions and
violence carried out in Democratic Kampuchea (Hinton 2005, 25). Not unlike any other totalitarian regime, violence is an essential part of its existence. But the difference between Western examples and the DK experiment is that its widespread belief in reincarnation gives rise to a relationship to death less tragic than that prevailing in the West since the end of the Middle Ages (Ibid., 31). To Ponchaud, “If life is precious to Westerners, it is because it is conceived as being unique, beginning with conception and ending with death. In contrast to such a linear conception of life, the Buddhist cyclical concept, stemming from the doctrine of reincarnation, tends to dilute the absolute nature of existence” (Ponchaud 1989, 174). Thus the fear of dying, or for the DK cadre, killing, for that matter, was not viewed as that tragic. After listening to numerous accounts provided by refugees who escaped massacres, Ponchaud proclaimed that “one cannot fail to note a certain complicity between the executioners and their victims, each accepting the tragic rules of the game governing them” (Ibid., 174). And to Thierry, “the act of murder, furthermore, is not conceived as an evil and uniquely reprehensible act: it assumed a revelatory function, either in the sense that it was a prelude to a rebirth, or in that it triggered acts of salvation, exemplifying the divine or Buddhistic cosmic order” (Thierry 1978, 457).

“The Khmer Rouge devotion to violence, xenophobic fear of contamination, righteousness, and literalism derive their peculiar psychological force from the dictates of sectarianism” (Jackson 1989, 7). Thus all the murder and loss of life that exemplified the Democratic Kampuchean regime, to Angkar, was just an unfortunate part of the spiritual re-visioning of a selfless egalitarian utopia. The “moral self-righteousness, the literal and
doctrinaire way of pursuing goals are what separate the Khmer Rouge from comparable revolutionary phenomena” (Ibid., 7). Philip Short’s 2004 biography of Pol Pot describes the DK years in more detail:

Drear and joyless it was, certainly. But that was what its leaders intended. Theravada Buddhism taught that nirvana, the realm of selflessness, could be attained only when the ‘thirst for existence,’ made up of worldly and emotional attachments, had been totally extinguished. Under Pol’s rule, love, sorrow, anger, passion and all the other feelings that made up everyday life were seen as emanations of individualism to be banished for the collective good. In some parts of the country, it was forbidden even to laugh or sing. In pursuit of illumination, the people had to suffer.

(Short 2004, 328)

And suffer they did. As mentioned above, estimates place the death toll during the forty-four months of continuous revolution in Democratic Kampuchea at 1.7 to 2 million lives. But to Angkar it was justified. Suffering and death were an essential part of the politico-religious process. Short describes that “Mey Mak’s commanding officer told him: ‘If we worry about that sort of stuff, we are no longer revolutionaries.’ Soldiers were urged to ‘cut off their hearts’ towards potential enemies, a category which included all urban deportees. It might be argued that such behaviour comes more naturally to Cambodians than to other nations because their culture regards forgiveness as a form of weakness” (Short 2004, 284).

Thus life in Democratic Kampuchea could only be sustained by the blind following of the new regime’s political religion. This was true of all the citizens of DK. In order for the Party members and the population to bow down to Angkar the destruction of ‘material and spiritual private property’ had to take place. Unlike the destruction of the
cultural and social institutions mentioned above, this was described as ‘changing your mentality’ (Short 2004, 316). According to Short, “The destruction of ‘material and spiritual private property’ was Buddhist detachment in revolutionary clothes; the demolition of the personality was the achievement of non-being. ‘The only true freedom,’ a study document proclaimed, ‘lies in following what Angkar says, what it writes and what it does”’ (Ibid., 318-319).

In one’s mind there is always ‘spiritual private property’ and in Pol Pot’s DK even your right to your thoughts was denied. This ‘changing your mentality’ was made clear at a month-long seminar conducted by Khieu Samphan at the former Khmer-Soviet Technical Institute in Phnom Penh. There Khieu Samphan explained:

The first thing you have to do is destroy private property. But private property exists on both material and the mental plane…To destroy material private property, the appropriate method was the evacuation of the towns…But spiritual private property is more dangerous, it comprises everything that you think is ‘yours’, everything that you think exists in relation to yourself – your parents, your family, your wife. Everything of which you say, ‘It’s mine…’ is spiritual private property. Thinking in terms of ‘me’ and ‘my’ is forbidden. If you say, ‘my wife’, that’s wrong. You should say, ‘our family’. The Cambodian nation is our big family…That’s why you have been separated: the men with the men, the women with the women, the children with children. All of you are under the protection of Angkar. Each of us, man, woman, and child, is an element of the nation…We are the child of Angkar, the man of Angkar, the woman of Angkar. (Short 2004, 316)

The ideological and brutal control Angkar sought during the DK regime, along with its total destruction of the traditional religious institutions the citizens of Cambodia
ever knew, exhibits all the characteristic features of a counter-religion. From 1975 to 1979 Angkar represented a new radical religion counter to the traditional Theravada Buddhism that had shaped Cambodian society for centuries. The Khmer Rouge’s brutal implementation of this political religion may be mirrored only by the monotheistic revolution of Akhenaten in Egypt during the fourteenth century BCE. In its radical rejection of tradition and its violent intolerance, the revolution of Akhenaten exemplified the counter-religion. Just as Pol Pot tried some thousands of years later in a tiny country in Southeast Asia, “Pharoh Amenophis IV changed the whole cultural system of Egypt with a revolution from above in a more radical way than it ever was changed by mere historical evolution” (Assmann 1997, 24).

The temples were closed, the images of the gods were destroyed, their names were erased, and their cults were discontinued. What a terrible shock such an experience must have dealt to a mentality that sees a very close interdependence between cult and nature, and social and individual prosperity! The nonobservance of ritual interrupts the maintenance of cosmic and social order.

(Assmann 1997, 25)

Angkar too changed the whole cosmic order of Cambodia in its implementation of a new political religion and its complete destruction of the previous one. From this view Pol Pot’s counter-religious revolution reflected several aspects of Akhenaten’s. The Khmer Rouge radically rejected tradition and displayed violent intolerance. It also closed temples, or wats, destroyed images of the Buddha, erased Buddhist scriptures, and discontinued religious observance. This nonobservance of religion, and the subservience to Angkar, also interrupted the maintenance of cosmic and social order in Cambodia as
well. Just as Jan Assmann articulates of Akhenaten’s revolution, during Pol Pot’s movement, the “catastrophic and irreparable crime must have been quite widespread” (Assmann 1997, 25).

The complete overthrow of traditional polytheistic Egyptian society and the replacement of the sun god Aten as the only god during Akhenaten’s reign was similarly implemented in Cambodia starting in 1975 when the traditional Buddhist society of the Khmers was overthrown and replaced by the political religion of Angkar. And even though the Khmer Rouge regime has not been banned from official and historical memory as Akhenaten’s had, it too has survived in the form of traumatic memory (Assmann 1997). A traumatic memory Cambodians will not soon forget.
Khmer people interact with the spirit realm on a regular basis in Cambodia as represented by daily offerings of incense, fruit and flowers for ancestors on home alters. The Khmer culture contains a complex structure of spirit phenomena that often overrides more formalized religious beliefs. “Within metaphysical-based systems, conscious life can be ascribed to nature; bodies can be inhabited by souls as either material or immaterial; spirits can exist as separate disembodied states; and activity of spirits of the recently deceased can visit and/or possess the living” (LeVire 2010, 138). Cambodians have had long associations with the animistic realm. The Khmer language has Pali and Sanskrit terms that account for animating forces with strong connections to Hindu images of gods with transforming powers (Knipe 1991). Although Theravada Buddhism is the official national religion of Cambodia that commands the sincere and devout allegiance of most Khmer, the spiritual life of the people is better seen as a blend of elements not only from Buddhism but from Hinduism, animism, and ancestor-spirit worship.

In her groundbreaking 1986 work, Svay, A Khmer Village in Cambodia, May Ebihara characterizes the spiritual synthesis of Buddhism, Hinduism, animism, and ancestor-spirit worship as “indigenous folk religion.” For Ebihara, this “folk religion” is the “oldest religion of the Khmer” and “offers a variety of supernatural beings, as well as

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8 Pol Pot’s Little Red Book, (Locard 2004, 174)
rituals and other practices, that are still firmly espoused in village life” (Ebihara 1986, 363). For the observer it may be possible to segregate various elements of beliefs and practices as deriving from one religious tradition or another. But “for the ordinary Khmer, Buddha and ghosts, prayers at the temple and invocations to the spirits, monks and mediums are all part of what is essentially a single religious system, different aspects of which are called into play at different times” (Ibid., 364).

While the Khmer are officially Buddhists, their Buddhism encompasses and co-exists with what Ebihara termed “folk religion” that centers around belief in a variety of supernatural beings and essentially magical rituals and other practices. Virtually no competition or conflict subsists between the national religion and this folk religion (Ebihara 1986). “Shrines for spirits are found on Buddhist temple grounds; magical practitioners are also devout Buddhists; life cycle and other ceremonies combine offerings to both spirits and monks; appeals are made to Buddha and spirits in time of trouble; etc.” (Ibid., 424). There is an array of supernatural beings in the folk religion. The neak ta are, in a broad sense, “guardian spirits that maintain the welfare of the thing or area which they inhabit” and are “applied to a variety of different sorts of supernatural entities ranging from animistic spirits to celestial deities” (Ibid., 425). Neak ta can also refer to an ancestral person in general, or considered to be spirits of the dead. DK survivor and memoirist U Sam Oeur referred to the neak ta as “spirit cabin”, the site being a “communal spirit house” (U Sam Oeur 2005, 228). Professor at the Faculty of Archeology at the Royal University of Fine Arts, Ang Choulean, describes the neak ta in more detail in his 2000 work People and Earth:
Neak Ta is the most omnipresent figure of the divinities which populate the supernatural world of the Cambodian countryside. Small huts for the Neak Ta are found throughout the landscape and every village regards the Neak Ta as tutelary gods. In addition, the Neak Ta is the only figure of the supernatural pantheon to be materially represented.

The Neak is not just a kind of simple spirit but rather a phenomenon or energy force relating to a specific group such as a village community. It is the main point of energy in the network linking the whole village, just like, for example, the circuit box is the junction of the electric wires serving a group of buildings or an area. In this example, the buildings share one fate as they are interconnected through the system.

(Ang Choulean 2000, 2)

Another supernatural entity of the Cambodian “folk religion” is, as Ebihara transliterates, *kmauit* (or *khmowj*), which are ghosts in the Western sense. In other words, “spirits of dead persons (the term kmuait also means ‘corpse’), especially those who have committed suicide or been murdered. These ghosts wander about and may appear in human or animal form although they usually vanish when approached” (Ebihara 1986, 428). Respect and/or fear for the folk religion’s supernatural entities is almost universal. Thus for the Khmer, the Buddhism that they practice is intrinsically intertwined and intermingled with the indigenous traditional folk beliefs. Due to this phenomenon, and for the sake of this particular discussion, I will not refer to Khmer Theravada Buddhism and “folk religion” as wholly separate spiritual beliefs, but instead refer to the synthesis of their sacredness as the peoples’ “spirituality”.
Familiarity with this “spirituality,” or the Khmer “spiritual experience,” helps to better understand the rise of Pol Pot’s Angkar and the horrors that followed. The leadership group and ruling authority of the Khmer Rouge referred to themselves as Angkar – “a ‘faceless name’ that evoked complex meanings” (LeVine 2010, 13). A key symbol of the new order, the Angkar, constituted a Communist Party of Kampuchea “ideological palimpsest linking high-modernist thought, communist ideology, and local understandings to idealize a new potent center” (Hinton 2005, 127). Angkar is “derived from the Pali term anga, meaning ‘a constituent part of the body, a limb, member’ and proximately from the Khmer term angk, which has the primary meaning of ‘body, structure, physique; limb of the body’ but is also used to refer to ‘mana-filled’ objects such as monks, royalty, religious statuary, or Siva lingas” (Ibid., 127). Angkar in the Khmer Dictionary is described as “a type of structure, an orderly institution that arranges the state of affairs of the government or a governmental [administrative] group created in order to achieve prosperity – as in a ‘political organization’ or a ‘state organization’” (Ibid., 127). It is however more commonly translated as only, “organization.” But it also connotes a structure that orders society – an “organic entity that is infused with power” (Ibid., 127).

If we configure Angkar as a personification of what Eric Voegelin characterized as a political religion, the rise of Angkar was facilitated by the spiritual and moral vacuum left by the legal abolition and physical destruction of Khmer Theravada Buddhism. Angkar was able to infiltrate the hearts and minds of the Cambodian people by taking advantage of individual fear and dread. With the Sangha devastated and the wats and pagodas demolished, all that was left to fill the moral vacuum was “spirituality,”
or more specifically the *neak ta* and *kmault*, animistic spirits and celestial deities. But with respect comes fear for these supernatural entities. And as we have seen, the *Angkar* preyed on this fear.

For a decade ethno-psychologist Peg LeVine has followed Khmer men and women as they have come to terms with the memory of the Pol Pot period. Fascinatingly, she “observed an unusual form of compliance by Cambodians when they perceive violence to be sourced by transforming, destroying spirits. At such times, their anxiety is palpable and they are powerless to act if they cannot protect themselves” (LeVine 2010, 13). Mistrust, fear, and hypervigilance were related to the respondents’ experiences of *Angkar*. It was a damaging and potentially possessing force. *Angkar* was the unknown. A “power so large that people were afraid to think for fear that *Angkar* could read their minds. It is one thing to keep secrets from oneself, but quite another to be blocked from protective, predictable ritual, when distressed. The gravity of this dread-making context is staggering to contemplate” (*Ibid.*, 13-14).

What needs to be put into perspective is that starting on April 17, 1975 mass segments of the population of Cambodia were forcibly evacuated from their home cities, towns, or villages and marched, sometimes for hundreds of miles, and relocated to work sites and communal camps deep in the countryside. All that they had identified with before was lost and all that lied before them now was anew. Everything that had brought order to their spiritual lifeworlds, the *Sangha*, *wats*, pagodas, was obliterated. For many they became lost souls, empty shells of their former selves. As survivor and memoirist
Loung Ung described, after having to “walk from the break of day until the dark of the evening” – “Gone is the air of mystery and excitement; now I am simply afraid” (Loung Ung 2000, 27).

Interestingly, the more people were removed from access to traditional spiritual rituals for protection, the more their spirit-based anxiety increased. For LeVine, “Fright was the consequence of not being able to appease spirits, maintain obligations to ancestral spirits, or protect oneself and others from possessing, wandering, or vengeful spirits” (LeVine 2010, 14). Displacement restricts access to safe spirit places, where neak ta may reside. Without access there is no protection.

Angkar fed on the spiritual fear held by most of Democratic Kampuchea’s inhabitants. If a person asked who Angkar was, for example, he or she might receive the cryptic reply: “Why, the people of course! It is everyone; it is you” (Criddle & Mam 1987, 153). Most of the time these senses converged portraying Angkar as a quasi-divine entity, comprising the CPK leadership and the populace, to be worshipped by everyone.

As Haing Ngor explained, “Logically, Angka had to be a person or a group of people, but many found it easier to believe that Angka was an all-powerful entity, something like a god” (Haing Ngor 1987, 199). Angkar filled the need of “a ‘certain being’ that would give order to society, who would censure that which should be censured, and who would banish those who deserved to be banished.” …“In return, the ruler was given a share of the rice produced by the people” (Ling 1993, 104). This is a reference to the “Lord of the Fields” (Raja), and there is evidence that suggests that Angkar acted as such a Lord and was perceived to be one.
In his *Why Did They Kill?* Hinton stated that while spiritualism was banned during Democratic Kampuchea, “Angkar supplaned Buddhism as the new ‘religion’” (Hinton 2005, 128). Like a deity, it was depicted in superhuman terms. “Angkar was characterized as something to be ‘believed in,’ ‘loved,’ and ‘thanked for the good it has done,’ as an entity that ‘provided for’ the people and was ‘master of the land and earth’” (*Ibid.*, 128). *Angkar* was able to fill the spiritual void left by the eradication of traditional religious practices. It was able to be so “successful” in thought reform and mind control due to its “lordly” rhetoric. This helped *Angkar* seem “omnipotent and omniscient in everyone’s mind. Angka blessed us with food, clothing, and purpose. We were to turn to Angka for our every need” … “[It was like] a new unassailable deity” (Criddle & Mam 1987, 70-71).

Through a spiritual floodgate, *Angkar* sought to overrun, transform, and control Kampuchean society. It wanted to undermine people’s collective memories and separate them from the past. A favored method for undermining these institutions was one deeply rooted in Khmer culture. “This involved the oral transmission of edifying sayings, rhymes, and proverbs. Before the revolution these short, commonsensical texts had provided generations of Khmer men, women, and children with diversion and moral guidance. For hundreds and perhaps thousands of years, they had furnished the thought-worlds of ordinary Khmer” (Chandler 2004, xiii). But after the Kampuchean revolution new sayings, rhymes, and proverbs peppered the countryside. Henri Locard’s 2004 anthology of many of these sayings titled *Pol Pot’s Little Red Book* exposes this all-seeing and all-knowing *Angkar*. This omnipotent and omniscient presence was summed up as *angka: phne:k monoah* (Locard’s transliteration) or:

*The Angkar has [the many] eyes of the pineapple.* (Locard 2004, 112)
As Locard articulates, “It is in the nature of Pol Pot-ism, and what Robert Jay Lifton, speaking of the Cultural Revolution, calls, with reason, ‘totalism’” … “The Angkar was an omnipresent being, fount of all power and all authority, with the attributes of a god” (Locard 2004, 112).

_The Angkar is full of cleverness._ (Locard 2004, 111)

Those that lived and died during the Khmer Rouge period felt the ambiguity of this statement. Behind which lied a “faintly veiled threat from the all-seeing Angkar god” (Locard 2004, 111). This “god” of Angkar was able to rise to extraordinarily brutal heights and unprecedented horrors due to the control it exercised over the “spirituality” of the people.

*Pol Pot’s Little Red Book* and the sayings of Angkar represent an aesthetic dimension to the rule of Democratic Kampuchea that also helps us understand the rise of Angkar and the horrors that followed its bloody lead. As the revolution grew in intensity the aesthetic dimension of everyday Khmer life began to erode. Monasteries, schools, libraries, and museums were shut. Art, books, newspapers, magazines, radios, and televisions were banned. Monks, teachers, students, artists, professionals, and intellectuals were executed. All those who may have taken a part in the Khmer aesthetic scene of the 1970s were effectively silenced. Those that may have survived the first wave of purges never spoke a word of their past lives in fear of Angkar’s wrath. Just as the spiritual vacuum facilitated the rise of Angkar to that of a “god”, the lack of an aesthetic movement during the political existence of Democratic Kampuchea eased the Angkar into a position where it would be the only source of aestheticism.
As touched on above, for hundreds and perhaps thousands of years, orally transmitted sayings, rhymes, and proverbs have helped steer the affairs of ordinary Khmer. They guided people through life’s paradoxes, pleasures, and adversities. As one proverb tells us:

*Don’t believe the sky. Don’t believe the stars. Don’t believe your daughter when she says she has no lover. Don’t believe your mother when she says she has no debts.*

(Chandler 2004, xiii)

And another warns:

*If a tiger lies down, don’t say: ‘The tiger is showing respect.’*

(Chandler 2004, xiii)

For the promotion of the revolution and the power of Angkar these traditional sayings, rhymes, and proverbs were hijacked and transformed into a new Angkarian aesthetic dimension. The sayings were used in praise of the regime, in admiration of Chairman Mao, in worship of the Angkar, in support of the search for “enemies”, and in the glorification of collectivism. Some of these include:

*Long live the most glorious 17 April, [day] of super-abounding joy!* (Locard 2004, 44)

*Long live the correct and extremely clear-sighted Communist Party of Kampuchea!* (46)

*The Super Great Leap Forward, this is a big leap beyond all reality.* (72)

*When pulling out weeds, remove them roots and all.* (77)

*Love the Angkar, sincerely and loyally.* (105)

*The Angkar orders, execute!* (117)

*Stab one side, then stab the other side!* (165)

*A comrade guilty of many faults is an enemy.* (182)
He who has rice possesses absolutely everything. (238)
The red krama goes with a black shirt adorned with a whole troop of buttons. (283)

The last idiom describes another aspect of the aesthetics of Angkar – wardrobe. Democratic Kampuchea’s Center exercised “rules of conduct such as women having to keep their shirts buttoned to the neck” (Ebihara 1990, 30). Men and women were also made to dress alike. The Party’s strict dress code maintained that men and women wear the same loosely fitting black cotton pants and shirt, red and white checkered krama and rubber slippers made from automobile tires. In a sense Angkar uniformed its people to glorify the collective over the individual. It is almost absurd to imagine a world devoid of color. But for millions of Khmers – Black came to signify Angkar and its aesthetic dimension. Pin Yathay in his 1987 memoir Stay Alive, My Son describes this experience:

There was no relief from it. Cosmetics and fashionable clothing were all considered vestiges of capitalism, foreign imperialism, Western decadence. Our own clothing was despised. We were told we should become as much like the Ancients as possible, and advised to dye our clothing either by trampling it in the darkest mud we could find or by staining it with macloeur, the dark juice of a local fruit. Even spectacles, for some reason, were banished. The Khmer Rouge disapproved of sunglasses and seemed to equate prescription glasses with the evils symbolized by sunglasses.

(Pin Yathay 1987, 47)

Excerpts from A Poem for Grandmother in Chileng Pa’s 2008 memoir Escaping the Khmer Rouge tells of this “Black shadow” cast over Cambodia’s inhabitants.

However depending on the Administrative Zone the colors of the kramas could vary; blue, black, and green checkered could have also been acceptable.
Black cotton meals
Black living
Black marriages
Are common.
Ash black cotton
Is fate for all.

Keeping one’s
Own white cotton
Colored clothing
Belonging to
The old regime
Churned to death by
Black cotton.

Loud black cotton
Screaming that
We should be
Grateful to
Angkar for
Staying
In one bundle.

Colorful clothes
Must quickly
Be dyed
The hope and
Joy of black.
Or we will die
If we keep
The white color of truth.
(Chileng Pa 2008, 117)

_Angkar’s_ aesthetic experience helps to comprehend its grip on power. But it was not only language and clothing that where shaped by _Angkar’s_ politco-religious sensibilities. The Communist Party of Kampuchea leadership commanded the airwaves of Cambodia and broadcast over Radio Democratic Kampuchea official songs and slogans heard on ceremonial occasions and during governmental gatherings in Phnom Penh. These slogans and revolutionary songs played an essential role in CPK rituals. 
_Angkar_ abolished all traditional Khmer festivals as well as all festivals and rituals of the non-Indianized ethnic minorities at the periphery and filled the vacuum with a new revolutionary calendar of events during the course of the year (Locard 2004). Pol Pot’s speech on September 27, 1977, where he revealed to the world that the _Angkar_ was the Communist Party of Kampuchea and gave his version of Khmer history, was broadcast over Radio Democratic Kampuchea on the 29th proceeded by Pol Pot’s revised version of the internationally renowned revolutionary song _L’Internationale_ (Ibid.). What followed, the national anthem of Democratic Kampuchea “The Red Flag of the Revolution”, sung of:

Glittering red blood blankets the earth,
Sacrificial blood to liberate the people:
Blood of workers, peasants and intellectuals;
Blood of young men, Buddhist monks, and young women.

Blood that swirls away and takes flight, twirling on high into the sky,
Turning into the red, revolutionary flag!

(Locard 2004, 40)

Dith Pran’s 1997 compilation, *Children of Cambodia’s Killing Fields*, provides a child’s-eye view of a different, harsher world. One in which Sophiline Cheam Shapiro wrote of in the “Songs My Enemies Taught Me”, where the Khmer Rouge sang about the wonderful countryside, about the value of hard work and the worthlessness of passion. For Angkar it was all for the glorious revolution. “They were pretty songs, with beautiful melodies and poetic lyrics. Their intention was to make us work hard and forget about the snakes that lurked in the rice paddies, the dangerous currents of river rapids, and the emptiness in our bellies” (Shapiro 1997, 1). One of the first children’s songs she could remember learning under the Khmer Rouge was called “Angka Dar Qotdam” (The Great Angka).

We children love Angka limitlessly.
Because of you we have better lives and live quite happily.
Before the revolution, children were poor and lived like animals,
We were cold and suffered,
But the enemy didn’t care about us.
Only skin covered our bones, so thin we were worried.
All night we slept on the ground,
We begged and looked for food in trash cans during the day.
Now Angka brings us good health, strength.

And now we live in the commune.

We have clothes, we are not cold and miserable anymore.

The light of revolution, equality, and freedom shines gloriously.

Oh, Angka, we deeply love you.

We resolve to follow your red way.

We study hard both numbers and alphabet

To be good workers with good minds

In order to extend the revolution.

(Shapiro 1997, 2)

Later, as a nine-year-old, Sophiline Cheam Shapiro labored all day, every day. From sunrise to sunset, breaking only to eat one cup of watery rice porridge twice a day. As she toiled the sounds of the songs of her enemies bellowed from the loudspeakers.

The lands, the forests, the villages after liberation become lively landscapes

With laughter everywhere.

People are enjoying their work in the villages and cooperatives.

They sing beautifully while they work.

Look, look at the open rice paddies,

Look further at the mature rice, like golden carpet.

Look to the left, the young rice grows up so healthy,

Look to the right, replanted rice is growing in competition,

Look behind us, bananas compete with jackfruit, papayas with mangoes.

The fragrance of young and ripe fruit spreads everywhere.
In front of the houses the lemon grass, cabbage, herbs, scallions, and chilis are very green.

We are very happy living in the countryside.

We are very proud and happy.

We work hard to produce a lot more rice than before,

To improve the economy of New Kampuchea.

It is Kampuchea, independent, neutral, peaceful, advanced, democratic, glorious.

Men and women live in happiness.

(Shapiro 1997, 3)

Gone were the songs of before. “Gone were the songs of love and heartbreak. Blood and sacrifice were the themes of the day” (Shapiro 1997, 2).

Ruby red blood that sprinkles the towns and plains

Of Kampuchea, our homeland,

Splendid blood of workers and peasants,

Splendid blood of revolutionary men and women soldiers.

Live, live, new Kampuchea,

Democratic and prosperous.

We resolutely lift high

The red flag of the revolution.

We build our homeland,

We cause her to progress in great leaps

In order to render her more glorious and more marvelous than ever.

(Shapiro 1997, 2-3)
At the level of the composer’s mind itself, the words define the metamorphosis of the smiling and benign Saloth Sar of the Paris and Phnom Penh days, to the merciless and savage Pol Pot. “The impalpable tones of the music transmute aesthetic emotion into coarse brutality, a striking example of Communist mental manipulation. Beyond the socialistic aspiration to complete equality, sheer violence becomes the universal value that encompasses the apocalyptic Pol Pot-ian universe” (Locard 2004, 41).

In a way, the “sheer violence” of Angkar was its true aesthetic. But this aesthetic violence was one shrouded in mystery, and fueled by mysticism. We have discussed that in the spirit realm Angkar represented an omnipotent, omnipresent god-like force. But within the mystic realm Angkar symbolizes a multitude of ambiguities. In returning to Peg LeVine’s study, the responses by the many who were asked to define Angkar highlighted its numinosity. “Mr R who married in Kandal said, ‘Angkar is Magic Mouth’” (LeVine 2010, 34). He quickly learned a lesson about Angkar – just eat and shut your mouth – that was the strategy to survive (Ibid., 34).

References to Angkar often revealed an amorphous, often creepy, agent of intrusion (LeVine 2010). Respondents of LeVine’s study spoke of seeking power from magical sources, in particular, sources of magic embedded in nature. Some beneficial magic sources could be accessed through meditation or uttering Pali texts, medallions, or objects from sacred rituals; hearing sounds of sacred syllables; placing tattoos on the shoulder or top of head. A dangerous realm of magical sources include: “contact with human excrement, menstrual blood, liquid extracted from corpses”; “amulets or objects used in aggressive love; or by placing tattoos of naked women on the thigh” (Ibid., 140). This “‘dangerous realm’ of power was embedded most in respondents’ references to
*Angkar*, or when they gave accounts of having witnessed deaths by violent means” (*Ibid.*, 140). *Angkar* was represented as some organizational figurehead, or myth, magic, spirit. It is manifested within the mystical realm – “whereas in the realm of religion, principles and morals interpret the cosmic order and tend to be more concrete” (*Ibid.*, 143).

*Angkar* was an “it”, “appearing at night but one can’t see it” or “coming down from trees” (LeVine 2010, 143). It was a mighty transforming force, a pervasive, and ironically, consistent entity. A mysterious-other or invisible power that could take many forms in many places. *Angkar* existed outside the human realm and represented a threatening force. For survivor Teeda Butt Mam, she wrote that she was scared *Angkar* “would hear my thoughts and prayers, that they could see my dreams and feel my anger and disapproval of their regime” (Teeda 1997, 14). To some individuals they are “haunted now by the prospect that *Angkar* could return at any time” (LeVine 2010, 155). It was also an intermediate force between subject and object. *Angkar* “tended to function like an agency that permitted a possessing entity to infiltrate people and their place” (*Ibid.*, 155). It possessed intrinsic and extrinsic powers related to spiritism – as one women who married in Battambang said, “*Angkar* is *The Hearing*” (*Ibid.*, 159).

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At the same time that the categories of spiritual, aesthetic and mystical experience helped facilitate the rise of *Angkar* and the horrors that followed, the same categories can help us develop a politics of resistance to the banality of evil *Angkar* embodied. Hannah Arendt’s authoritative and startling report on the trial of German Nazi leader Adolf Eichmann first opened the world’s eyes to the problem of the human being within the
modern totalitarian system. In her groundbreaking series of articles in the *New Yorker*, which would later become 1963’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, Arendt examines the psychological paralysis that befell the willing participants of the totalitarian terror of the 20th century. Her account detailed the trial and banal fashion in which Adolf Eichmann approached his work of ‘transportation’ for the eventual elimination of millions of European Jews. In Arendt’s work and the later released documentary of the Eichmann trial *The Specialist*, the ‘banality of evil’ is conceptualized in its eerie totality as a psychosomatic disorder.

Arendt detailed “the lie most effective with the whole of the German people,” coined by either Hitler or Goebbel, that “the war was no war” and that “it was a matter of life or death for the Germans, who must annihilate their enemies or be annihilated” (Arendt 1963, 52). The Democratic Kampuchean regime of *Angkar* mirrored this totalitarian statement in its most vicious manifestation. As an all-seeing, all-knowing mystical entity, the *Angkar* could conduct its policies of terror without conscious. The banality of *Angkar* was in its formulation. It was much bigger than any one individual that belonged to it. *Angkar* was “the people of course! It is everyone; it is you” (Criddle & Mam 1987, 153). Thus the perpetrator is stripped from consequence, in other words, killing became no longer an individual course of action, it was a collective.

A politics of resistance to *Angkar’s* banality of evil entails a resistance to ritualcide. It represents the return to, or continuation of, the mystical, spiritual, and aesthetic thought-worlds that have guided the Khmer people through the ironies, pleasures, and hardships of everyday life. During the Democratic Kampuchean period resistance took place, although limited. In a Documentation Center of Cambodia and Ian
Harris interview, Ke Kan divulged, “In Stung Treng province some people kept small images of the Buddha at home and performed their devotions in front of them during the night. The statues were carefully hidden again at dawn” (Harris 2007, 149). Resistance of this nature may seem small, yet was extremely dangerous. “[A]t a village in Mong Russey district a group of ex-monks, nuns and old laypeople regularly gathered together at night. A painting of the Buddha that had been reversed to the wall during the day was turned round so they had a focus of worship. They were reported to the Khmer Rouge and were never seen again” (Ibid., 150).

At the local level there existed policies of resistance to the evils of *Angkar* in such a manner that there still remained scope for determined individuals to maintain a minimal level of spirituality. A very limited number of courageous elderly monks disrobed of their saffron attire and lived the life of a white-robed ascetic, if only for a short period (Harris 2007). A slightly larger group determinedly confronted the terrors of *Angkar* and performed their devotions in secret. Some found ingenious ways to resist evil. “Younger monks who had no choice but to disrobe in order to survive found different strategies to retain something, however tenuous, of their old religious allegiance. Some cut up their orange robes, sewed them into working clothes and dyed them black” (Chhang Song 1996 *from* Harris 2007, 172). “Others more obviously retained the symbolic presence of the robe about their person. Ven. Uk Mut continued to wear a monastic belt under his work clothes and confirmed that other prominent monks, such as Ven. Thim Pot, did likewise” (Harris 2007, 172-173).

In Democratic Kampuchea the revolutionary organization was the only significant power in the land. It may have been perceived to possess crypto-supernatural capabilities
and quasi-religious significance, however, there were many examples of the continuance of mystical and animistic rites among the people as well.

Wat Prasat Mathar in Chey commune, Kampong Svay district, Kampong Thom, close to the pre-Angkorian site of Sambor Prei Kuk, had two protector spirits, Ta Hang and Lok Yeay. During Democratic Kampuchea the villagers, joined by individuals who had been moved there from other locations, kept up a secret belief (*chumnoeur luoch leak*) in these divinities. Sticks of incense were burnt at the entrance to their shrines. According to one informant, even the Pol Pot officers were afraid of the spirits and believed in them, and it is widely claimed that when the daughter of an important cadre became lost in a nearby forest for several days, her father made them offerings of a roasted pig and wine. Soon after, the girl was found.


U Sam Oeur recalls his own secret efforts to appease the spirits and salvage his country and people. After abandoning his guard post as the golden disk of the full moon rose over the trees of the jungle, U Sam Oeur walked along the dikes to see if any Khmer Rouge cadres were eavesdropping and returned to his secret altar. There he stood in the moonlight. He wrote in *The Three Wildernesses*:

> My guardian spirit had told me that flowers represent hope, candles and torches symbolize enlightenment, and incense sticks are message transmitters. She also told me that a prayer from the top of a termite mound will reach any realm with which you wish to communicate. So I set my tiny Buddha statues that were always in my hidden pocket on the highest step of the three-stepped altar I had sculpted. I placed the flowers on the second level, and the incense sticks on the lowest step. I lit the twenty-one sticks of incense with my torch, set it on the altar, and squatted to recite the *namusacar*: Namo
Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhassa (Praise be to the Enlightened One, the Blessed One), three times, while bowing.

(U Sam Oeur 2005, 276)

Evidence has shown that the return of sacred practices allowed many to resist Angkar’s continued influence even after the fall of Phnom Penh to the Vietnamese in January of 1979.¹⁰

Soon after the invasion, people returned to their home towns and villages with mixed emotions of joy and fear … Former monks, particularly the elderly, rushed back to visit their old monasteries. On the journey back, many were moved at seeing the unimaginable destruction of the monasteries along the way. The sight of unsheltered Buddha statues amidst the debris of the destroyed temples was a shock to those who passed by. There were signs, however, that Buddhism could be restored… During this early period many people went to the temple with food offerings taken from the Khmer Rouge storage sites. The commemoration ritual went on for days and nights. Classical music could be heard across the rice fields and villages.

(Yang Sam 1987, 79-80)

These are but very few examples of the Khmer people’s resistance to the banality of Angkar’s malevolence, yet their impact was astounding. The very categories of spiritual, aesthetic and mystical experiences that help comprehend and illuminate the rise of Angkar and the terror that followed, were the very categories and experiences that

¹⁰ The Communist Party of Kampuchea mounted a limited yet violent domestic insurgency throughout the 1980s.
fostered a resistance to its power. Because in Cambodia – “a landscape with Flying Apsaras, the Garuda, the Naga, the Buddha, magic, spells, and spirits of the ricefields” – “There is nothing certain about sources of harm and protection” (LeVine 2010, xvi).
Voegelin and the Secondary Reality of S-21

Copies of Eric Voegelin’s Die politischen Religionen were streaming from the printers of the Berman-Fischer publishing house in March of 1938, just as the National Socialist occupation of Austria occurred. The publisher was an inevitable target of the occupation forces and the whole edition was confiscated before it ever reached the public. While only a few copies of the text found its way into circulation after World War II, apparently from various National Socialist agencies that received copies from the Gestapo, its motivations were clear (Voegelin 1989). Die politischen Religionen, or The Political Religions, represented an attempt to conceive of an “apparatus for dealing with the highly complex phenomena of intellectual deformation, perversion, crookedness, and vulgarization” that dominated the intellectual climate and made for the rise of power figures like Hitler possible (Ibid., 50). For Voegelin these vulgarian and ochlocratic problems were not to be taken lightly. These were serious problems of life and death; “one cannot simply not take notice of them” (Ibid., 50).

Voegelin indicated that the purpose of the book was to analyze and comprehend the self-interpretation of the National Socialist movement. Specifically, “he wished to understand the Nazi claim that the party (and thus its self-interpretation) was the ‘truth’ of the German Volk and of the place in history of the reality symbolized as that Volk”  

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11 Pol Pot’s Little Red Book, (Locard 2004, 207)
However, at the same time, he sought to analyze and draw the connection to the obvious conflict with commonsense reality posed by National Socialist race doctrines, associated ideological symbols such as the *Volk*, and their oppressive and murderous practices (*Ibid.*, 6). Voegelin in 1938 was not solely interested in denouncing the Nazis as “merely a morally inferior, dumb, barbaric, contemptible matter” but as a “satanical substance that is not only morally but religiously evil” (Voegelin 2000, 24-25). As Manfred Henningsen articulates, “He saw the root of evil in ‘religiousness’ and recognized it as a ‘real substance and a force that is effective in the world’” (Henningsen 2000, 6). These “Luciferian aspects are not simply morally negative or atrocious, but are a force and a very attractive force at that” (Voegelin 2000, 25).

According to Barry Cooper in his 2004 volume *New Political Religions, or An Analysis of Modern Terrorism*, conventional analyses of contemporary terrorist acts have described a “religious” dimension among the motivations of terrorist violence. Terrorists operating in Northern Ireland during the 1970s and 1980s “used Protestant and Catholic Christianity as a screen behind which they pursued their own political agendas” (Cooper 2004, 6). And more recently larger numbers of terrorist cells “are using religion itself as the primary motivation behind their attacks” (Durham 1999, 357). The term “religion” in itself is problematic. It is used in many senses, even in political analyses, and opens up a wide spatial and temporal field for terrorist activity. “[E]thno-religious’ terrorists often direct their violence at ‘ethno-secular’ leaders of the same ‘religious’ group. President Anwar Sadat, for example, was murdered by an Egyptian Islamist and Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was murdered by an equivalent type of Israeli” (Cooper 2004, 6). This
kind of ambiguity is not confined to the Middle East however, but applies throughout the world from the Balkans to India and Sri Lanka, to the Philippines.

As Roger Scruton noted at the beginning of his study *The West and the Rest: Globalization and the Terrorist Threat*, the etymology of religion indicates a sense of binding together by binding back to an originary event or divine revelation.

THE WORD “RELIGION” derives from the Latin *religio*, the root of which, according to a disputed ancient tradition, is *ligere*, “to bind.” Looked at from the outside, religions are defined by the communities that adopt them, and there function is to bind those communities together, to secure them against external shock, and to guarantee the course of reproduction. Religion is founded in piety, which is the habit of submitting to divine commands. This habit, once installed, underpins all oaths and promises, gives sanctity to marriage, and upholds the sacrifices that are needed both in peace and in war. Hence communities with a shared religion have an advantage in the fight for land, and all the settled territories of our planet are places where some dominant religion has at some time staked out and defended its claims.

(Scruton 2002, 1)

In one way or another, all political orders, including those in the West, are bound and justified by symbolic narratives that connect political performance in the pragmatic and secular sense to a broader order of meaning. Thus it can be “impossible to understand contemporary terrorism without paying close attention to the religiosity or spirituality that terrorists experience as central to their own activities” (Cooper 2004, 7). This can hardly be said to be the latest approach in the study of politics, to say nothing of the approach taken by the past’s great philosophers.
Why is it then, that while we are still presently at war with the Voegelinian “satanic substance” and “religiously evil” “Luciferian” force of modern terrorism, did Voegelin after 1938 discontinue using the concept of the “political religion” to help comprehend the attractiveness of totalizing regimes of terror? To Voegelin, the concept of political religion was “meant to define the essential meaning of ‘totalitarian,’ namely the claim of these regimes to dominate and control not only the political and social sphere, but all aspects of human existence” (Vondung 2005, 88). But as we have seen these ideologically driven totalitarian movements have assumed many different forms yet have continued to flourish even after the horrors of the Third Reich. Even “non-religious and aesthetic” Communist movements of the twentieth century “concede that religious experiences can be found at the root of their fanatical attitude” (Voegelin 2000, 32). This has left behind no doubt as to the extent of what Voegelin said in 1938 about the religious foundation of political order. As Henningsen explains:

In *The Political Religions* he rejects the conceptual nominalism that equates religion with the institutional churches and politics with the modern state. For Voegelin this neat compartmentalization makes it impossible to recognize that all political order is justified and legitimated through symbolic narratives that connect the respective society or movement with a larger order of things. The secularization of the world, this major achievement of modernity, has not silenced the quest for meaning but has produced the urge to find alternative ways of satisfying this human need.

(Henningsen 2000, 7)

*The Political Religions* reflect the intensity of the political crisis and the growing awareness by its author of the depth of the disaster that was about to occur. “Ideologies
now appeared as spiritual diseases whose origins lay in the late middle ages when sectarian religious movements grew too powerful to be publicly suppressed as heresies” (Cooper 1986, 30). With the decapitation of God during the Enlightenment and His proclaimed murder during the nineteenth century, “political religions” were created to express the lost emotions and sentiments that were once expressed through spiritual worship. In place of divine transfiguration through grace in death, humans sought out to transfigure themselves with “only scanty glimpses of reality.” “[P]erhaps only one single view: of nature, a great person, one’s people, mankind—what such a person sees becomes the realissimum, the paramount reality; in fact, it takes the place of God and, thus, hides all else also, and above all, God” (Voegelin 2000, 32). By and large *The Political Religions* expressed a fundamental truth – these ideologies were secular religious movements.

Despite the soberness of Voegelin’s analysis, the work concedes that man still cannot alter the structure of the world. As Voegelin laments:

> Men can let the contents of the world grow to such an extent that the world and God disappear behind them, but they cannot annul the human condition itself. This remains alive in each individual soul; and when God is invisible behind the world, the contents of the world will become new gods; when symbols of transcendent religiosity are banned, new symbols develop from the inner-worldly language of science to take their place. (Voegelin 2000, 60)

Just as the ideological “vulgarians” and “satanic” seducers of the 1930s, contemporary politico-religious manifestations possess the connection between social order and narratives of transcendent meaning. However, for Voegelin the problem with
characterizing these constellations’ root of evil in “religiousness” arose from the term “religion” itself. Voegelin abandoned the concept of political religion shortly after escaping the Gestapo in Austria, and later commented that he “would no longer use the term *religions* because it is too vague and already deforms the real problem of experiences by mixing them with the further problem of dogma or doctrine” (Voegelin 1989, 51). “The terminology was not simply wrong so much as vague and undiscriminating” (Cooper 1986, 29). Voegelin’s problem was with ideology and evil, not religion and evil. He later reflected that he possessed a “hatred of ideologists because they vulgarize the intellectual debate” (Voegelin 1989, 49). Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche in particular were all described as “intellectual swindlers” with “sick” ideas. Thus the attractive evil was never a manifestation of the political religion, it was of the ideologist. For Voegelin, ideology was a spiritual disease.

There is, therefore, an inherent friction between the common reality of worldly existence, in which you, and I, and the ideologically diseased terrorist must live – and the occult or “secondary reality” within which the terrorist lives imaginatively; an alternate reality where the killing of innocents to impress others is understood as altruistic heroism. Analysts of terrorism have used terms as “moral insanity” to identify what many have called this “spiritual disorder.” We will, however, use the term *pneumopathology*, distinct from psychopathology, to refer to the disorder in question.

In his brief essay *Ersatz Religion: The Gnostic Mass Movements of Our Time*, Eric Voegelin raised the question as to why Thomas More wrote *Utopia* (1516) when he knew his visionary state could never be actualized in the world. In the essay is where the term *pneumopathology* first appeared in print for Voegelin.
In his *Utopia* More traces the image of the man and of society that he considers perfect. To this perfection belongs the abolition of private property. Because he had the benefit of an excellent theological education, however, More is well aware that this perfect state cannot be achieved in the world. Man’s lust for possessions is deeply rooted in original sin, in *superbia* in the Augustinian sense. In the final part of his work when More looks over his finished picture, he has to admit that it would all be possible if only there were not the “serpent of superbia.” But there *is* the serpent of superbia—and More would not think of denying it. This raises the question of the particular psychopathological condition in which a man like More must have found himself when he drew up a model of the perfect society in history, in full consciousness that it could never be realized because of original sin.

And this opens up the problem of the strange, abnormal spiritual condition of Gnostic thinkers, for which we have not as yet developed an adequate terminology in our time. In order, therefore, to be able to speak of this phenomenon, it will be advisable to use the term “pneumopathology,” which Schelling coined for this purpose. In a case like More’s, we may speak, then, of the pneumopathological condition of a thinker who, in his revolt against the world as it has been created by God, arbitrarily omits an element of reality in order to create the fantasy of a new world.

(Voegelin 2000, 305-306)

It is clear that Voegelin used the term to refer to the intellectual act whereby a thinker knowingly denies the reality of one or another aspect of the world in order to fantasize about the imaginary world (Cooper 2004). In a letter to Theo Broerson, Voegelin could not recall precisely where F.W.J. Schelling had used the term. “I refer to it only, because I do not want to be accused by some Schelling scholar of having pinched
the term without acknowledging its authorship” (Voegelin from Cooper 2004, 42). In his exhaustive investigation of Schelling and Voegelin, Jerry Day noted that Schelling had used related terms such as “spiritual sickness” (Geisteskrankheit), “sickness of temperament” (Gemuthskrankheit), and “consumption of the spirit” (Verzehung des Geistes), but concluded that “pneumopathy” was probably Voegelin’s coinage (Day 2003, 24-25, 33-36). Similar to “scotosis,” a term used to refer to intellectual blindness or a hardening of the mind against unwanted wisdom, or as Bernard Lonergan in his *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, introduced it to philosophy as an intellectual act whereby a thinker prefers to project a kind of daydream than to understand the world, pneumopathological phenomena, for Voegelin, denoted a “‘loss of reality,’ which we prefer to the accurate, but fuzzy ‘nonsense’ (madness)” (Lonergan 1957, Voegelin 1990, 163).

For Thomas W. Heilke in his 1999 study *Eric Voegelin: In Quest of Reality, The Political Religions* “offered a ‘stop-gap notion,’ an ‘ad-hoc explanation’ that was conceptually insufficient for coming to grips with the ideological political phenomena of his time” (Heilke 1999, 78). Voegelin clearly indicated the form for a hatred of ideological discourse and killing should take in a philosophical investigation. Yet the “philosophical lack of clarity of the book resulted from the absence of a theory of consciousness and of a concomitant theory of the structure of the whole” (Heilke 1999, 78). So in order for Voegelin to come to grips with the political phenomenon of his time, he chose to abandon the political religions of totalizing projects and instead investigate the individual human consciousness that allowed it.
Eric Voegelin does not refer to *The Political Religions* at all in his 1964 University of Munich lectures on *Hitler and the Germans* for that very reason. He was more concerned with the individual within the totalitarian mechanism than the mechanism itself. Karl Jaspers’s famous refutation of a German collective guilt in 1946 was part of “an admonition that what was required was a coming to terms, not with an abstract ‘guilt of the German people,’ but with the question of personal guilt—whether criminal, political, or moral—of every individual German” (Jaspers from Clemens 1999, 6-7). Jaspers called for a purification of the soul, understood as a “continuous becoming of oneself”, an “unconditional self-examination” and “inner change of heart” (*Ibid.*, 7). This was to be a precondition for the realization of personal and political freedom after the catastrophic National Socialist experience. In the summer of 1964, this was to be one of Voegelin’s central themes in the Munich lectures.

that the acceptance of one’s own past, the unsparingly self-critical assessment of individual guilt for crimes committed in the name of the German people, was the prerequisite for a truly free and democratic society of citizens free of mutual suspicion and mistrust. Only such a society could also summon up the resolution to declare guilty those who perpetrated or abetted crimes, thus confirming that, as Jaspers had stated, guilt is always individual, never collective, even if it encompassed very large sections of a people.

(Clemens 1999, 7)

In the lectures Voegelin confronts the pneumopathological individual. Just as human beings can imagine themselves to be less than human—an ego, a self—they can just as easily image themselves to be more than human—a communist or fascist or some...
other sort of superman. At the same time, such an imagination does not in fact change his or her status between human and nonhuman. As Barry Cooper elaborates, “In the event that someone engages in such an act of imagination and attempts to live as an infra- or superhuman self, and given the stubborn fact that reality remains as is, whatever the fancy of the imaginator, friction is bound to arise between the imagined reality and the actual surroundings within which human beings, whether they undertake imaginary acts or not, must live” (Cooper 2004, 42-43). Thus the act that created the imaginary self is followed by another that creates the imaginary reality in which the imaginary self lives. This second act of imagination creates the “secondary reality.” “The term second reality is not original with Voegelin, but as with the term pneumopathology it was appropriated by him and used in a precise analytical way that was somewhat different from the way it was originally used” (Ibid., 43).

For the Munich lectures Voegelin relied on Austrian novelists Robert Musil and Heimito von Doderer with respect to “second reality.” Describing Musil’s Man Without Qualities, Voegelin states, “The consequence of living in the second reality is, exactly, conflict with the first reality, which indeed is not canceled by the fact that I make for myself a false idea of it and live according to it” (Voegelin 1999, 108). The second reality produces men within that reality, yet at the same time man remains in “full reality.” For Voegelin:

Man remains man in full reality, even when he loses reason and spirit as those parts of reality that help him to order his existence; he does not cease to be man. And there is no point, as is still so often done, in accusing Hitler of inhumanity; it was absolute humanity in human form, only a most remarkably disordered, diseased humanity, a pneumopathological humanity. Such a man’s image of reality, therefore, although
defective, has not lost the form of reality; that is, he is still a man, with the full claim to make statements of order, even when the ordering force of orientation toward divine being has got lost – even then – except that he puts a pseudo-order in place of the real order. So reality and experience of reality are replaced by a false image of reality. The man, thus, no longer lives in reality, but in a false reality, which claims, however, to be the genuine reality. There are then, if this pneumopathic condition has occurred, two realities: the first reality, where the normally ordered man lives, and the second reality, in which the pneumatically disturbed man now lives and which thus comes into constant conflict with the first reality. (Voeglin 1999, 108)

A more explicit discussion of the problem is found in Heimito von Doderer’s 1956 novel *The Demons*. In it “Doderer establishes the analogy between the spiritual decline of the modern world with that of the late Middle Ages in order to establish continuity between the second reality of witchcraft and that of ideological politics in general and of National Socialism in particular” (Cooper 2004, 44). For Voegelin, “The construction of a second reality comes from the desire to have the beyond in this life” (Voegelin 1999, 255). In other words, secondary reality is the imaginary embodiment of the next life – in this life. In Doderer’s political philosophy the consolidation of the many refusals of human beings to apperceive reality, which is the second reality, is the “total state.” A total state made up of pneumopathological revolutionaries. As in *The Demons*, “If enough people find themselves in the same impossible and untenable situation, the one who shows them a tempting way out—that is, a way to slip by the law of circumstances, and to do so moreover with moral exaltation—that person becomes a
revolutionary leader. A person who has been unable to endure himself becomes a revolutionary; then it is others who have to endure him” (Doderer 1961, 491).

Similar to Albert Camus’s declaration in his 1951 work *The Rebel*, “The slave begins by demanding justice and ends by wanting to wear a crown” (Camus 1991, 25). Doderer’s character Gontard’s remarks generate images of reality in order to obtain direction for his existence and action in the world. The insight makes it possible to formulate the loss of reality. As Voegelin articulates, “When a person refuses to live in existential tension toward the ground, or if he rebels against the ground, refusing to participate in reality and in this way to experience his own reality as man, it is not the ‘world’ that is thereby changed but rather he who loses contact with reality and in his own person suffers a loss of reality” (Voegelin 1990, 170). The effects of this loss of reality generate secondary images of reality in order to find order in an orderless world. This can only end in tragedy because the “great projectors of second reality are social forces” (Voegelin 1999a, 134). The lust for wealth, power, and sex, as well as positioning the Ego in place of the ground. In this lies the great danger of all totalitarian movements, its replacement of a ‘common sense’ reality with that of all encompassing state power, or ideology. For Heimito von Doderer, it’s a tendency to accept a false, second reality, and remain blind to the true, first reality. To Doderer, the genesis of totalitarian regimes “lies in his theory that totalitarian, as well as revolutionary, ideology springs from basic mistakes in, or failures of, perception” (Bachem 1981, 100). It is given the opportunity to establish itself when “constructs of thought, rather than apperception, are mistaken for truth” or when “‘second reality’ obscures ‘first reality’”(*Ibid.*, 100). “The effects of a loss of reality are pneumopathological disturbances in the existential order of the respective
person, and, if life in the ‘second reality’ becomes socially dominant, such massive
disturbances of social order as we have witnessed” (Voegelin 1990, 170).

Eric Voegelin summed up his intellectual quest from The Political Religions of
1938 to his later theory of consciousness brilliantly in the closing of his Anamnesis:

The desire for “principle” of political science, however, which I characterized above as a
potential source of social disorder, seems to me also to express a genuine desire to go
beyond the relative inadequacy of common sense and to attain again the luminosity of
noetic consciousness.
(Voegelin 1990, 213)

Eric Voegelin was fifty-nine when in 1960 Southeast Asia introduced the
Communist Party of Kampuchea that would later bring into being Democratic
Kampuchea. Some of the atrocities that befell the citizens of the DK period have been
mentioned above, however this discussion will focus more specifically on the lives
extinguished after arriving at the secret Phnom Penh prison Munti Sa-21 (Security Office
21) on the former grounds of Lycee Tuol Svay Prey school (henceforth referred to as
Tuol Sleng, or S-21). It is an attempt to conceptualize the horrors of Tuol Sleng by
implementing the perception of the mystical state construction of “alternate”, or
“secondary reality”, explored earlier by Austrian novelists Robert Musil and Heimito von
Doderer, but further philosophically investigated by Eric Voegelin in his 1964 lectures on
“Hitler and the Germans”. It is a dialogue of continual interchange between studies, from
philosophy to history to film. It contends that the employees of S-21; administrators,
guards, torturers, and executioners alike, were transformed by the Khmer Rouge
revolutionary politico-religious ideology into mechanical components for the
collection of a “secondary reality”—a reality that made the act of murder a banal task,
and the successful promotion of the revolution the only objective. Within this “secondary
reality,” the concentration and elimination of ‘enemies’ became so drearily commonplace
that the act of murder itself became devoid of meaning.

Francois Ponchaud observed first-hand the evacuation of Phnom Penh, and from
later Cambodian refugee testimonies, he writes of the horrors of forced migration,
unrelenting labor, starvation, disease, and mass executions. His is a close-up view of a
nation that cut itself off from the rest of the world, and systematically destroyed its
people and its past. Ponchaud characterizes the regime brilliantly in his passage:

On April 17, 1975, a society collapsed; another is now being born from the fierce drive of
a revolution which is incontestably the most radical ever to take place in so short a time.
It is a perfect example of the application of an ideology pushed to the furthest limit of its
internal logic. But the furthest limit is too far, and “too far” is akin to madness—for in
this scheme of society, where is man?
(Ponchaud 1978, 192).

Eric Voegelin articulates in The Political Religions, that ‘man’ is invisible to the world
while living within a similar political manifestation.

Mankind is that great collective body, to whose progress each man has to contribute. It is
terrestrially closed; it progresses only as a whole, and the meaning of individual existence
is to participate instrumentally in the collective progress. This conception is radically
collectivistic; it is so radical that, with respect to his own construction, Kant expressed his
“astonishment” at the collective body because only the last generations would enter into
the perfection of the earthly paradise.

(Veogelin 2000, 61)

Voegelin goes on to expose how such societies construct a need for carriers towards the end realm. Kant’s revelation encompasses all of mankind; Fichte, the connection with the symbolism of the Gospel of John, with the end realm being the kingdom of God; and Comte, the three stages of world history, with the French the carriers of the positivist spirit. “Marx divides history into the original communist period, the class-based period, and the final communist society and recognizes the proletariat as carrier of the development toward the end realm” (Veogelin 2000, 61).

Thus the end realm is only to be enjoyed by the last generations. The “wheel of history rolls on” and those who do not conform to the collective “will be caught in the spokes” (Haing Ngor 2007, 89). Pol Pot noted once that Cambodia could reach its end realm with only a million people. As we know, he tried hard to meet that quota.

The Vietnamese invasion of Democratic Kampuchea at the end of 1978 drove the Khmer Rouge from Phnom Penh into the dense jungles of the Thai-Cambodian border and the country was opened up to relief workers, journalists, and scholars. After the seizure of the capital on January 7, 1979, evidence and information became available that detailed the bloodlust of Angkar. Within Democratic Kampuchea yet unknown to the outside world at the time, existed what the Chief of the Education, Training and Information Unit of the U.N. Center for Human Rights in Phnom Penh David Hawk called “a nationwide prison-torture-execution system—virtual extermination facilities” (Hawk 1989, 209).
Murder-by-government under the Khmer Rouge rule was so systemic and widespread that a large bureaucracy was required to eliminate the projected, suspected, and imagined opponents of the revolutionary transformation of Khmer society. The most definitively documented killings are those that took place at S-21, known as Tuol Sleng, the prison-execution facility in Phnom Penh. Tuol Sleng was an extermination center at the hub of a nationwide system of imprisonment, interrogation, torture, and execution.

When the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia in 1979, Pol Pot’s forces retreated so precipitously that they left behind tens of thousands of pages of archives from the S-21 “bureaucracy of death.” These meticulously kept records indicate that nearly twenty thousand were executed (literally “smashed to bits”) at Tuol Sleng.

(Hawk 1989, 209)

Within the confines of S-21 existed an “alternate reality” or what Austrian writer Heimito von Doderer implores and are to be found throughout his writings, a “secondary reality”. One constructed by the leaders of the CPK only for the protection of their political existence. A place where real and perceived “enemies” are crushed by a politico-industrialized mechanism; a space that Giorgio Agamben could have called a “state of exception”. Tuol Sleng prison too exemplified Agamben’s notion of the “camp”. A location which “supports totalitarian domination and that common sense stubbornly refuses to admit to, namely, the principle according to which anything is possible. It is only because the camps constitute a space of exception—a space in which the law is completely suspended—that everything is truly possible to them” (Agamben 2000, 40). The horrendous events that transpired within S-21’s barbed-wired confines “remain entirely unintelligible” (Ibid., 40). S-21 defined an illicit zone of indistinction, where the dematerializing confrontation with other human beings no longer appeared as a crime. It
typified the consequent creation of “naked life”, “Inasmuch as its inhabitants have been stripped of every political status and reduced to naked life, the camp is also the most absolute biopolitical space that has ever been realized—a space in which power confronts nothing other than pure biological life without any mediation” (Ibid., 41, author’s italics).

Arendt rightly states “that impotence breeds violence,” that the “loss of power becomes a temptation to substitute violence for power” (Arendt 1969, 54). And as power began to disintegrate around Angkar a man named Kaing Guek Eav (Kong Kech Eav), or Comrade Duch, became one of the half dozen most important leaders in Democratic Kampuchea as “Tuol Sleng became the nerve center of the system of terror” (Becker 1998, 263). The buildings of Phnom Penh’s Tuol Sleng – Tuol Svay Prey school complex were handed over to the santebal, the Khmer Rouge secret police, headed by Duch. Santebal is “a Khmer compound term that combined the words santisuk (security) and nokorbal (police)” (Chandler 2000, 3). And as the consensus among CPK leaders began breaking down in the latter half of 1976, the santebal was charged by Pol Pot to uncover enemies within the party and among the general population. It was to “devour its own children.” “Duch not only arrested suspects named by Pol Pot, he helped concoct the ‘evidence’ against them. By controlling the confessions of victims, hence the ‘evidence’ of crimes, he was gradually able to manipulate the party leaders and point to unsuspected ‘enemies.’ Duch and his police force took on the powers of judge, jury, and executioners” (Becker 1998, 263).

Nic Dunlop’s remarkable 2005 study The Lost Executioner: A Journey to the Heart of the Killing Fields details Comrade Duch’s transformation from sensitive
schoolchild and dedicated math teacher to revolutionary torturer and killer who later slipped quietly back into village anonymity. It confronts how such a seemingly ordinary man from one of the poorer areas of the country could turn into one of the worst mass murderers of the twentieth century. But it is David P. Chandler’s 2000 work *Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot’s Secret Prison* that best describes Duch and his business of running a department of death.

A day after the fall of Phnom Penh on January 8, 1979, two Vietnamese photojournalists stumbled into the Tuol Sleng facility, drawn to the compound by the smell of decomposing bodies. When they pushed through the gate made of corrugated tin and topped with coils of barbed wire, the photojournalists came across the corpses of several recently murdered men. “Some of the bodies were chained to iron beds. The prisoners’ throats had been cut. The blood on the floors was still wet” (Chandler 2000, 3).

Nearby houses held “thousands of documents in Khmer, thousands of mug-shot photographs and undeveloped negatives, hundreds of cadre notebooks, and stacks of DK publications” (*Ibid.*, 3). Other documents at the site revealed that the facility was “designated in the DK era by the code name S-21. The ‘S,’ it seemed, stood for sala, or ‘hall,’ while ‘21’ was the code number assigned to santebal” (*Ibid.*, 3).

The former school buildings on campus were divided into discrete areas of imprisonment, torture, and execution. As Elizabeth Becker elaborates in her volume *When the War Was Over*:

> Classrooms were subdivided into crude cells by short brick walls that reached halfway to the ceiling. Lecture halls were outfitted for torture with iron manacles, whips, hooks, and beds with spring mattresses where prisoners were shackled. The former campus grounds held the huge water tanks used for dunking and nearly drowning the victims. Old student
notebooks were used to keep records. The school bulletin boards were used to post rules for the victims, admonishing them not to cry out loud under torture, to answer questions directly and without elaboration, and to follow other awful rules while awaiting their deaths.

(Becker 1998, 262)

In *Voices from S-21* Chandler conceives Tuol Sleng as the nerve center of the country. “The cadres in charge of S-21” … “were members of an independent regiment, they worked under military discipline. S-21, the Party Center, the CPK, and the state of Democratic Kampuchea (DK), in other words, can be seen as successively more inclusive ‘forcing houses for changing persons’” (Chandler 2000, 14). It combined incarceration with judicial and counterespionage functions. “Counterparts of *santebal* in other Communist countries would be the Soviet NKVD, the East German Stasi, and the Central Case Examination Group in China. Parallels also exist between S-21 and such bodies as the America FBI and the British MI5” (*Ibid.*, 15). But the *santebal* at Tuol Sleng’s mission and duties were not spelled out by law. There was no legal code or judicial system. As an interrogator’s notebook described, “The work of the Special Branch is class struggle work, achieving the smashing of the exploiting classes, uprooting them completely so as to defend the party, the proletariat, DK, and the line of independence-mastery.” …“No enemy agents can do things the way we do them!” (*Ibid.*, 166).

Chandler describes in horrific detail the “smashing” that personified Tuol Sleng/S-21. It chose the “enemies,” framed the questions, and forced the answers. Duch and his staff, in just under four years, extracted some four-thousand “confessions.” And Chandler, by analyzing the mass of documents, supplemented by interviews with former
staff and the few survivors, and then examining this alongside the twentieth century’s other regimes of terror, he describes an institution both uniquely Cambodian and horrifically universal.

Many of the “enemies” of Angkar who were arrested and “smashed” at Tuol Sleng were from the Eastern Zone, the Democratic Kampuchean territorial demarcation east of Phnom Penh, encompassing the former Prey Veng and Svay Rieng Provinces. The Eastern Zone purge is explained by Ben Kiernan in his paper “Wild Chickens, Farm Chickens, and Cormorants: Kampuchea’s Eastern Zone Under Pol Pot” from editors David Chandler and Ben Kiernan’s 1983 collection of essays Revolution and Its Aftermath in Kampuchea: Eight Essays. In the collection are works by Anthony Barnett on DK’s centralized dictatorship, Chanthou Boua on the Heng Samrin government, Chandler on perceptions of Cambodian history, Gareth Porter on Vietnamese policy towards pre-revolutionary Kampuchea, Serge Thion on ideas of Cambodian revolution, and Michael Vickery on the variations and themes of Democratic Kampuchea. All of these essays have been vital to my research and are used throughout the chapters of this dissertation, however, it is Kiernan’s work that sheds light on the darkness of Angkar’s paranoia that led to the deaths of thousands of their own cadres.

In the essay, Ben Kiernan, one of most prolific writers on the Khmer Rouge movement, explains how the Eastern Zone was quite different than the rest of Cambodia. Up until May 1978 the zone was largely a loyal even unwitting opposition to Pol Pot and the CPK Center. But soon the Eastern Zone cadres and population had “Khmer bodies with Vietnamese minds”. “Over 100,000 perished in the next six months – the worst single atrocity of the DK period” (Kiernan 1983, 138). It was considered the safest place
to live in Democratic Kampuchea until 1977 but then regressed to the most dangerous. Based on interviews of thirty-three ‘base people,’ twenty-seven ‘new people,’ and twenty revolutionary cadres, Kiernan pieces together how the Khmer Rouge managed to, as Arendt articulates, “devour its own children”. The Eastern Zone CPK cadres were nearly eliminated, “although they had the last say in 1979 when their remnants, led by Heng Samrin and Chea Sim, and backed by the Vietnamese army, returned to positions of power” (*Ibid.*, 138).

Tuol Sleng was to be the site where tens of thousands of these actual and imagined Eastern Zone opponents of *Angkar* lost their lives after extreme torture and forced confessions. Duch, a short, slender man quickly became the face of brutality to thousands of Cambodians. The old Phnom Penh secondary school, under the leadership of Mit Duch, more accurately became an elaborate torture chamber (*Etcheson* 1984). As commandant of the S-21 facility, Comrade Duch personally presided over the mechanics of the Khmer Rouge extermination industry. International journalist Nic Dunlop writes that Duch “was present at many of the interrogations at Tuol Sleng, where a wide variety of torture methods were employed. They ranged from electrical shocks and the pulling of toenails, to severe beatings and near drownings” (*Dunlop* 2005, 6). Commandant Duch orchestrated the imprisonment, torture, and demise of thousands of individuals. He turned from a “seemingly ordinary man from one of the poorest parts of Cambodia into one of the worst mass murders of the twentieth century” (*Ibid.*, 7). But he was not alone in the laborious task of annihilation. A dedicated team of young Khmer Rouge comrades came along with Duch as they conducted their mission at S-21, within the walls of what sociologist Erving Goffman, in 1961’s *Asylums*, could have called a “total institution”; a
place of employment in which like-minded individuals, cut off from the wider outside society, together lead an enclosed, formally administered way of life.

The organizational mechanism of the Tuol Sleng killing machine is described by David Chandler as a prison where people were confined and punished but no one was ever released. “The facility served as an anteroom to death” (Chandler 2000, 15). The clandestine facility functioned to wrench “confessions” from those who were thought to oppose or disagree with the party. According to Meng-Try Ea and Sorya Sim of the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam), “It housed people from throughout Cambodia and foreign countries. S-21 also took the lives of nearly 600 of its own 1,700 comrades” (Meng-Try & Sorya 2001, 7). As Haing Ngor lamented, “It became a symbol of the Khmer Rouge atrocities, just as Auschwitz was a symbol of the Nazi regime” (Haing Ngor 2007, 132).

This description has since made its way to visual representation in the 2003 documentary *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine*. Explained as “unforgettable” [sic] …“as horrific an exposure to evil as ‘shoah’”. The film explores a manifestation of banality. Producer Rithy Panh brings two surviving prisoners back to the former prison facility, now the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum where former Khmer Rouge are employed as guides, where outspoken survivor Vann Nath confronts his former captors in the converted schoolhouse where he was once tortured. “[T]hough by chance he did not suffer the fate of most of the other 17,000 men, women and children who were taken there, their “crimes” meticulously documented to justify their execution.” (2003). On the film’s DVD jacket it reads:

The ex-Khmer Rouge guards respond to Nath’s provocations with excuses, chilling stoicism or apparent remorse as they recount the atrocities they committed at ages as
young as 12 years old. To escape torture, the prisoners would confess to anything, and
often denounce everyone they knew though their final sentence was never in doubt.

(2003)

As discussed above, Eric Voegelin explained in 1938 when considering National
Socialism, “one should be able to proceed on the assumption that there is evil in the
world and, moreover, that evil is not only a deficient mode of being, a negative element,
but also a real substance and force that is effective in the world” (Voegelin 2000, 24).
This statement was later mirrored after the Holocaust by Arendt when one cites her
remarks on “radical evil”. These evildoers “lived in a parallel world of ideology, either
because they had lost touch with the real world or because they had never been in touch
with it” (Henningsen 2002).

This parallel world was alive and well in the totalizing institution of S-21 and was
so frighteningly depicted in the film that one has trouble in contemplation. The ghostly
account and reenactment of the guards sheds light into the darkness of the past
“secondary reality” created within S-21. The absolute and unprecedented power of the
Democratic Kampuchean regime replaced reality with a secondary form of reality,
facilitating the rise of the S-21 murder center. The guards’ stoicism and banality towards
their past crimes places their horrific deeds within the alternate reality that existed to
them within the barbed-wired institution. This reality comes back to life for the guards as
they, in the exact locations, reenact with precision the very movements, duties, and
powers of which they once exhibited. The guards’ recreation of the events of
concentration, torture, and murder is almost impeccable in its performance. It is as if time had stood still and allowed the evil “secondary reality” to reconstruct itself for the cameras.

The recreations of the guards’ former lives in the documentary represents an instance of which the “first reality” comes into conflict with the “second reality”. Describing Robert Musil’s epic novel *Man Without Qualities*, Voegelin states that “The consequence of living in the second reality is, exactly, conflict with the first reality, which indeed is not canceled by the fact that I make for myself a false idea of it and live according to it” (Voegelin 1999, 108). The second reality of S-21 produces men within that reality, yet at the same time man remains in “full reality.” Voegelin again explains this concept, when describing Hitler’s Third Reich. However the explanation of the concept could easily be applied to the Khmer Rouge cadre and S-21.

The alternate DK constructed reality that gave birth to S-21 was made possible by the “state as an organizational unit” … “endowed with the original power to rule” (Voegelin 2000, 28). In other words, this original power made believers out of ordinary Khmer teenagers and turned them into banal murderers. When the state controls the modes of human behavior and promotes violence without the threat of repercussion, the molding of believers becomes an unspoken reality. It is the reality. Eric Voegelin creates this mystical vision in his *The Political Religions*.

Now we feel more distinctly what is at stake: The issue is not the correctness of a definition; the issue is a matter of life and death. And even more so, the issue is the question as to whether man may exist personally or has to blend into the suprapersonal *realissimum*. Intrapersonal relationships are severed, nonhuman spiritual structures confront one another, and man is transformed into a machine component that runs along
mechanically in the gearbox, abstractly fighting and killing toward the outside. Anyone who recognizes the state will no longer hold that the state’s power is original or absolute; rather, this is the dogma of a believer. In the believer’s realm of experience, the existence of man loses its reality.

(Voegelin 2000, 30)

The mystical process of constructing a secondary reality as another way to conceptualize the horrors of Tuol Sleng runs counter to the argument brought forth by anthropologist Alexander Laban Hinton in his 2005 work *Why Did They Kill?* Hinton fails to take in account the primacy of politics, the omnipotent political and spiritual control the Khmer Rouge had over all aspects of the population’s social and cultural lives. The leaders of Democratic Kampuchea did not manipulate aspects of Khmer culture for the maintenance of their regime – they instead *constructed* culture. Just as *Angkar* destroyed the traditional Khmer Buddhist religion and replaced it with a new politico-religious manifestation, *Angkar* decimated the true reality and replaced it with an alternate one. One in which murder became such a laborious endeavor that the act itself lacked any semblance of meaning. The whole of Democratic Kampuchea became Agamben’s “state of exception” in which the annihilation of individuals was truly possible.

Hinton’s analysis runs counter to the idea of the state creation of “secondary reality.” For if we assume that cultural models can be used to explain the existence of regimes of terror, then we can also assume that cultural models explain individuals’ actions during the regime. The Documentation Center of Cambodia on the other hand believes that the S-21 guards, while living within this secondary reality, exhibited actions that were not part of their ‘culture’. Instead the guards were manipulated by Khmer
Rouge ideology. For DC-Cam, “These children should be viewed not only as perpetrators but also as victims of the Khmer Rouge” (Meng-Try & Sorya 2001, 7). DC-Cam interviewed former S-21 guards who were between the ages of 12 and 18 when they served as Khmer Rouge comrades. They found that the effects of trauma would also have an impact on the staff of S-21 and others participating in state terror. They often suffered adverse psychological effects similar, in some ways, to those of their victims. And citing a study of torturers from the Greek military regime, “These resembled posttraumatic stress patterns we have already seen in other groups: nightmares, depression, severe irritability” (Ibid., 9).

These symptoms were touched on in the beginning of the S-21 film with the increasingly disturbing interaction between the filmmaker, an ex-guard, and his parents. The former guard and executioner recounts his horrific past in an attempt at salvation. But what is readily apparent in this scene, as well as in the many other scenes depicting the former lives of the KR comrades, is that these individuals were not insane, or delusional, during their former employment at the facility. In actuality, the comrades could not, as Voegelin explains, be confused with “inhumanity; it was absolute humanity in human form, only a most remarkably disordered, diseased humanity, a pneumopathological humanity” (Voegelin 1999, 108). The guards were manipulated by DK state ideology and thus were transformed into the realm of the “secondary reality”. As a report on child soldiers prepared for the United Nations found, “The lure of ideology is particularly strong in early adolescence, when young people are developing personal identities and searching for a sense of social meaning” (Impact of Armed Conflict on Children, 1996, para. 34). And as we have seen in the case of Democratic Kampuchea,
the ideological indoctrination of youth can have disastrous consequences. As psychiatrist Richard Mollica who has worked extensively with Cambodian refugees in the United States, discussing the situations of children in Rwanda said in Chandler’s *Voices from S-21*:

> In my opinion… the psychology of young people is not that complicated, and most of the people who commit most of the atrocities in these situations are young males. Young males are really the most dangerous people on the planet, because they easily respond to authority and they want approval. They are given the rewards for getting into the hierarchical system, and they’re given to believe they’re building heaven on earth… Young people are very idealistic and the powers prey on them.

(Chandler 2000, 33-34)

Inside of S-21’s secondary reality existed, not only a number of ideologically indoctrinated youth, but also a physically controlled and terrified staff. Khmer Rouge comrades were under constant threat of their own demise by the extermination apparatus. “They could disobey orders only on pain of death” (Chandler 2000, 141). A former S-21 employee, Nheum Ein, recalled, “If we did not carefully carry out the job we would not escape from being jailed or [being] stopped from work” (Maguire *from* Meng-Try & Sorya 2001, 40). S-21 comrade Kang too complained of the uncertainty of daily life, made more acute by the fact that many comrades could not help but notice that other comrades routinely disappeared (*Ibid.*, 40). Another former Tuol Sleng employee, Suos Thy, recalled how he worked so hard to follow orders because anyone who made a mistake was shown no mercy. “‘If a guard allowed a prisoner to run away, he would be killed. If I made a mistake, I would be killed,’ he said. He thought of escaping, but found
no way” (Mydans *from* Meng-Try & Sorya 2001, 41). One after the other, young S-21 comrades would disappear. Some were charged with being allies of the arrested prisoners, others where killed because *Angkar* believed them to be agents of the CIA or KGB (*Ibid.*, 41). And like their individual victims torture was commonplace even for the young Khmer Rouge employees themselves.

Ideological and physical creation of a “secondary reality” within the barbed-wire of the Tuol Sleng facility was made possible through DK state power. Cultural models cannot be used to explain the existence of regimes of terror because their many manifestations have transcended history and have been implemented in all parts of the world over many different cultures. Totalitarian projects of this kind do not work in congruence with cultural traditions – they destroy them. As Giorgio Agamben stated in his notes on politics entitled *Means Without End*, “Contemporary politics is this devastating experiment that disarticulates and empties institutions and beliefs, ideologies and religions, identities and communities all throughout the planet, so as to rehash and reinstate their definitively nullified form” (Agamben 2000, 110).

In Democratic Kampuchea’s race to create a new world for its population the old life-world had to be annihilated and the new supplanted. For this to happen it mandates consequential action, even violent action, under certain conditions and qualified in certain ways (Issac 2006). Albert Camus writes in *The Rebel* that murder is both necessary and inexcusable, both right and wrong, just and unjust. This contradictory feature of political justice lies at the heart of Camus’s political vision, and is also apparent in all the totalitarian regimes of history. Camus’s rebel cannot cope with the order of his life and thus substitutes the present life with the dream of the future (Voegelin 1978). This rebel,
like the leaders of the Khmer Rouge, “turned their backs upon the fixed and radiant point of the present. They forgot the present for the future, the fate of humanity for the delusion of power, the misery of the slums for the mirage of the eternal city, ordinary justice for an empty promised land” (Camus 1951, 305). The leaders of the Democratic Kampuchean project produced a vision of the future where ideology and violence merged, and from this vision the creation of a “secondary reality” emanated.
CHAPTER 7

“Absolutely do not hide anything from the Angkar”¹²
Deleuze, Barthes, and S-21 Photography

On January 29, 2008 Voice of America (VOA) Khmer correspondent Chiep Mony reported from Phnom Penh that a “former photographer for the Tuol Sleng prison plans to erect a giant display in the former Khmer Rouge district of Anlong Veng.” At the time, Nhem En (or Nhem Ein) planned for a six-meter long billboard to be raised in the town where he is now deputy minister, and where Pol Pot was cremated in 1998. From the installation would hang some of the thousands of photographs of leaders he has in his collection. He would not display photographs of killings however, and would also not seek to “glorify the Khmer Rouge,” he told the VOA Khmer. The display was slated to cost him $3,500 of his own money. Yim Thin, deputy governor of Odar Meanchey province where Anlong Veng is situated, said of the exhibit, “We want to show, as history, that which people want to see” (Chiep Mony 2008).

Whether or not Cambodians “want to see” Nhem En’s work today, comes nearly thirty five years after tens of thousands of them were given no other choice. They were to “see” and be the subjects of his art. When the victims of Khmer Rouge purges arrived at the secret Phnom Penh prison S-21 the first face they saw after the blindfold was removed belonged to Nhem En—Tuol Sleng’s official photographer. The men, women, and children that materialize in the notorious black and white images, who appear to be

¹² Pol Pot’s Little Red Book, (Locard 2004, 137)
staring death in the face, were mostly looking at him (Bell 2007). In November 2007 Nhem En, the peasant boy from Kompong Cham who joined the CPK forces in 1970, became the “first witness in Cambodia’s genocide tribunal as prosecutors made their case against the prison’s commandant Kaing Geuk Eav, better known as Duch, for crimes against humanity” (Ibid.). Nhem En told the Daily Telegraph before his testimony, “It's hard to say if they knew they would die or not.” “It was a job,” he said, “and if you did it wrong you were dead for sure.” The Shanghai trained photographer was also responsible for developing and printing the images. “I did it all,” he said with a glimmer of pride. “It was tough work.” “Calling me an artist is kind of correct. As a photographer you try to make it look good,” he said, before complaining: “My photos are famous around the world but no-one ever thinks of my copyrights” (Ibid.).

Nhem En’s arrogance seems a bit macabre considering that after months of brutal torture only death awaited the thousands of people transported to Tuol Sleng. From the prison’s gates only seven emerged alive. When the Vietnamese liberated Phnom Penh in January 1979, “tens of thousands of pages of archives from the S-21 “bureaucracy of death”’ corroborated that nearly twenty thousand were tortured and executed at Tuol Sleng or were taken off from S-21 to be killed near the hamlet of Choeung Ek (Hawk 1989, 209).

But ahead of certain death was the detainee’s introduction to Nhem En, where they were to be individually photographed upon arrest. The thousands of black and white stills that survived the war, most of them housed on the former grounds of S-21 at the now Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes, offer a chilling glimpse into the political pathology of the regime. For not only do the glimpses—a small, brief, or indistinct
indication or appearance of something—manifest themselves in the consciousness of the viewer, they provide an incomplete look into the forces sensed between victim and perpetrator. Photography in this case, as the art of painting does so in others, is an attempt to capture and render visible invisible forces.

Influenced by one of the implications of Kant’s Third Critique, Gilles Deleuze, in his work *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* refigures aesthetic knowledge by analyzing the hysteria of Bacon’s paintings (Shapiro 2006, 36-38). Deleuze suggests that it is a mistake to think that Bacon works on a white surface. He does not paint to reproduce on canvas, he paints on images that are already there, everything that is in his head, or around him (Deleuze 2002, 71). For Deleuze, “In art, and in painting as in music, it is not a matter of reproducing or inventing forms, but of capturing forces” (Ibid., 48).

“The task of painting is defined as the attempt to render visible forces that are not themselves visible” (Ibid., 48). Just as Jean-Luc Nancy wrote in *The Ground of the Image*, “A painter does not paint forms unless, above all, he paints the force” (Nancy 2005, 22). “Force is closely related to sensation: for a sensation to exist, a force must be exerted on the body” (Deleuze 2002, 48). The invisible elementary forces such as pressure, inertia, weight, attraction, gravitation, and germination, once painted, can render the forces visible. For Bacon the act of vital faith was to “choose ‘the scream more than the horror,’ the violence of sensation more than the violence of the spectacle” (Ibid., 52). “The invisible forces, the powers of the future—are they not already upon us, and much more insurmountable than the worst spectacle and even the worst pain?” (Ibid., 52).
“Life screams at death, but death is no longer this all-too-visible thing that makes us faint; it is this invisible force that life detects, flushes out, and makes visible through the scream”\(^\text{13}\) (Ibid., 52).

As Roland Barthes articulates in his seminal \textit{Camera Lucida}, “Photography has been, and is still, tormented by the ghost of Painting”…“it has made Painting, through its copies and contestations, into the absolute, paternal Reference, as if it were born from the Canvas” (Barthes 1981, 30-31). Thus Deleuzian sensibility effectively alights Nhem En’s Tuol Sleng inmate photographs. Just as Bacon paints “the scream more than the horror,” Nhem En captures the prisoners’ ‘silent screams’ in the face of impending death. The invisible forces, the powers of the future, are depicted in the facial expressions captured through the camera’s lens. The art of the photograph renders not only the invisible visible but the inaudible audible. In all, it portrays insensible forces as sensible. But what forces are we sensing? Pain? Torture?

For Elaine Scarry in \textit{The Body in Pain}, where the act of torture is invisible, the language of torture remains inaudible. It is in this location of the invisible insonorous language of torture that the arts’ images can render visible and sonorous. According to Deleuze we must consider the special case of the scream. For to paint the scream, “It is not at all a matter of giving color to a particularly intense sound” … “but to establish a relationship between the sound of the scream and the forces that sustain it” (Deleuze 2002, 51). Bacon attempted “to paint the scream more than the horror” … “since the scream captures or detects an invisible force” (Ibid., 51).

\(^\text{13}\) see Francis Bacon’s \textit{Study after Velazquez’s Portrait of Pope Innocent X}
Thus photography, just as painting, becomes an inventor of language. And to Scarry, “Nowhere is the sadistic potential of a language built on agency so visible as in torture” (Scarry 1985, 27). Torture is itself a language, an objectification, an acting out. Real pain, agonizing pain, is inflicted on a person; but torture, which contains specific acts of inflicting pain, is also itself a demonstration and magnification of the felt-experience of pain. In the very processes it uses to produce pain within the body of the prisoner, it bestows visibility on the structure and enormity of what is usually private and incommunicable, contained within the boundaries of the sufferer’s body. (Scarry 1985, 27).

For Bacon’s *Pope Innocent X*, the painting’s function “is to render visible these invisible forces that are making him scream, these powers of the future” (Deleuze 2002, 52). From *Empathic Visions* Jill Bennett suggests that the art can “actively engender pain’s transformation into language; they ‘lift it into the visible world,’ as Scarry puts it. And they do this by negotiating the evacuated spaces of the past and the ‘antiphony of language and silence’” (Bennett 2005, 69). They evoke the onlooker’s ‘sense memory,’ of which bodily and emotional connections can be established. “They do not offer us images that are themselves traumatizing; rather, an image of the force of trauma—of its capacity to infuse and transform bodies, objects and spaces” (*Ibid.*, 69). The language of pain made visible through Nhem En’s photography captures and transforms the body of the prisoner from innocent to tortured. In one fall of the shutter the future forces of pain and torture are made sensible.

One such photograph depicts the forces. A young teenage male, no more than fifteen, is being held upright by an unknown man’s grip of his arm. The pain on the
teenager’s face is unmistakable. The force of this pain is not however. It lies just off to the left of the shot. Hidden from view. An obscured hand is all one sees.

Like the process of torture, photography was an integral part of identify and reducing enemies in the eyes of the Khmer Rouge. “Once prisoners were captured in the frame, they were no longer in possession of their lives” (Dunlop 2005, 148). Just as many North American Indians believed that the camera could imprison their souls in pictures, the subjects at S-21, once they were photographed “could never be anything but guilty – a kind of trial by camera” (Ibid., 148). The ‘mug shot’ surrendered the last vestige of their individual identities to the Party. The inmate photographs introduce a whole mechanism that links a formation of knowledge to the exercise of power. As Michel Foucault in Discipline and Punish articulated, “Disciplinary power” … “is exercised through its invisibility; at the same time it imposes on those whom its subjects a principle of compulsory visibility. In discipline, it is the subjects who have to be seen. Their visibility assures the hold of the power that is exercised over them” (Foucault 1979, 187).

The photograph is the artistic act of being constantly seen. It maintains the disciplined individual, in this case the subject soon to be tortured and eliminated, in his or her subjection. It is the “technique by which power, instead of emitting the signs of its potency, instead of imposing its mark on its subjects, holds them in a mechanism of objectification” (Foucault 1979, 187). It is the space of domination. Where disciplinary power “manifests potency, essentially, by arranging objects” (Ibid., 187). Just as Barthes defines the photograph as a motionless image, “this does not mean only that the figures it represents do not move; it means that they do not emerge, do not leave: they are anesthetized and fastened down, like butterflies” (Barthes 1981, 57). In photography,
Barthes elucidates, “I can never deny that *the thing has been there*. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past” (*Ibid.*, 76, *author’s italics*). Photography, as with Bacon’s work, renders visible the subject and the power. Creating sensation that indicates a level of surveillance in the viewers’ consciousness.

Surveillance is what the viewer feels as they gaze at one of S-21’s photographs. In it, a young girl sits alone in the official black outfit of the regime; short cropped black hair and a stare out into nowhere. In the far right top corner we see a blurred vision of a woman or girl peering from behind a projection screen. We do not know if it is a functionary of the regime or another prisoner awaiting her chance to be photographed. But we do know she is watching.

The scarcely sustainable visibility of Khmer Rouge power is turned into the unavoidable visibility of the subjects or victims. This inversion of visibility in the functioning of the disciplines assures the exercise of power even in its lowest manifestations (Foucault 1979, 189). For Foucault, “We are entering the age of the infinite examination and of compulsory objectification” which “introduces individuality into the field of documentation” (*Ibid.*, 189, *author’s italics*). The developed film situates the subject in a network of writing and engages them into a mass of documents that attempt to confine and repair them (*Ibid.*, 189). Photographs are visual documentation of existence. If one shows his or her photographs to someone else—he or she will immediately show you theirs. As Barthes explains, “‘Look,’ ‘See,’ ‘Here it is’; it points a finger at certain *vis-à-vis*, and cannot escape this pure deictic language” (Barthes 1981, 5). In photojournalist Nic Dunlop’s viewing, Nhem En’s photographic evidence offers “a simple and straightforward documentation of mass murder by the killers” (Dunlop 2005,
“Murder-by-government under the rule of the Khmer Rouge was so systematic and widespread that a large bureaucracy was required to eliminate the projected, suspected, and imagined opponents of the revolutionary transformation of Khmer society” (Hawk 1989, 209). S-21 became the end of the line for most of these opponents. It was the nexus of a nationwide system of arrest, documentation, imprisonment, interrogation, torture, and execution. As Nhem En declared, “Tuol Sleng was the heart of the movement” (Dunlop 2005, 157). David Hawk, describes this Foucaultian ‘power of writing’ in the mechanisms of the facility:

At any one time, Tuol Sleng held between one thousand and fifteen hundred prisoners. The prisoners were individually photographed upon arrest. They were repeatedly tortured until confessing to be traitors to the revolution, compelled to name collaborators, and then executed. Those persons named as collaborators were in turn arrested, interrogated, tortured, and executed in an ever-expanding series of purges directed against various sectors of the population. Prison interrogators prepared typewritten summaries of the confessions to pass on to superiors. The confessions provide a chilling glimpse into the political pathology of the regime. Sometimes interrogators noted in the margins of the confession the specific application of the torture technique used. Victims were sometimes photographed after torture and death, documenting that the “wrongdoers” had been eliminated.

(Hawk 1989, 210)

All of the confessions of those suspected as conspirators were extracted under torture, and none of the prisoners were ever considered innocent. It is impossible to establish which were actually guilty. “Many of the texts display what seems like genuine devotion to the Communist Party of Kampuchea. At least some of the victims (but which
ones?) were innocent of plotting against the party, whereas others (impossible to determine) were guilty of disloyalty, knew people who were, or knew people accused of being disloyal” (Chandler 1999, 124). The primary value of the confessional documentation is to place the individual in the field of surveillance practiced by the KR leadership. For Chandler, “the confessions are a bleak testimony to the extent to which the Red Khmer were riddled with brutality and distrust” (Ibid., 124). And as Chanthou Boua and Ben Kiernan explained, the confessions were a “chilling glimpse of a bureaucracy devoted to lethal megalomania” … “a political catastrophe with few modern parallels” (Boua & Kiernan 1982, 117).

S-21 was an officially supported government operation. All photographs, confessions, and records had to be composed at Tuol Sleng and sent by its director Mit Duch to his superior Son Sen, who sent them along to Party headquarters (Chandler 1999). The total operation at Tuol Sleng was no simple madness. It was a sophisticated bureaucratic mechanism of terror implemented to rid the party and country of enemies. Party cadres in charge of internal security were indeed meticulous in their documentary sense. “Unsurprisingly”, David Chandler notes, “given what we know of the consequences for ‘sabotage’ in DK, typographical errors are almost nonexistent” (Chandler 2000, 27). “Everything was done neatly and thoroughly, just as Khieu Samphan had advised, at least with respect to important ‘enemies’ of the party. The accumulated caches of records of what might euphemistically be termed ‘national security investigations’ are today a treasure-trove of unmitigated horror” (Etcheson 1984, 178). According to the prison archives that survived after the Vietnamese invasion and fall of Democratic Kampuchea, a serious increase in the number of inmates entering S-21
continued from 1975 until 1978, reflecting an increase in paranoia displayed by Angkar.

Anthony Barnett states that the archives “show that in 1975, 154 prisoners were taken in. For 1976, 2,250 are recorded. The figure rises to 6,330 for 1977, and to 5,765 for the first half of 1978 only. After that the records are lost. Thus a total of 14,449 prisoners as it seems been logged as entering S21” (Barnett 1982, 114). Inmate’s stays were brief and always fatal. In October of 1977 when the rate of exterminations increased, 179 were executed on the 18th, 88 on the 20th, and 148 on the 23rd, and on the 15th, 418 were killed, the second highest daily total of all (Ibid., 114). “The greatest single figure was 582, recorded on 27 May 1978; on other days there were no executions. None of three ‘day lists’ selected at random recorded any. It seems that the condemned were gathered in lots over some time, and driven off together to be eliminated” (Ibid., 115).

Like the language of documentation, photography was essential to the running of the prison. For the Khmer Rouge, photography helped reinforce a rigid interpretation of the new world created. Similar to the Chinese propaganda imagery of the Cultural Revolution, DK photographs were deeply political and moralistic images that reflected an idealized vision of their political religion. “This is why the great portrait photographers are great mythologists” (Barthes 1981, 34). The resulting still visually represents a “religion of politics” … “in the sense that it is a system of beliefs, myths, rituals, and symbols that interpret and define the meaning and end of human existence by subordinating the destiny of individuals and the collectivity to a supreme entity” (Gentile 2006, xiv, author’s italics).

In Democratic Kampuchea the efforts of the collective triumphed over that of the individual. In a stark contrast to the uniformity of purpose and strength in numbers, it has
always been considered foolish to stand apart from the group and draw attention to oneself (Dunlop 2005, 150). During DK it could be fatal. “To photograph a person alone, often with a blank backdrop with no context, was further ‘proof’ of their guilt. There was nothing to relate them to and they weren’t part of this world” (Ibid., 149). And in Nhem En’s images, there they sit, sometimes in an old colonial-era photographer’s chair with a headrest to keep people steady for long exposures, vulnerable and alone. Taken in isolation, “presented as the Khmer Rouge saw them: without name, without family, without an identity or country,” as though in a void between life and death (Ibid., 166). Hence, “the photograph suggests that it is already dead” (Barthes 1981, 79).

Roland Barthes describes how photography transforms subject into object. A site where one is “neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object”…“a micro-version of death (of parenthesis)” (Barthes 1981, 14). to become an object made one suffer as much as a surgical operation; then a device was invented, a kind of prosthesis invisible to the lens, which supported and maintained the body in its passage to immobility: this headrest was the pedestal of the statue I would become, the corset of my imaginary essence.

(Barthes 1981, 13)

Susie Linfield investigates the roles of photography and political violence in her 2010 volume *The Cruel Radiance*. Analyzing photographs from such events as the Holocaust, China’s Cultural Revolution, and the civil wars of Africa, Linfield attacks the ideas that photographs of political violence are exploitative, deceitful, even pornographic, contending that instead the viewing of such photographs is an ethically and politically
necessary act. Likening the S-21 photographs to the collection of portraits of political prisoners taken by Stalin’s secret police in Moscow’s Lubyanka prison, Linfield writes:

S-21 photographs are a shock: there is simply no way to prepare for them. Many of the condemned had just arrived, blindfolded, at the prison, and had no idea where they were or why; some are chained to other prisoners. Illuminated by harsh light or flashes—which lends these pictures a stark, flat, weirdly “pure” look—faces of alarm, terror, and exhaustion stare out at us. There don’t seem to be many scientists or journalists here, if indeed any still existed in Pol Pot’s Cambodia; we see scrawny, weather-beaten peasants, usually wearing loose black shirts and pants. Some look sad or plaintive or angry or scared, but many look like nothing at all: perhaps they had moved beyond recognizable emotion.

(Linfield 2010, 56)

Nhem En’s portraits have now become iconic representations of the Cambodian cultural memory. The overwhelming mass of individual photographs assaults the senses. “Hundreds of the mug shots, selected and enlarged by East German photographers in 1981, have been posted on the walls of the Tuol Sleng Museum since 1980” (Chandler 2000, 27). The viewer stands helpless in front of the mute faces that continue to “repel, engage, shock, outrage and worst of all exclude” (Dunlop 2005, 165). The photographs constitute Deleuze’s ‘sensuous signs’ that “force us to seek the truth.” The “signs of art force us to think; they mobilize pure thought as a faculty of essences” (Deleuze 2000, 98). As one observer notes:

There are mothers with their babies, the young girl with terror in her eyes, the old woman who appears resigned to her fate. But on closer scrutiny, the photographs are the very
antithesis of the cut-and dried confessions, full of ambivalent narratives and subtexts. They depict a world of doubt, of pain and suffering that words do not.

Death is central to these images and yet, for the most part they depict people who are alive, frozen in time by the fall of the shutter. Their deaths have already taken place, but the people in the pictures continue to live. Looking at Chan Kim Srut and her baby, it is easy to believe she is imploring you to help. It is the illusion of intimacy that is so troubling.

The feeling of helplessness when confronted with the photographs is almost suffocating. We want to do something, they demand action and yet we know that there is nothing that we can do.

(Dunlop 2005, 164-165)

The self-professed “artist” Nhem En’s photographic ‘recalls’ not only render visible the invisibility of power, audible the inaudible scream, and sonorous the insonorous language of torture and pain; they manage also to figuratively portray Foucault’s documentation of surveillance by evoking Deleuze’s approach to aesthetics articulated in his treatment of Francis Bacon. Bacon, in a curious passage, says that he does not like to paint the dead. The portraitist prefers the sensation of a current photograph or recent impression: “this is what makes the act of painting a kind of ‘recall’” (Deleuze 2002, 57-58). Of his Anlong Veng photography installation, Nhem En expressed that he would “not display photographs of killings” (Chiep Mony 2008). Maybe he as well did not like to “paint the dead?”

Although the bulk of his photographic work is made up of portraits prior to killing, there are many grisly images of the dead in his portfolio as well. Nhem En’s photography subunit at S-21 “took mug shots of prisoners when they arrived, pictures of
prisoners who died in captivity, and pictures of important prisoners after they were killed” (Chandler 2000, 27). When the senses juxtapose the frightened antemortem pictures with the postmortem depictions we can begin to perceive the space in which Nhem En’s ‘art’ resides—the occurrence of death! “In Photography”, according to Roland Barthes, “the presence of the thing (at a certain past moment) is never metaphoric; and in the case of animated beings, their live as well, except in the case of photographing corpses; and even so: if the photograph then becomes horrible, it is because it certifies, so to speak, that the corpse is alive, as corpse: it is the living image of a dead thing” (Barthes 1981, 78-79).

Nhem En’s photographs are not a universal currency of common experience, like baby or school pictures, formal portraits, or photographs of weddings and holidays. They do not characterize the subjects and portray the way we wish to remember or be remembered. Instead they are the antithesis. The staring appearance of the subject becomes the space in which death resides. And as Giorgio Agamben articulates, this “appearance becomes a problem for human beings: it becomes the location of the struggle for truth” (Agamben 2000, 91). Thus the face’s “exposition is the location of politics,” or location of the struggle—between good and evil, life and death (Ibid., 93).

As Barthes expresses in Camera Lucida:

And the person or thing photographed is the target, the referent, a kind of little simulacrum, any eidolon emitted by the object, which I should call the Spectrum of the Photograph, because this word retains, through its root, a relation to “spectacle” and adds to it that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead.

Death is the eidos of that Photograph.

(Barthes 1981, 9, 15)
The faces in Nhem En’s photographs not only render visible invisible forces they render sensuous their ascetic killing. And in maybe no other art but the brutally beautiful paintings of Francisco Jose Goya y Lucientes, or Francisco de Goya, is this dealt with better. As Deleuze’s aesthetic treatment of Francis Bacon expressed the artist’s ‘future forces’, Goya’s art expressed the ‘past, present, and future forces’ all within the same piece. For Charles Baudelaire, “Goya is always a great and often a terrifying artist”…“he unites a spirit far more modern, or at least one that has been far more sought after in modern times—I mean a love of the ungraspable, a feeling for violent contrasts, for the blank horrors of nature and for the human countenances weirdly animalized by circumstances” (Baudelaire from Licht 1973, 33). Goya’s debaucherous scenes of war, torture, execution, witches, sabbaths, devilry, and other grotesque hallucinations represents a fantastic landscape on which he subjects the primeval chaos of his era. Much as Bacon, Goya’s art is an attempt to grasp the point of “juncture between the real and the fantastic” where the “transcendent and the natural concur” (Licht 1973, 35).

Francisco de Goya’s brutal picture The Third of May 1808, in Madrid: the Shooting on Principe Pio Mountain (1814), captures this juncture brilliantly. In it, the reality of life confronts the fantasy of death by the glimmer of the soldier’s lantern light. Goya’s masterwork bestows visibility to the French reaction to the conflict at the Puerta del Sol. This gripping, dramatic painting depicts the firing squad executions of all Spaniards believed to have been connected in any way with the uprising. The executioners are anonymous soldiers obeying the orders to kill the suspects lined up before them. “The focus of the painting is a peasant with arms upraised, his face and posture a mixture of horror, pride and resignation in the face of death” (Schickel 1968,
132). As in the Tuol Sleng photographs, the central figure is to die. In *The Third of May 1808* “[t]he man in the white shirt is about to be shot. No last minute order countermanding the execution can save him, for the order to fire has evidently been given. This is the moment before the explosion” (Thomas 1972, 13). His eyes, like the blank gaze of the victims of S-21, “wild though they look, stare rather emptily down the barrel of the rifle of the executioner” (*Ibid.*, 14). The man’s eyes are fixed out into the night sky, “already glimpsing, perhaps, a sight of the next world about whose existence he surely, from his expression, has no doubts” (*Ibid.*, 14).

There was never any doubt in the minds of those who arrested and photographed at Tuol Sleng that the prisoners would be killed. In essence the photographs capture their actual death. In Goya’s masterpiece, the moments before, during, and after the execution process are presented as a triptych, with a right-to-left narrative depicting the Spaniards awaiting, experiencing, and completing death. In Nhem En’s photographs however, the triptych is combined and transferred to the face of the condemned. The subject’s past, present, and future spatial-temporal configurations convene in the moment of the flash.

For Barthes, “The Photograph is violent” (Barthes 1981, 91). And for all those “photographers who are at work in this world”, they “do not know that they are agents of Death” (*Ibid.*, 92). “Photography is a kind of primitive theatre, a kind of *Tableau Vivant*, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead” (*Ibid.*, 32). Barthes describes:

In 1865, young Lewis Payne tried to assassinate Secretary of State W. H. Seward. Alexander Gardner photographed him in his cell, where he was waiting to be hanged. The photograph is handsome, as is the boy: that is the *studium*. But the *punctum* is: he is
going to die. I read at the same time: This will be and this has been; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is at stake. By giving me the absolute past of the pose (aorist), the photograph tells me death in the future.

(Barthes 1981, 96)

For Mary Price in her The Photograph: A Strange Confined Space, “Gardner’s photograph catches the starkness, pain, even resolution in Lewis Paine”…“Paine, against his coarse-textured background and with hands cuffed with metal and separated by a rigid bar, is almost at ease”…“His fate is complete” (Price 1994, 96). We can sense it in his face, and the faces of the condemned of S-21. And it is in the location of the face where the ‘sensuous signs’ reside. For Agamben, “the face is, above all, the passion of revelation, the passion of language” (Agamben 2000, 92, author’s italics).
“We need model people, model villages, model houses!”

Notes on the Aesthetics of Politics

No inquiry on the study of sensory or sensori-emotional values, the nature of beauty, art and taste, can be undertaken without a least a slight reference to Immanuel Kant. It is from the Kantian critique of judgment that the core of modern aesthetics built its framework. But for the sake of space (and sanity) a philosophical treatment concerning Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* and its subsequent aesthetic theory will not be the focus of this chapter. However from the Kantian gaze illuminates thought from the likes of Schopenhauer, Arendt, to Derrida. But it is the aesthetic theory of the German poet, dramatist, and philosopher Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805) that has had the most influence on my approaches to the politics of aesthetics.

Not only was Friedrich Schiller the playwright that penned some of Europe’s most acclaimed dramas, *The Robbers, Intrigue and Love, Don Carlos, Wallenstein, Mary Stuart,* and *William Tell,* he fused the thoughts of Immanuel Kant and Karl Reinhold together formulating that the aesthetic experience of beauty is one of morality as well. No other work highlights Schiller’s philosophy of aesthetics like that of his 1794 treatise *On the Aesthetic Education of Man, In a Series of Letters.* As Reginald Snell articulates, “The whole burden of the argument in these Letters is, in a single sentence, that Man must pass through the aesthetic condition, from the merely physical, in order to reach the...”

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14 *Pol Pot’s Little Red Book,* (Locard 2004, 291)
rational or moral” (Snell 1965, 12). In other words, the aesthetic condition teleologically restores Man to himself. “He is a cipher; be he is capable of becoming anything (Schiller here treats art much as Kant did religion). Sensuous Man, then, must become aesthetic Man before he can be moral Man” (Ibid., 12). These three conditions of Man must be passed through in order to complete the whole circle of their determination. None can be entirely passed over, “and even the order in which they follow one another cannot be reversed either by Nature or by will” (Schiller 1965, 113).

The first condition is that of the physical which is subject to the power of Nature alone. It is the site of Man before Beauty lures him from his enjoyment of wild life. Every phenomenon stands before him, single and isolated, he finds himself as one with these beings. The physical condition has Man “eternally shifting in his judgments, self-seeking without being himself, unfettered without being free, a slave though serving no rule” (Schiller 1965, 113). Every change is an entirely new creation, yet he lacks that necessity outside himself to bind together the varying shapes into a universe (Ibid., 113).

The aesthetic is second. However it must be a “gift from Nature”, for it is what first gives rise to freedom, thus it cannot arise from freedom. It can have no moral origin. For Schiller, the “favour of fortune alone can loosen the fetters of the physical condition and lead the savage to Beauty” (Schiller 1965, 124). It is when Man escapes the simplicity of Nature and “sense and spirit, receptive and creative power develop in the happy equilibrium which is the soul of Beauty and the condition of humanity” (Ibid., 124-125). It is the moment that Man escapes from the animal state in a delight of appearance, and a disposition towards ornament and play. This is the actualization of the Schillerian “play impulse.” It transcends Kant’s polarity of Sinn and Form with the
notion of Spiel. The Sinnestrieb, “sensuous impulse”, and Formtrieb, “formal impulse”, are synthesized by the Spieltrieb, “play impulse” (Marcuse 1966). The “play impulse” is the realm of the beautiful—an ideal state.

Although it has already been touched on, the third condition is that of the rational or the moral condition. It is when Man achieves power over Nature. As Schiller postulates, “From being a slave of Nature, so long as he merely perceives her, Man becomes her lawgiver as soon as she becomes his thought. She who had formerly ruled him only as force, now stands as object before the judgement of his glance” (Schiller 1965, 120). This transition from the second to the third condition seems to be an easier transition than from Nature to Beauty.

Hence the transition from the aesthetic condition to the logical and moral (from Beauty to truth and duty) is infinitely easier than the transition from the physical condition to the aesthetic (from mere blind life to form). The former step a man can achieve through his sheer freedom, since he needs to take and not to give himself, only to separate the elements of his nature, not to enlarge it; the aesthetically-determined man will judge and act with universal validity as soon as he wishes to.

(Schiller 1965, 109)

The two primary impulses – the “sensuous” or material, and the “formal” or reason – are in constant dialectical interplay. The conflict between Man’s sensuous nature and the drive for order in the world is resolved through Schiller’s impulse of “play” or beauty. The moment when one finds the aesthetic, one finds the ideal. The aesthetic dimension, or Schiller’s “play impulse”, bridges the gap between the two worlds and brings them into harmony. An ideal state, a utopia of sorts, where all is content and all that surrounds
is beautiful. The task of culture than is to harmonize, secure the boundaries of the impulses and not allow them to dominate one another. For Schiller, “Thus its business is twofold: first, to secure the sense faculty against the encroachments of freedom; secondly, to secure the personality against the power of sensation. The former it achieves by the cultivation of the capacity for feeling, the latter by the cultivation of the capacity for reason” (Schiller 1965, 69).

Schiller’s Beauty is the ideal humanity. A humanity that is just out of reach as the individual constantly balances the polarity of the conditions of Man. Beauty is said to link these two conditions, which are opposed to one another, yet at the same time Beauty is said to combine the two opposite conditions only by cancellation. For this, Schiller uses the German word aufgehoben, meaning ‘preserved by destruction’ in the dialectical sense (Schiller 1965, 88-89). The goal is to make the opposed conditions combine perfectly as to make the appearances of divisions entirely disappear, with no trace remaining in the whole. “[O]therwise we are isolating but not uniting them” (Ibid., 89).

If we are to prevail, this realm of Beauty, this ideal state, where the conditions of Man are held in harmony, “is then no mere poetic licence, but also philosophical truth, to call Beauty our second creator” (Schiller 1965, 102). This second creator emancipates Man from the grips of Nature and from the shackles of Reason and allows freedom of “play.” In his Twenty-first Letter Schiller explains:

They are entirely right; for Beauty gives no individual result whatever, either for the intellectual or moral; it realizes no individual purpose, either for the intellect or for the will; it discovers no individual truth, helps us to perform no individual duty, and is, in a word, equally incapable of establishing the character and clearing the mind. A man’s personal worth or dignity, then, insofar as this can depend upon himself, remains
completely undetermined by aesthetic culture, and nothing more has been accomplished except that it has been rendered possible for him on the part of Nature to make of himself what he chooses—that he has had completely restored to him the freedom to be what he ought to be.

(Schiller 1965, 101)

This freedom Schiller speaks of, the realm where Man can “make of himself as he chooses” and “be what he ought to be,” is the theoretical soil of his Aesthetic State. As the Kantian revolution in philosophy adequately prepared the reasoning side of the human, Schiller believed through art and aesthetic education one could usher in a social and political order—the ‘aesthetic state’ (Chytry 1989). “Schiller’s theory of the aesthetic state is predicated on a major premise. The ‘most perfect of all artworks’ is the ‘construction of genuine political freedom’” (Ibid., 77). Schiller’s three types of socio-political states: the “natural state” corresponding to the purely natural conditions of humans, the “moral state” corresponding to the supremacy of the moral law in humans, and the “aesthetic state” are not really parallel to the stages Schiller has set in humans’ individual development. The moral state is the end to be sought by advancing from the sensuous to the rational. But “Schiller clearly prefers the aesthetic state as the synthesis of the dynamic or empirical state and the ethical state which makes society morally necessary” (Chytry 1989, 91).

Schiller’s theory of the “aesthetic state” is one of the theoretical contributions from which this discussion on the politics of aesthetics features. It is my contention that, just as Hitler’s Third Reich and Mussolini’s Fascist Italy, Pol Pot’s Democratic Kampuchea too strived for the ideal “aesthetic state”. During the first few days following
the “liberation” of Phnom Penh, as the functionaries of the ancien regime were rounded up for execution, the rational or moral condition of Man was lost. Cambodia’s socio-political “moral state” was destroyed; replaced by the “natural state” controlled by the whims of the purely natural condition of Man.

Khel, a Khmer Rouge soldier who fought against Lon Nol troops in Kompong Cham and later near Phnom Penh, was transferred to an army battalion stationed around Phnom Bros. He soon discovered that, like many other temples around Democratic Kampuchea, Phnom Bros was being used as an execution center (Hinton 2005, 39). An Angkar officer by the name of Reap headed a regiment of Northern Zone troops that was ordered to “sweep clean” (baos samat) the enemy during the first part of the revolution (Ibid., 39). Khel recalled, “The Khmer Rouge wanted to kill people who had worked as government officials, those who had been on the side of the Lon Nol regime – soldiers, police, civil servants, intellectuals, teachers, doctors, and so on” (Ibid., 39-40). Thus Reap and his soldiers’ Schillerian “moral state” was destroyed and replaced by the “natural state.” This “natural state” being one of a secondary reality – a “political power”…“shrouded in holiness” (Gentile 2006, xiv). As Khel observed, according to Alexander Laban Hinton:

Reap’s troops first “cleaned up” in Kompong Thom province and the Chomkar Loe district of Kompong Cham. Perhaps to expedite such killings, Phnom Bros temple and its environs were turned into an extermination center – one of many in operation during DK – run by Reap. In just over one month in mid 1977, Reap’s troops executed somewhere between five thousand and ten thousand people at Phnom Bros. The victims, many of whom were told they were “going to a new village” (tov phoum thmey), were loaded into trucks that held thirty to forty people. Upon arriving at Phnom Bros, the trucks drove
directly to one of two killing sites: one at the base of Phnom Bros, the other at the outskirts of nearby Banyan village, which remained unoccupied. After exiting the trucks, the victims found themselves surrounded by Reap’s armed soldiers. They were ordered to form a straight line and take off their outer garments before being marched a short distance to a killing field, where they were murdered by members of a twelve-person execution squad.

(Hinton 2005, 40)

Thet Sambath and Rob Lemkin’s 2009 documentary *Enemies of the People: A Personal Journey into the Heart of the Killing Fields* includes a featurette titled “One Day at Po Chrey: Anatomy of a Massacre”. In it, Thet Sambath visits the Tuol Po Chrey execution site with five of its perpetrators to reconstruct the events that led to the deaths of “between 9,000 and 10,000” ancien regime functionaries immediately after the fall of Phnom Penh. Former Khmer Rouge soldiers Po Chean, It Thoeun, Ut Y, Prorm Prein, and Tith Bun Chan recall horrific scenes of the area where thousands of individuals who were told they were going to “see the Prince” were tied together and shot one by one down the line. “The brains were scattered,” says one executioner, another tells of “white brains mixed with red blood, it looked horrendous.” Tuol Po Chrey may have been the Schillerian “natural state” of certain individuals within Pol Pot’s political religion.

Stories such as these were not at all uncommon during Democratic Kampuchea. Thousands were killed under similar circumstances in extermination sites that dotted the Cambodian landscape. Through the Three Conditions of Man, the physical comes first. It convenes in him a false sense of eternal rightness. “Man in his *physical* condition is subject to the power of Nature alone” (Schiller 1965, 113). He only shakes off this power
in the realm of the aesthetic. From there he can control it in the moral condition. But while in the physical realm Man is subject to animalistic tendencies. He is not yet been able to complete the whole circle of determination. In these examples Reap and his soldiers, and the executioners of Po Chrey, are incapable of ascending to the next stage of Man. They are trapped in the physical. If one is to gaze upon the perpetrators through Schiller’s eyes, “every change is for him an entirely fresh creation, since together with the necessity within himself he lacks that necessity outside himself which binds together the varying shapes into a universe” (Schiller 1965, 113, author’s italics). Reap, just as Pol Pot and the majority of DK’s revolutionary Angkar, is Ignorant of his own human dignity, he is far removed from honouring it in others, and conscious of his own savage greed, he fears it in every creature that resembles him. He never perceives others in himself, only himself in others; and society, instead of expanding him into the species, only confines him ever more closely inside his individuality. In this dull limitation he wanders through his twilit life, until a kindly Nature rolls away the burden of matter from his darkened senses.

(Schiller 1965, 114)

Any attempt to climb back up the Schillerian ladder to reason was thwarted. Along with the moral, the “play impulse”, the realm of beauty, was destroyed. Intellectuals, artists, teachers, monks, and students were eliminated. Books were burned, artworks stolen, wats defamed, libraries razed, and museums looted. For this discussion however, it was Democratic Kampuchea’s attempt to bridge the gap between the state of nature to the aesthetic state that evokes Schiller’s gaze. After three years in power the regime Center, or Angkar, believed it to be the right time to attempt an ascent to the
“aesthetic state.” “In the second half of 1978, scattered evidence suggests that Pol Pot was being edged toward a personality cult that, had his regime lasted longer, might have transformed his taciturn, clandestine style of government into a more personalistic one and deepened continuities with previous, nonrevolutionary regimes” (Chandler 1999, 148). Like other Communist leaders – such as Stalin, Mao, Castro, Che and Tito – Pol Pot had to contend with pressures for deification from some of his supporters (Ibid., 148).

Emilo Gentile, in his Politics as Religion, cites Italian historian, journalist, and novelist, Guglielmo Ferrero as interpreting the sacralization of politics as the legitimization of power by surrounding it with “an almost religious fervor that exalts it and confers a transcendent virtue upon it” (Ferrero from Gentile 2001, 5).

This exaltation can only be perceived through an emotional crystallization of admiration, gratitude, enthusiasm, and love around the principle of legitimacy that transforms its imperfections, limits and lack of common principles into something that is absolute and inspires devotion. This fervor and this total, sincere, joyful but partly illusory acknowledgement of the superiority of power causes legitimacy to achieve its complete maturity and highest degree of effectiveness, which then transforms that legitimacy into a kind of paternalistic authority.

What are the means for achieving this fullness of legitimacy? There are many devices that can be used, but art has always been one of the most powerful. Painting, sculpture, and architecture did not just cooperate with monarchies and aristocracies of the Ancien Regime, but with governments of all times and all places…

(Ferrero from Gentile 2001, 5)

S-21 survivor Vann Nath’s oil portraits of Pol Pot found at Phnom Penh’s secret prison in early 1979 have become concrete evidence of this aesthetic legitimacy. Some of
these were head and shoulder portraits copied from photographs. “Visitors to the prison in 1979 also found molds for concrete busts of Pol Pot. At least one of these busts—all of which were slightly larger than life size—was cast in silver” (Chandler 1999, 149). Vann Nath recalled that at the end of 1978 there were also plans for a more grandiose sculpture in Pol Pot’s honor. “[A]ll of us were entrusted with a new job: to make an eight-meter-tall concrete statue of Pol Pot standing with farmers carrying flags and such – intended to show the history of the class struggle” (Vann Nath 1998, 82). In Chandler’s 1999 biography of Pol Pot, *Brother Number One*, Vann Nath said:

> We had to design a revolutionary monument with the design first taken to Nuon Chea who approved it and it was then supposed to be taken to Pol Pot for his approval. The monument was like those in China and Korea and featured Pol Pot in front of a line of people with his right hand stretched skywards and his left arm grasping a copy of the revolutionary works, the red book. Pol Pot was the only figure depicted as a particular individual. Behind him were a number of people indicating the progress of the revolutionary struggle, beginning with axes and knives and ending with abundance, with guns and B-40s [rocket launchers]. [The administrator of S-21] said that the plan was to destroy the temple at Wat Phnom and replace it with the monument. If the Vietnamese hadn’t invaded, I think that’s what would have happened.

(Vann Nath *from* Chandler 1999, 149-150).

Although Pol Pot’s aesthetic dimension may have only existed in the *Angkar*, evidence shows that the regime harbored aspirations to legitimize its rule through the “play impulse”, to find the ideal “freedom” of the Schillerian “aesthetic state”.
Another approach to the politics of aesthetics that has contributed to my thought is that of Friedrich Nietzsche. The philosopher who famously uttered “God is dead” remains substantial in and beyond philosophy. Noted as the godfather of the postmodern, Nietzsche’s nihilism, existentialism, individualism, perspectivism, the Ubermensch, and will to power, continue to be central ideas of contemporary world philosophy. However, what has captured my interest comes from his first major work in 1872, *The Birth of Tragedy*. The main premise of the volume is the fusion of Apollonian and Dionysian artistic impulses to form the dramatic arts, or tragedies. Apollo, the god of the sun, reason, dreams, and the plastic arts; and Dionysus, the god of music, wine, ecstasy, and intoxication, hold “artistic energies which burst forth from nature herself, without the mediation of the human artist” (Nietzsche 1995: 5, author’s italics). With reference to these immediate art-impulses of nature, every artist is an “imitator,” that is to say either an Apollonian artist in dreams, or a Dionysian artist in ecstasies, or finally – as for example in Greek tragedy – at once an artist in both dreams and ecstasies: so we may perhaps picture him sinking down in his Dionysian drunkenness and mystical self-abnegation, alone, and apart from the singing revelers, and we may imagine how now, through Apollonian dream-inspiration, his own state, *i.e.*, his oneness with the primal nature of the universe, is revealed to him in a *symbolical dream-picture*.

(Nietzsche 1995, 5)

The real goal of the investigation is directed towards acquiring knowledge of the Dionysian-Apollonian genius and its art-product, or an understanding of its mysterious
union. As in a Greek tragedy: the hero of the drama struggles to make order (Apollonian) of his unjust and chaotic (Dionysian) state. The hero dies, of course, unfulfilled in the end. But what comes of the story is the underlying essence – the “primordial unity” – which revives our Dionysian nature. The godlike unity of the Dionysian experience is of utmost importance as it relates to the Apollonian because it emphasizes the harmony that can be found through one’s chaotic encounters.

Nietzsche gives an example of this harmony, saying that “Schiller has thrown some light on the poetic process by a psychological observation” … “He admits that before the act of creation” … “his condition was rather that of a musical mood” … “A certain musical mind precedes, and only after this ensues the poetical idea” (Nietzsche 1995, 14). Or as “we see the drunk reveler Archilochus sunk down in slumber” … “Apollo approaches and touches him with the laurel. Then the Dionyso-musical enchantment of the sleeper seems to emit picture sparks, lyrical poems, which in their highest form are called tragedies and dramatic dithyrambs” (Ibid., 14). The chorus of the Greek tragedy is the symbol of the collectively excited Dionysian horde. Thus Greek tragedy is “the Dionysian chorus, disburdening itself again and again in an Apollonian image-world” (Ibid., 27).

For Nietzsche the Greek tragedy was the highest form of art due to its mixture of both Apollonian and Dionysian elements. These elements fuse into a seamless whole, allowing the spectator to experience the full spectrum of human consciousness – the ultimate aesthetic experience. The Dionysian element could be found in the music of the chorus, the Apollonian element was alive in the dialogue that provided the symbolism to balance the Dionysian revelry. In other words, Apollo gives form to the abstract
Dionysus. “So that the intricate relation of the Apollonian and the Dionysian in tragedy may really be symbolized by a fraternal union of the two deities: Dionysus speaks the language of Apollo; Apollo, however, finally speaks the language of Dionysus; and so the highest goal of tragedy and of art in general is attained” (Nietzsche 1995, 81).

The influence of Euripides, by reducing the role of the chorus and making human drama more reflective of daily life, and the emergence of Socrates, by emphasizing reason and devaluing myth, drained the ability of the individual to participate in forms of art. This crushed the human’s ability to live creatively in harmony with the sufferings of life. Is it possible to reattain this balance of Apollonian and Dionysian, or “primordial unity,” in modern art? For Nietzsche, the answer, as he later articulates, may be obtained through the operas of Richard Wagner.

Unfortunately for the world, from Hitler’s Third Reich to Pol Pot’s Democratic Kampuchea, some found their “primordial unity” through the oppositional tension and harmony of bloodlust and banality. Dionysian ecstasies of intoxication and ritual madness symbolizes everything that is chaotic, dangerous and unexpected, everything that escapes human reason and can only be attributed to the unforeseeable actions of the gods. Nietzsche’s aesthetic theory in *The Birth of Tragedy* features Democratic Kampuchea’s *Angkar* as an embodiment of Dionysian ecstasies. The intoxication and ritual madness of murder have been documented, over 17,000 from Tuol Sleng were “smashed” alone. As was discussed earlier, the entire culture of the Khmer Rouge was chaotic, dangerous and unexpected. “*Angkar* has many ears and knows all your actions; *Angkar* just appears; *Angkar* is the law for killing and hears everything; *Angkar* is the harming force; *Angkar* knows your actions” (LeVine 2010, 155). “Others described a possession-like
phenomenon by which Khmer Rouge cadres were momentarily ‘taken’ – as if Angkar entered a person’s body long enough to deliver a message, or enact a torture” (Ibid., 155).

Nietzsche’s “primordial unity” can be examined in the context of Hinton’s discussion of power. He suggests that the Cambodian syncretic blend of animist, Hindu, and Buddhist conceptions have contributed to the local understandings of power as an animating energy that exists, shifts, and flows through time and space (Hinton 2005, 99). Such beings that contain and accumulate this power disproportionately are said to have “etthipol, a term that is etymologically derived from the Pali root, etthi, which means ‘potency’ and ‘psychic power’” (Ibid., 99). This “potent power,” used in a variety of ways in colloquial conversation, defines Angkar’s rule. It connotes individual potency or a forceful inner capacity that enables one to be effective, to accomplish deeds and influence others (Ibid., 99). Thus “through ascetic practice, meditation, and understanding, religious figures – from Buddha to a forest monk – gain etthipol that enables them to accomplish magical feats” (Ibid., 99).

However, “Etthipol may be differentiated from the power that comes from having amnach. This term is related to the verb ach, meaning ‘to dare, to be able (to do something)” … “to not be afraid, to not shrink back, to not hesitate, to not be obstructed.’ Amnach implies ‘raw power’” (Hinton 2005, 100). Khmers often use the term to describe the ruthless actions of government officials who use their political authority to carry out their desires, abusing the populace in the process (Ibid., 100). As Hinton articulates:

One Cambodian official differentiated this “raw power/authority” from “potent power” by stressing its external locus: “Amnach comes from the law, while etthipol comes from the person himself.” The two terms are highly interrelated, however, since a person who
is able to rise to a position of authority or wealth is often said to have potent power. Thus Pol Pot may be characterized as having both potent power and despotic authority.

(Hinton 2005, 100)

Nietzsche may not have had the tensions created by the concepts of *ethipol* and *amnach* in his mind when he penned *The Birth of Tragedy*, however, one can distinguish a similarity between the Apollonian and Dionysian “primordial unity” and the “potent power” and “raw power” of *Angkar*. *Angkar* was, at once, brutal violence and omnipotent infallibility.

The Schillerian focus on the dialectical interplay between *Sinn* and *Form*, or the “sensuous impulse” and the “formal impulse”, has inspired a wide range of aesthetic theory, including French philosopher Jacques Ranciere’s conception of the aesthetic regime of art. Thus Ranciere’s approach to the politics of aesthetics is yet another contribution to my thinking of Democratic Kampuchea. According to Ranciere, aesthetics is neither art theory in general nor the discipline that takes art as an object of study. “Aesthetics is properly speaking a specific regime for identifying and thinking the arts” referred to as the “aesthetic regime of art” (Ranciere 2004, 82). And these ‘regimes of art’, or as Schiller noted, the ‘aesthetic state,’ have many manifestations. From the Greek ideal of the Homeric polis to the gas chambers of National Socialism, the Fascism of Mussolini’s Italy to the gulags and killing fields of Marxist movements in the twentieth century, the pursuit is the same—the convergence of a new social and political order with aesthetics.
The aesthetic judgment of Homer and the politics of persuasiveness in Athens stand out as the overture to the aesthetic state in Western intellectual thought (Chytry 1989, lxxiv). Aesthetic experience must resolve itself in the political realm. From Friedrich Schiller to Matthew Arnold to T.S. Eliot, “aesthetic judgment has always in the end been understood to effect, somehow, a passage to cognition and humane action. Culture is acculturation—the forming of subjects, the reforming of the world” (Redfield 2003, 1-2). Although Burke, Kant, Kierkegaard, Hegel, Heidegger, and Nietzsche among others, as well as postmodern cultural critics, may differ in their attitudes toward aesthetic judgments, “Aesthetics, then, is always in principle and at the end of the day a political discourse” (Ibid., 2). From this view, one can begin to see what Jacques Ranciere called “the distribution of the sensible” in his The Politics of Aesthetics. For Ranciere, “In a broad sense, however, aesthetics refers to the distribution of the sensible that determines a mode of articulation between forms of action, production, perception, and thought. This general definition extends aesthetics beyond the strict realm of art to include the conceptual coordinates and modes of visibility operative in the political domain” (Ranciere 2004, 82).

To Ranciere the aesthetic regime of the arts is first of all a new regime for relating to the past (Ranciere 2004, 25). It is a “grand aesthetico-political endeavour to have ‘thought’ become ‘world’” (Ibid., 10). Aesthetics refers to a specific realm for identifying and reflecting on the arts. It can be understood in the Kantian sense, “as the system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience” (Ibid., 13).
“Politics plays itself out in the theatrical paradigm as the relationship between the stage and the audience” (Ibid., 17). In simpler terminology, for Ranciere, the aesthetic state is not only the Schillerian ideal, where the “play impulse” is free to harmonize Man’s polarity, it is the site of art – the art of the political itself.

It can be seen more clearly in Clifford Geertz’s seminal work of 1980, Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-century Bali. From this work we can see an unfolding of Ranciere’s distribution of the sensible. In Bali Geertz found Negara to be, as he coined it, a "theatre state." A political configuration governed by rituals and symbols rather than by force. The Balinese state did not specialize in tyranny, conquest, or effective administration. Instead it emphasized spectacle and ceremony:

It was a theatre state in which the kings and princes were the impresarios, the priests the directors, and the peasants the supporting cast, stage crew, and audience. The stupendous cremations, tooth filings, temple dedications, pilgrimages, and blood sacrifices, mobilizing hundreds and even thousands of people and great quantities of wealth, were not means to political ends: they were the ends themselves, they were what the state was for. Court ceremonialism was the driving force of court politics; and mass ritual was not a device to shore up the state, but rather the state, even in its final gasp, was a device for the enactment of mass ritual. Power served pomp, not pomp power.

(Geertz 1981, 13)

What is important about Geertz’s work is that can be used to highlight Ranciere’s “theatrical paradigm” as the site where “politics plays itself out”. For example, these spectacles of power and pomp are reminiscent of Leni Riefenstahl’s 1934 documentary The Triumph of the Will, where the National Socialists descend on Nuremburg in mass
militarized parades. These and other immense rallies are all captured in full Nazi regalia – uniforms, flags, symbols, and standards – with the sounds of Wagner permeating the images. For Hitler and the Third Reich, this was the representation of their politics of aesthetics. Their “theatre state.” The Triumph of the Will exemplified the National Socialist’s Schillerian aesthetic state. The Third Reich was for Hitler the site in which Man who has overcome Nature and Reason could enjoy the freedom of Beauty. It was unfortunately also the site where one constructed beauty by destroying the “ugly” or degenerate. Hitler’s National Socialism created art by destroying it.

Pol Pot’s “triumph of the will” happened on 17 April 1975 when the Communist Party of Kampuchea descended on Phnom Penh, not with the pomp of Nuremburg, but definitely the power. Angkar reduced the capital to a discarded film set. Pictures were no longer to be taken in the city. From then on, the theatrics would take place only in the countryside, were the “new people” became the supporting cast, stage crew, and audience to a grandiose state aesthetic. One in which the wardrobe, set design, and screenplay had all been crafted in advance. A story of social order turned on its head, where the heroes would become villains and the villains, heroes.


Perhaps I had a nightmare earlier because what was being presented to us as reality was so obviously fake. I was waiting for something of Cambodia to break through the shield around us, even if it was violent. The cooperative could have been a movie set. It bore no resemblance to the descriptions of cooperatives refugees had fled. There was a cluster of handsome one-room Khmer wooden huts on stilts. Everyone, the cooperative leader told
us, ate three meals a day, including dessert with the main meal. They had three holidays a month—on the 10th, 20th, and 30th. The cooperative leaders showed us women weaving cloth, men repairing implements, and a large canteen where all shared their meals. The leader said he and the others running the cooperative were common people selected by the masses as leaders because they showed superior management skills. Later I discovered the leader and all those presented to us as common people were in fact top party officials.

(Becker 1998, 414-415)

The Beauty, described by Becker, to be found in Democratic Kampuchea was in the construction of the utopian ‘socialist man,’ and by the destruction of all that surrounded him. For the director, Angkar, this destruction was the “play impulse” – the realm of the political aesthetic, or Ranciere’s “theatrical paradigm” where “politics plays itself out.”

Written from someone within the CPK, French born Laurence Picq, or Comrade Phal, describes the pomp of Angkar in her memoir Beyond the Horizon. She says that after two years of secrecy surrounding the Communist Party of Kampuchea, in mid September 1977, an air of excitement seemed to liven up the offices of CPK cadre. This year the Communist Party festival would be celebrated openly. It was to be a big event, with international repercussions. “Indeed, the Khmer revolution had only one precedent: the October Revolution” (Picq 1989, 105). Everyone was supposed to be involved in the festivities and learn the national anthem, “The International.” “From morning till night, one could hear the song echo throughout the camp, arousing an emotion even more powerful than that felt by starving bodies anticipating the banquet” (Ibid., 105-106).
During the festivities there was for once plenty of food. The atmosphere was warm. People became animated. “Everyone was jubilant. For much less, we could have forgotten the past!” (Ibid., 106).

The cadres and work units were taken to a theatre performance in the Bassac manner—a traditional lyrical style. It was the first such performance since the overthrow of the Lon Nol regime and the radio reported that delegations from all over the country were attending. As Picq recalls:

The performance was held at nine in the morning. We got up before daybreak and walked in rank to the site. As we arrived, we were carefully searched—women on one side, men on the other. “Too often, during the war, spectators became so caught up in the action that they shot at the actors…” we were told, in explanation of this measure. The acting was good, the set was well done, the voices effortless, and the songs magnificent. What a beautiful spectacle it was!

The banquet brought a sense of well-being and fulfillment to our underfed bodies and inspired gratitude toward the generous donors.

(Picq 1989, 106)

According to Picq, at a CPK seminar in July 1978, “There was a certain pomp that signaled the sprouting of a personality cult” (Picq 1989, 124). Jeeps had been replaced by enclosed sedans. Foreign Minster Ieng Sary was to be considered a hero who conducted a victorious struggle against imperialism. When he began to speak at once about Kampuchea’s new system of democracy he “assumed an air of mystical inspiration. Everyone held his breath; silence was total” (Ibid., 125). “The new seminar hall was equipped with a sound system, a huge stage covered in banners, a map of Cambodia, and
a planisphere. Powerful fans beat the air with their big blades, causing a deafening
live the just and clairvoyant party” (*Ibid.*, 125).

Just as many of the world’s political manifestations have throughout their
existences, Democratic Kampuchea, displayed the pomp of Ranciere’s “theatrical
paradigm” where “politics plays itself out.” But for *Angkar*, unlike Geertz’s Balinese
state, pomp served the power, not power pomp. Power through violence was to achieve
the ultimate goal for *Angkar*. It was to destroy the old, champion the new, and construct
the new socialist Man. One who exhibits total acquiescence to *Angkar*. For Picq, *Angkar*
was an “anonymous, faceless power, Angkar was omnipresent, blindly followed and
idolized. Angkar demanded to be served unconditionally, and in return, it provided
everything. Angkar banished all religions and beliefs, imposing itself like a new god”
(Picq 1989, 77-78). The art of this destruction and creation of a new god was the “play
impulse” of Democratic Kampuchea – the realm of the politico-religious aesthetic.
The notion of an aesthetic state traces its roots to the impression expressed primarily by one Hellenic ‘city-state’ or polis, mainly the Athens of 480-429 BCE, where its political and social institutions were controlled by a collective mass of forces of which the closest modern identifications belong to the aesthetic sphere (Chytry 1989, xxxi). The cultural formations of Athens operated through the celebration of the Homeric works and the influence on the creative life from his poetic to dialectic. Homer, in a sense, became the “unique poetic ‘prophet’ for the religion of the Athenians” (Ibid., xxxi). As Josef Chytry, from his 1989 work The Aesthetic State expressed, “their religion is a Kunstreligion or ‘religion of art’ because it stemmed from a legislation made possible primarily through a ‘poetic’ mind” (Ibid., xxxi). Thus Homer’s Iliad can be viewed as the original text of “political theory” indicating the content of the tragedy of the aesthetic judgment shared by a people committed to the life of a model citizen of the polis (Ibid., xxxi). And any interpretation of Homeric paideia must also include his depiction of the ideally functioning polis in the Odyssey. The Phaeacian, or Scherian, way of life narrated in the Odyssey describes the most perfectly articulated communality where the physical arrangement of the polis harmonized with the imagination of the sophisticated Greek

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15 Pol Pot’s Little Red Book, (Locard 2004, 299)
sensibility. “Phaeacia had been judiciously planned” … “to housing, land cultivation, and temples, and Homer’s descriptions of the charms of its palace, agora, and gardens add up to a memorable tableau” (Ibid., xxxix). The Phaeacian utopia accords to the highest perfection of the Homeric scale of values. Where the heroes and free men can lounge about and share “the noble visions that the bardic poet excites in their collective imagination” (Ibid., xl). For Homer and the Athenians, just as Alexander Nehamas’s 1985 interpretation of Nietzsche in *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, a person’s, or the collective persons,’ “life is best lived when it is deliberately lived as a coherent narrative or story” (Kateb 2006, 140). Or as George Kateb articulated in his 2006 work *Patriotism and Other Mistakes*, “The arts of existence make one’s existence into a work of art” (Ibid., 140).

As glossed over in the previous chapter, for French philosopher Jacques Ranciere, aesthetics is neither art theory in general nor the discipline that takes art as an object of study. “Aesthetics is properly speaking a specific regime for identifying and thinking the arts” referred to as the “aesthetic regime of art” (Ranciere 2004, 82). And these ‘regimes of art’, or what the German intellectual tradition has referred to them as, the ‘aesthetic state’, may have many manifestations. As Mark Antliff described in his 2007 volume *Avant-Garde Fascism*, the desire is a unification of aesthetics and politics that includes “concepts of cultural, political, and biological regeneration”; notions of Emilio Gentile’s “secular religion”; primitivism; and anti-capitalist theories of space and time” (Antliff 2007, 21). I hope to treat these themes in more detail, considering the insinuation of each paradigm while recognizing the synergetic comparison to modern totalitarian aesthetic states, mainly Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, and Democratic Kampuchea. This discussion
is not an argument for the Khmer Rouge to be labeled as ‘fascist’, it is merely proposing—just as aesthetics studies new ways of seeing and perceiving the world—a sensori-emotional approach to better understand the ‘aesthetic intoxication’ of modern regimes of terror.

Art in the original Homeric models of polis operated as the ideological focus for the Athenians, the Solonian legislation, as well as the eighteenth century Ioian polis. But as the shift to more complicated social forms took place, “such visions of Troy and Phaeacia had to be formalized into an educative ideal if Homeric polis thought was to shape the minds of the forthcoming generations” (Chytry 1989, xl). The ideal political life was to be highly thespic, theatrical, persuading, and particularly attentive to aesthetic elements. Just as “Plato may have kicked out the professional tragedian” … “he did so in order to inaugurate the true life of the polis itself as a ‘tragedy’: ‘the imitation of the fairest and noblest life’” (Ibid., xlii). Aristotle, however, personified the purpose of the polis as including a “strongly aesthetic sense” evidenced by his use of Greek synonyms for the modern category of “beauty” (Aristotle, *Politica* 1278b, 1252b from Chytry 1989, xlii). “Its members act for the sake of beautiful actions and hope to transmute their shared life from the merely necessary into the fair and beautiful” (Ibid., xlii).

Thus, the aesthete’s temporary retreat from the “political, social, humanitarian sphere” could itself be understood as a “ruse, a pursuit of politics by other means” (Redfield 2003, 2). Even on vacation from the aesthetic sphere, the individual cannot separate the aesthetic from the political. Again one can rouse the thoughts of what Jacques Ranciere called “the distribution of the sensible” in his *The Politics of Aesthetics*
that refers to the “articulation between forms of action, production, perception, and thought”…“operative in the political domain” (Ranciere 2004, 82).

For our discussion, therefore, this overreaching sensible realm constitutes the “aesthetic state” that stands for a “social and political community that accords primacy, although not exclusiveness, to the aesthetic dimension in human consciousness and activity” … “developed by German thinkers from the mid-eighteenth to the late twentieth century” (Chytry 1989, xii). One particular anxiety in this chapter however hovers over George Kateb’s concern of the aesthetic state and morality, moreover “the power of unaware and unrationalled aestheticism to move people to act immorally with an apparent innocence” in the search of ideals that are pursued at high moral cost (Kateb 2006, 118). In other words, humanity and morality are to be thrown out in the pursuit of the total aesthetic state. “Aesthetic motives help to animate pursuit of ideals that are untheorized but enacted, or theoretically defended, at large moral cost, that are loved more than morality or are so loved that the moral cost does not break into consciousness with any force” (Ibid., 123).

Thus morality and the aesthetic are hostile. But why? I agree with Kateb when he states in his chapter “Aestheticism and Morality: Their Cooperation and Hostility”, “Start with beauty: people want beauty!” (Kateb 2006, 125). Beauty is what is pleasing to the senses, what charms the intellectual faculties. “Aestheticians deal preponderantly with the interplay between the senses and the imagination” (Ibid., 125). Beauty, therefore, is not only “in the eye of the beholder” it is in the imagination. For Kateb, the imagination is where the senses minister. “The imagination wants to be not only charmed but also thrilled or deeply gratified” (Ibid., 125). “It is the insistence that something beautiful is,
that something beautiful exists; or, by contrast, it is the desire that something beautiful should exist, that the attractively possible should be made actual” (Ibid., 125).

For the sake of this discussion, aesthetics, therefore, can be conceived as the imaginary search for the politically beautiful. A political ‘sense perception.’ The pursuit of the ‘aesthetic state’ amounts to what Kateb named the “activist deliberate philosophical aestheticism” in regard to the individual, society, or societies as a whole (Kateb 2006, 139). Proponents including Schiller, Nietzsche, Wilde, and Herbert Marcuse urge that “social life be made over so that it deserves to elicit aesthetic attitudes and feelings” (Ibid., 39, author’s italics). And one such strand of deliberate philosophical aestheticism is that of fascism. As Kateb describes:

fascism, to some of its initiators, adherents, and sympathizers, was a consciously aesthetic response to what they perceived as the ill-disciplined, ill-defined, swarming, incoherent, and slovenly social conditions of modern mass and surplus populations in distress. It is not only true that fascism gratified for many people cravings that did not know themselves to be aesthetic, and it is not only true that fascism was formed and enacted by a few who were willing to say or at least imply that fascism gratified their aesthetic cravings. The relevant point here is that for more detached admirers, fascism was justified as an aesthetic phenomenon, and for them there could be no higher kind of justification.

(Kateb 2006, 139-140)

As Mark Antliff discusses in Avant-Garde Fascism, both fascism and modernist aesthetics emerged out of the anti-Enlightenment movements opposed to democratic tradition. For Antliff, “the rise of fascism in Europe responded to a widespread search for spiritual
values and ‘organic’ institutions capable of counteracting what was considered the corrosive effects of rationalism (and capitalism) on the body politic” (Antliff 2007, 19).

Marxists Micheal Lowry and Robert Sayre configured fascism as one manifestation of “Romantic anti-capitalism,” an umbrella term for the opposition to capitalism associated with a broad political spectrum, including Marxism, anarchism, and socialism (Ibid., 19).

It was a “dreamed-of future beyond capitalism” inscribed “in the nostalgic vision of the pre-capitalist era” (Ibid., 19). Although fascists may have been opposed to Enlightenment ideals and capitalism, they were willing to absorb aspects of modernity and modern aesthetics to reconfigure their irrational concepts of political identity. The fascist aesthetic imaginary, attuned to alternative philosophical strands like Friedrich Nietzsche, conceived a new social and political order in concert with the industrial revolution, yet opposed to the democratic tradition (Ibid., 21). This Nietzschean “life as literature” antirationalist aesthetic “inspired the anti-Semitic ‘blood and soil’ politics of the Nazis, the creation of fascists myths under Mussolini, the socioeconomics of corporativism, and the theatrical mass politics of fascist regimes and movements throughout Europe” (Ibid., 21). As Jacob Golomb and Robert S. Wistrich postulated in 2002’s Nietzsche, Godfather of Fascism?, “One has to ask if there is not something in Nietzsche’s philosophy with its uninhibited cultivation of a heroic individualism and the will to power, which may have tended to favor the fascist ethos” (Golomb & Wistrich 2002, 3).

“From Mussolini and Hitler to Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, and Saddam Hussein, the last eighty years have been riddled with so-called political geniuses imagining that they were ‘beyond good and evil’ and free of any moral constraints” (Golomb & Wistrich 2002, 3). This is the genesis of Kateb’s battle between aesthetics and morality discussed above.
Nietzsche’s right to rule of a ‘good and healthy aristocracy’ would be ready to sacrifice untold numbers of human beings in the pursuit of the beautiful aesthetic state, whether that be National Socialist, fascist, or communist. The leaders of these regimes of terror sought self-mastery “to acquire reality in one’s own eyes. One’s eyes finally see and want to see only the shaped and shapely, the beautiful” (Kateb 2006, 141). This pursuit of the beautiful is, to borrow from George Kateb, an ‘aesthetic intoxication.’ Just as “[i]mperialism provides the aesthetic intoxication of destroying and remaking customs and relations, rules and institutions,” so too do the myths of fascism (Ibid., xix). To “want a self to be like a work of art or a life to be like a well-made story is not merely nonmoral” (Ibid., 141). While intoxicated there is an “eagerness to see indifference to or disregard of morality as aesthetically indispensable”…“aesthetic reason has been allowed to outweigh morality” (Ibid., 142).

Concepts closely “associated with modernist aesthetics—including regeneration, spiritualism, primitivism, and avant-gardism—were integrated into the anti-Enlightenment pantheon of fascist values, with the result that many artists found common ground with these new movements” (Antliff 2007, 21). Fascism’s generic cultural politics and internal workings can be used to better understand alternative aesthetically intoxicated regimes, including so-called non-fascist movements, more specifically Pol Pot’s Democratic Kampuchea, which according to S-21 survivor Pha Thachan, “was ‘Communism,’ but it was of a ‘fascist’ kind, and it surpassed fascism” (Chandler 2000, 10).

Robert Griffin’s definition in The Nature of Fascism situates fascism as “a genus of political ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a palingenetic form
of populist ultranationalism” (Griffin 1994, 26). Given the impact French political
theorist George Sorel’s work had on Mussolini, the Italian leader believed that “the
revolutionary transformations instigated by religious sects and political movements arise
from the emotive impact of their core myths, defined as those visionary principles that
inspire political action” (Sorel from Antliff 2007, 22). The production of myths not only
provided a blueprint for the future to be created through aesthetics, it provided a spiritual
ideal in contrast with reality. From Sorel to Pol Pot’s chief ideologues Nuon Chea and
Khieu Samphan, “In each case, myth makers drew a strong contrast between a decadent
present, rife with political and ethical corruption, and their vision of a regenerated future
society, premised, in no small part, on the spiritual transformation of each individual
within the body politic” (Antliff 2007, 23).

For Griffin the mythic essence of fascism was that of palingenesis. “Etymo-
logically the term ‘palingenesis,’ deriving from palin (again, anew) and genesis (creation,
birth), refers to the sense of a new start or of a regeneration after a phase of crisis or
decline which can be associated just as much with mystical (for example the Second
Coming) as secular realities (for example the New Germany)” (Griffin 1994, 32-33).
Regenerative aesthetics is the reinvigoration of the body politic. The mythic appeal of the
anti-modern art and literature harkened back to an agrarian, medieval past. It is not as if
the Italians wanted to reestablish the Holy Roman Empire, instead the fascists
“selectively plundered their historical past” to reflect the “values they wished to inculcate
for their radical transformation” (Antliff 2007, 27). Reflecting fascist aesthetics, Pol Pot’s
Democratic Kampuchea also selectively plundered. Harking back to the ideal agrarian
past, not to relive the ancient Angkor Empire, but to radically restructure the future. Just
as the fascists looked beyond the decadent present to past eras in order to construct palingenetic myths, Khmer Rouge cadres embraced Angkar’s radically new political jargon to “[c]ompletely get rid of all the castoffs from imperialist, feudal, and reactionary days” and become born again (Locard 2004, 76). “This new society, deprived of traditional religious holidays, without social classes save the proletariat, had to make a clean sweep of the past and enjoy a triumphant egalitarianism” (Ibid., 271). Or as a few sayings of Angkar articulate:

- Abolish everything old, replace it with everything new.
- Transform the old order into the new order. (272)
- Absolutely get rid of the property regime, throw away the old trade and create a new trade. (279)

However for Penny Edwards in her 2007 volume, Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation, 1860-1945, Pol Pot’s revolutionary utopia of Democratic Kampuchea was a “curious ideological mix” that “combined the rejection of modernity with the quest for a return to a prefeudal past and the simultaneous search for a progressive future” (Edwards 2007, 1). Its policies would boast that it could outleap Mao Tse-tung’s Great Leap Forward yet appealed to the masses to prove their worth as descendents of the builders of Angkor Wat and the vast temple complex. “Whereas Marx had set out to turn all peasants into modern citizens, Saloth Sar (Pol Pot) was determined to turn all citizens into peasants, viewing their potential to build anew as an atavistic trait exemplified in the prototypes for his earlier masquerade as the Original Khmer: the builders of Angkor” (Ibid., 1-2, my italics).
In Democratic Kampuchea the past was officially banned, with nostalgia being renamed as “memory sickness” punishable by execution. Those who were thrown into the mass graves were to eradicate the country’s tainted history. The Khmer Rouge however clung to national histories of Angkor and “the Original Khmer”\textsuperscript{16}, while at the same time embracing Communist internationalism. As Penny Edwards articulates:

Saloth Sar was apparently untroubled by the contradictions inherent in his blend of Angkorean antiquity and revolutionary modernity, or by its intellectual genealogy, which sat oddly alongside the DK’s robust anticolonial vitriol. As would have been well known to Saloth Sar and such members of his inner circle as Khieu Samphan, Ieng Sary, and Khieu Thirith, the French Protectorate (1863-1954) had used the trope of fallen race and the lodestone of Angkor to indicate what heights the Khmers could achieve with the correct (French) tuition. Saloth Sar used the same tropes, but “independence mastery” was his motto. This skewed translation of colonial historiography was conducted with a particular eye to prosperity.

(Edwards 2007, 2)

David Chandler similarly writes of Democratic Kampuchea’s selective historiography in his 1983 essay “Seeing Red: Perceptions of Cambodian History in Democratic Kampuchea”. For him what seems to be a uniquely Khmer approach to history – at least for a partly literate society – is the absence of written, historical texts. After April 17, 1975, there were no written histories of Cambodia in circulation since all libraries, bookshops, publishing houses, universities, and high schools were closed. And with the eradication of intellectuals, there were no histories available to ordinary Khmers.

\textsuperscript{16} Saloth Sar’s Khmer language press *nom de plume*
With no texts for comparative study, no history curricula, and the Party’s monopoly of the subject, it is not surprising that Cambodia’s history in the DK period was often treated very simplistically in terms of ‘2,000 years’ of unrelieved class warfare, slavery, and foreign intervention, broken by the appearance of the CPK (with birthdays – twelve – that began to vary, after 1976) and its ‘inevitable victory’ in April 1975.

(Chandler 1983, 37)

The Communist Party of Kampuchea’s social phases that had marked Khmer history would be no stranger to students of Marxism. The “locus classicus of DK periodization is Pol Pot’s speech of September 27, 1977, in which he announced the existence of the CPK to a large audience in Phnom Penh and gave his own idea of the periods that marked his country’s past” (Chandler 1983, 37-38). There was the era of primitive communism, where there were slave-owners and slaves, landowners and rural workers; then the capitalist society, with capitalists and wage-laborers. For the Angkor period, a contradiction arises. As a feudal configuration, where slaves toiled for the Royal few, Angkor exemplified the exploitation of man by man, or man by divine right. However, for DK public relations, “Angkor is used to demonstrate that ordinary people, when mobilized in vast numbers by the state can do extraordinary things. Angkor also fits into the boastful framework of DK foreign relations” (Ibid., 43). The Angkorean period, “especially the reign of Jayavarman VII (r. 1178-1220) offer striking parallels to the DK regime” (Ibid., 43). “In both eras, a small, more or less invisible directorate – the king and his advisors; the ‘organization’ – dictated the activities of the population”…
“mobilizing labor and resources on an unprecedented scale” and “unpaid laborers were put to work in the service of an arcane set of ideas, held by a few – Mahayana Buddhism; communism – which was used in turn to justify the destruction of social forms and to set in train the ‘liberation’ of those who understood it” (Ibid., 43).

Angkor was commandeered as a public relations tool yet abandoned when no longer needed. But with Angkor behind it, Cambodia was not longer a small nation, but a great civilization diminished over time by waves of foreign invaders. Thus revolutionary Khmers were to be the driving force behind a new grand civilizational period, free of historic enemies, with the ability to lead. Pol Pot compared the monuments of Angkor with the liberation of Phnom Penh: “If our people can make Angkor, they can make anything” (Pol Pot speech, FBIS 2 October 1977 from Chandler 1983, 44).

The workers at the Angkor complex and what they achieved, in other words, served the Kampuchean revolution. As Chandler explains:

by providing an analogy of national grandeur which, under the leadership of the CPK, could be re-enacted in the 1970s. Because “Angkor” and “Cambodia” were in a sense synonymous (and had been, since the French interpreted the ruins at the start of the colonial era) the DK regime was perhaps compelled to use it, as on the flag, while discarding the rest of Cambodian history; Angkor was too big, too well known, and too Cambodian to be discarded.

Angkor had been built; it was marvelous; it was there. Offering no explanations, DK historians returned Angkor to the jungle, but they were unable or unwilling to abandon it altogether.

(Chandler 1983, 44-45, author’s underlines)
Recourse to palingenetic myths had its roots in the attempt to achieve the ultimate goal of the aesthetic state through the creation of “a form of mass politics based on ritual and public pageantry meant to foster a spiritual unity supposedly unattainable under parliamentary systems of governance” (Antliff 2007, 35). Emilio Gentile has described this new aesthetic politics as a form of “secular religion,” wherein regimes “adapted religious rituals to political ends, elaborating their own system of beliefs, myths, rites, and symbols” in order “not only to govern human beings but to regenerate them in order to create a new humanity” (Gentile 1997, 27). The mass assemblage of the French Revolution sought to guide and formalize worship through forms of self-veneration. According to George Mosse “cult of reason abandoned rationalism; it tended to substitute the Goddess of Reason for the Virgin Mary and infuse the cults with hymns, prayers, and response modeled on Christian liturgy” (Mosse 1975, 13-14). Albert Speer, as well as Hitler himself, looked to past architects for the construction of national shrines as sacred spaces and sites of public worship (Antliff 2007, 36). Party rallies in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany in turn took on all the iconography of religious ceremonies. As Gentile cites of Giuseppi Mazzini, politics resembled “a collective palingenetic experience,” by undergoing a process of “struggle, sacrifice, and martyrdom” comparable to a religious transformation (Gentile 1997, 3-9). Gentile’s ‘secular religion’ calls for the spiritual rejuvenation of the body politic through aesthetics.

Haing Ngor’s *Survival in the Killing Fields* recounts how Angkar called for this spiritual rejuvenation of the body politic through the use of bells. Haing Ngor wrote that while still exhausted from the day before he rose from his hempen hammock at four o’clock in the morning as the first bell rang.
At four thirty they rang the bell again. Slow, separate beats to start with, then gradually faster until the notes ran together: DING...DING...ding, ding, ding, ding, ding,...ding-ding-dingdingdingdingdingdingdingding!!! Then a pause, and they rang it again. Another pause, and they rang it a third time: DING...DING...ding, ding, ding, ding, ding, ding, ding-ding-dingdingdingdingdingding!!

Always, they rang the bell in series of three. Before the revolution the monks had beat their drums in the same pattern, dull, single booms at first and then faster and faster into a drum roll, then a pause and then starting over again, in threes. With that signal, the monks had called the faithful to prayer. Unconsciously, perhaps, the cadre banging his stick against the metal car wheel hanging near the common kitchen was replaying a rhythm of his youth. Or perhaps, in the new ‘religion’ of Angka, work had come to mean something like prayer, as a way of purifying ourselves and showing our devotion.

(Haing Ngor 2007, 219)

Just as a cube of clay is sculpted into a beautiful statuette, the masses under totalitarianism are lumped together, destroyed and palingenetically remolded by the mystical hand of a political religion to resemble aesthetically perfect political subjects. From this outlook, fascism itself can be conceived as purely an aesthetic movement, not a theory. Because to Gentile, “there are no theories in fascism”, but there clearly exists “a mentality that is the start of a new life process” (Gentile 2005, 286, author’s italics).

However, prior to the mentality of Gentile’s ‘secular religion,’ Eric Voegelin developed the concept of ‘political religion’ to categorize the spiritual meaning that is the essence of totalitarian politics. As we have discussed in the preceding chapters, for Voegelin, “this mystical construction is at the core of all totalitarian politics in the twentieth century,” namely the claim of these regimes to dominate all aspects of human existence.
The fascist mentality, therefore, discloses itself in the religious experience as sacred. For Voegelin:

This basic transformation from the natural to the divine results in a sacral and value-oriented recrystallization of reality around that aspect that has been recognized as being divine. Worlds of symbols, linguistic signs and concepts arrange themselves around the sacred center; they firm up as systems, become filled with the spirit of religious agitation and fanatically defended as the “right” order of being.

(Voegelin 2000, 32).

Aesthetics, or ‘sense perception’ is a “central locus for the reception, creation, and reproduction of our religious worlds” (Plate 2005, 2). Just as with politics, aesthetics offers itself as a mode for analyzing and comparing religions. Whether conceptualized as Gentile’s ‘secular religion’ or Voegelin’s ‘political religion’, my attempt is to rescue aesthetics as an essential point for the study of totalitarian projects, whether that be fascist, communist, or anything else. But as Antliff contends, “The fascist’s new politics had its roots not only in state-sanctioned cults and religious institutions but also in the cultural politics of avant-garde primitivism” (Antliff 2007, 42). The fascist myths of the primitive, as Walter Adamson wrote, “grew out of a perceived need for a spiritual renewal in modern culture that would involve the masses in society’s political rituals” (Adamson 1989, 423). Italian fascism relied on Ardengo Soffici’s “synthesis of nationalism, modernism, and ‘volkish’ regionalism” as its spiritual regeneration (Antliff 2006, 42). The “religiosity of Tuscan peasants, combined with deep love of the land, constituted a ‘folk essence’ antithetical to the perceived materialism and corrupt values of the ruling elite” (Ibid., 42). The aesthetic primitivism of Italy was later reflected not only
in rhetoric but in the brutality of Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge revolution when the inhabitants of the capital Phnom Penh and other cities were forcibly evacuated and relocated to agrarian camps where the ‘new people’ were to “[s]ow and grow in order to raise the people’s living standards” (Locard 2004, 237). The fascist avant-gardists in Italy treated the European peasantry and their rural setting as “mythic ciphers for primitivist aesthetics” (Antliff 2007, 46). For the National Socialists, the “primitive” possessed both positive and negative connotations depending on its racial composition. The essence of the German folk resided in pure Aryan genealogy with roots in classical art and Renaissance eras. Scholars\textsuperscript{17} have noted:

Hitler’s and Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg’s literal association of Greek sculpture with their own eugenic program to create a fascist “new man,” untainted by the degenerative effects of racial “mixing.” As a result they cumscribed their notion of regenerative primitivism within the geopolitical boundaries of Europe and subsumed German society in the “organicist” politics of corporativism and racial collectivism. (Antliff 2007, 46-47)

The racial aesthetic language of National Socialism’s primitivist regenerative aims provided a stark contrast between ancient Greek and the degenerative ‘other’ that would be eliminated. For Hitler’s Germany there was no higher aestheticism than that of the individual body.

As Terry Eagleton stated, “Aesthetics in born as a discourse of the body.” It is “thus the first stirrings of a primitive materialism” (Eagleton 1990, 13). Yet the discipline of aesthetics has been largely displaced by inquiries on style, art, beauty, and taste, or as

\textsuperscript{17} see Michaud 2004; and Taylor & Van der Will 1990
Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten termed, *aesthetica artificialis*, as opposed to the sensually oriented *aesthetica naturalis* of the body (Plate 2005, 20). From this vantage point aesthetics can become a powerful force for invention, for rethinking who we are as humans, and rethinking the status of religion and politics. Although mind-body dualism is a key factor to the denigration of aesthetics, totalitarian mentality exerts control over its objects of study by maintaining the “interlocked dualities of the inside and outside, and pure and impure” which is at the heart of many religious traditions (*Ibid.*, 21). Expanding on the studies of James Aho (2002), S. Brent Plate characterizes fascist body and mind control:

> Because the bodily sense organs are physiologically situated at the cusp of the inside and the outside of the body—ears, nose, mouth, eyes, skin—the realm of aesthetics must be appropriated by the mind and retained “inside”—that is, subservient to the logic of reason—or is excised from the realm of thought and deemed unimportant for truth. (Plate 2005, 21)

No location—neither art, allegory, symbol, myth, memory, words, images, bodies, technology, or community—can be more controlling, both in mind and body, than the aestheticization of space and time. Fascist conceptions of Benjaminian “aesthetics-as-sense-perception” cast a dichotomy between regenerative and capitalist approaches to space and time. As Haing Ngor recalled, and according to geographer David Harvey, “clocks and bells that came to regulate the labor of workers and merchants separated the populace from the natural rhythms of agrarian life, as well as those of the Christian calendar” (Harvey 1989, 228). Spatial and temporal bases were now constructed as quantifiable commodities to be bought and sold (Antliff 2007, 49). Thus sensual
experiences of time and historical identification with a particular locale “were rendered irrelevant under the cultural logic of capitalism” as well as fascist totalizing aesthetic (Ibid., 49). Italian fascist aesthetics advocated qualitative over quantitative notions of time. “Fascists condemned the ‘clock time’ of capitalism, claiming it emptied temporality of meaning and thereby denied that human actions could have a ‘spiritual’ or ‘epic’ significance” (Ibid., 52). It again highlighted the life-affirming struggle between decadence and regeneration. This conversion of the mythic endpoint of teleological history into spatial form, whether Mussolini, Hitler, or Pol Pot, evoked the name of mythic “purification and revival of a class, a nation, or a ‘race’ that had a task to perform or a destiny to fulfill” (Ibid., 53).

In Griffin’s description, fascist revolutionary aesthetics fall under the rubric of an “alternative” time, since “a revolution is a moment when a mythically charged ‘now’ creates a qualitative change in the continuum of history, which is to be distinguished from undifferentiated ‘clock time’” (Griffin 1998, 15). The most dramatic instance of aesthetic social engineering came when the Gregorian calendar was destroyed to reveal the Italian fascist timeframe of 1922 becoming “Year 1”. This signaled an immediate regenerative break from the past. Pol Pot’s Democratic Kampuchea also challenged time and space by deeming April 17, 1975, “new year’s day” of “Year Zero”.

Pol Pot’s yearning for a place for himself and his regime peered through his coming-out speech in 1977 “in which he celebrated the ‘powerful historical tide’ of world revolution and urged the people of Kampuchea to take their place in this forward push of history” (Edwards 2007, 3). When history becomes a discourse of a totalizing regime it requires a suppressing of time, or a “creative rethinking of pasts mythologized in very
different fashions by previous sources of authority” (Herzfeld 1997, 59). Democratic Kampuchea historiography, according to Penny Edwards, “shared with that of other postcolonial regimes a common capacity for suppressing what Herzfeld calls time’s specificity, most notably through the erasure of the colonial encounter from the idea of Cambodian history. Paradoxically, this negation of time in itself reveals the enduring hegemony and mythic hold of the rethinking of time that occurred among Cambodians in the French Protectorate” (Edwards 2007, 3). For Angkar the French colonial regime and the non-communist resistance leaders were dismissed as unimportant. The DK had only forty-four months of continuous revolution “yet it was being compared with regimes and dynasties hundreds of years old” (Ibid., 3).

Hitler as well used mythic time images to “accelerate” the masses toward the “eternal Reich” and awaken the people’s desire for salvation. Michaud argues that the mythic images and edifices (German folk paintings, and Classical Greek sculpture) enabled the National Socialist movement to impose itself as the “prophesy already realized” (Antliff 2007, 59).

The monumentality of Italian fascist, National Socialist, and Pol Potist aesthetic states link to the Kantian notion of the “dynamic sublime” to account for the impact on the human psyche. Totalitarians deploy concepts of cultural, political, and biological regeneration, and the iconography of political religion to achieve the primitivist aesthetic. Fascism’s mythic constructs even accounted for anti-capitalist theories of space and time. As Kateb states, the leaders of these totalitarian regimes “could not get started unless the many craved some of these same aesthetic gratifications and were willing to settle for
vicarious triumph over others” (Kateb 2006, xix). And this is a form of aesthetic intoxication that has made individuals suspend morality, and make them “ruthless without a second thought” (Kateb 2006, xx).
“Worker-peasants unite tightly to make up a single stack!”

The Peasant in Revolutionary Teleology: Marx, Mao, and Pol Pot

Thus the awakening of the dead in those revolutions served the purpose of glorifying the new struggles, not parodying the old; of magnifying the given task in imagination, not of fleeing from its solution in reality; of finding once more the spirit of revolution, not of making its ghost walk about again.

~Karl Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte

In a historicist-teleological reading of the modes of production, Karl Marx explains a process that is integral to the formulation of the proletarian revolution, that being the transition from precapitalist, or ‘feudal’ society, to bourgeois industrial capitalism, to socialism, then ultimately to communism. In Marx’s historical dialectic a society must experience the economic stage of bourgeois capitalism in order to transcend to yet another stage. When looking from this teleological perspective, the ‘leap’ from ‘feudalism’ to communism in Mao’s China, for example, and the ‘leap’ of the same in Pol Pot’s Democratic Kampuchea, would of course not constitute ‘genuine’ communist revolutions. Both were also peasant-based revolutions, which according to classical Marxism, could not happen due to the fact that the peasantry did not really exist as a class, as explained in more detail below.

According to a teleological reading, when gazing through Marx’s historical dialectic this ‘leap’ over bourgeois capitalism is what ultimately makes these regimes problematic. When a society does not experience a stage of bourgeois capitalism the end

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18 Pol Pot’s Little Red Book, (Locard 2004, 59)
result is not ‘true’ communism. And more specifically if it was brought about by a peasant society it would not be a revolution of the proletariat, which would achieve Marx’s ultimate goal of the proletarian class controlling the modes of production. Thus through this teleological reading, Marx’s understanding of the process of obtaining revolution thoroughly explains the horrific failure of the Khmer Rouge’s peasant ‘pseudo-communist’ experiment in the nation of Democratic Kampuchea, and why other regimes, like that of Mao Tse-tung’s China, that have evolved in this manner, have ultimately led to party tyranny and mass extermination of populations.

But this contention comes from a strictly classical historicist-teleological reading of the modes of production and maintains that all historical stages must be met in order to achieve ‘true’ communism. But as we know there exists another, non-teleological way of understanding the progression from a peasant based ‘feudal’ society to a communist one. Through the gaze of post-colonial, subaltern, postmodern, and other schools of Marxist analysis one can formulate alternative conceptualizations of classes, stages, and ultimately regimes similar to that of Democratic Kampuchea where party tyranny and mass exterminations of people did not take place. But first a look into the historicist-teleological reading of Marxian thought needs to be more closely explored to further understand why the view is problematic.

This chapter is an attempt to examine these ideas through analysis of Marx’s work *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* and others writings on the ‘peasant question’, as well as a further discussion into the connections between the historicist-teleological understanding of peasant-based ‘communist’ revolutions, and that of the armed peasant uprising in Cambodia close to one hundred years after the death of Karl
Marx. The Khmer nation’s rural communist insurgency that led to the victory of Pol Pot’s Communist Party of Kampuchea in April of 1975 is an important illustration of how Marx’s theory of the peasantry as a revolutionary force can, and has been, adjusted to fit specific moments socially, culturally, and economically. The discussion also seeks to expose the obvious transition similarities held between the peasant led communist revolutions of Mao Tse-tung’s China and Pol Pot’s Democratic Kampuchea. In comparing the two revolutions one is able to tract the genesis of DK political ideology from that of Mao in its utilization of the peasantry as the primary revolutionary force, as well as how it too adjusted ‘classical’ Marxism to fit their specific moments socially, culturally, and economically.

From a classical reading of Marx, the peasant was absolutely incapable of any revolutionary initiative. However in light of this view, the CPK, most likely inspired by Chinese interpretations of orthodox Marxism, fashioned their own unique adaptation. One where in the absence of almost any large-scale capitalist production and proletariat class, the peasantry would play the biggest part in the revolutionary ‘leap’ from a precapitalist ‘fuedal’ economy to a radical utopian communist society. But before the procession into the DK period, a glimpse into Marx’s ‘peasant question’ is required. However, this glimpse is a teleological one, one that has purposely looked into sources that express a more Eurocentric viewpoint in order to lay the foundation of a classical Marxist interpretation of peasant analysis that will later be examined by non-teleological interpretations, more specifically Mao Tse-tung Thought.

According to economist Anthony Brewer’s reading of Marx’s Capital, “We start from the petty mode of production, which is production by individual, independent
producers (peasants or artisans) who own their own means of production” (Brewer 1984, 83, *author’s italics*). This mode however is interesting in that it “does not appear in the conventional sequence of modes (primitive-communal, ancient, feudal, capitalist), and does not involve any class opposition or exploitation” (*Ibid.*, 83). From *Capital*, Marx describes the peasant “as compatible only with a system of production and a society moving within narrow limits which are of natural origin” (Marx 1990, 927-928). And in *The Communist Manifesto* Marx described the small land holding peasants as ‘petite bourgeois’, and that after the implementation of large-scale industrial production engulfed the urban centers, “Marx took it for granted that the same process was bound to take place also in agriculture” (Mitrany 1951, 23). Marx saw the capitalist change in industry as the precedent for the inevitable capitalist change in agriculture. What had happened in England already and was in the process of happening in Germany at the time confirmed the role that traditional peasant farming was doomed (*Ibid.*).

At the time of *The Communist Manifesto* the continued increase in the price of land brought about an increase in peasant debt. And according to O.J. Hammen in his essay *Marx and the Agrarian Question*:

> At the same time the productivity of the land declined; it was impossible to use machinery and other modern devices to improve the yield of such small farms. Each generation started with the burden of a greater debt … all in the name of private property. ‘Only the fall of the capitalist can help the peasant,’ Marx claimed. ‘Only an anti-capitalist, a proletarian government can end his economic misery, his social degradation.’
>
> (Hammen 1990, 330)
The slow death of the peasant, for Marx, was inevitable under capitalism. The only way out of the impending doom was to assemble into the ranks of the proletarian class and forge ahead towards social revolution and the destruction of the capitalist system.

For Marx there existed however a contradictory nature of the peasantry as a social class. In 1852’s political pamphlet The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte Marx portrays the peasantry as belonging to a class, yet at the same time, not forming any class. For Marx the French peasantry was a class in itself and a class for itself, described as “a simple addition of homologous magnitudes, much as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes” (Marx from Selective Works [henceforth SW] 2000, 347).

Yet Marx also exposes that for the peasantry, “the identity of their interests begets no community, no national bond, and no political organization among them, they do not
form a class. They are consequently incapable of enforcing their class interests in their own name, whether through a parliament or through a convention. They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented” (Marx from SW 2000, 347). For Marx, the peasants of the population are incapable of any revolutionary initiative without help. They must be represented as a part of the proletarian class in order to survive, or “their passivity enabled them to be conjoled by a figure such as Bonaparte, who posed both as a representative and a master” (Wilde 1989, 43). And as we will see below, this phenomenon will later be repeated in revolutionary Kampuchea.

To many scholars, including David Mitrany in his seminal work Marx Against the Peasant: A Study in Social Dogmatism, Marx held nothing but contempt for the peasantry. *The Communist Manifesto* lumped the peasantry into the ‘petite bourgeoisie’ and never “allotted him a place of his own in the revolutionary procession” (Mitrany 1951, 40). Although these statements have since been overturned by contemporary Marxists their addition sheds light on the teleological argument. According to Mitrany in the 1950s, “If one considers not only *Capital* but his whole scientific and political activity, nowhere will one find signs that Marx had seriously studied the actual state of peasants in any one land” (*Ibid.*, 40). This is surprising even in contemporary history, in contrast to the fact that “no other issue has shaken the Socialist movement so violently and continuously” … “most of the many able English and American books which have discussed Marxist theory and practice scarcely mention the subject, if at all” (*Ibid.*, 14). He continues, “In the light of the part which the peasants have played in the eastern
revolutions, that is merely rather more puzzling, but it is nothing new. Neglect or ignorance by western writers and students of political attitudes and doings of the peasants have always been conspicuous” (*Ibid.*, 14).

David Mitrany’s account of the peasantry’s role in Marxian revolutionary thought has since been fiercely contested. For Hal Draper in volume II of his work *Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution*, “One of the hoariest myths of marxology is the belief that Marx and Engels simply dismissed the peasantry as rural troglodytes without interest” … “In fact, they wrote more voluminously on the peasant question than on many important aspects of the working-class movement” (Draper 1978, 317). Marx’s peasant views however were based more on the economic analysis of the impact of capitalist development on agriculture rather than their potential as a revolutionary class. But as discussed under the conditions of France in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx realizes that although the peasants cannot represent themselves, they can be wielded as a tool, just as Bonaparte utilized in his coup d’etat of 2 December 1851. “Bonapartism was not a peasant movement, though it utilized the movement of the peasants; and Bonaparte was not a peasant leader, though he led the peasants by the nose. The peasantry, as usual, was a tool” (*Ibid.*, 349).

According to a historicist-teleological reading of the dialectic method of Marx, revolutions in the standard sense refer “to a doctrine of final causes which focuses on certain ends as the logical outcome of previous events. There is unquestionably a teleological element in Marx’s method, for it purports to reveal the tendencies in the productive process which will eventually render private property unsupportable and lead to communist society” (Wilde 1989, 37). Each stage of the process is defined by the way
in which the ruling classes extract the economic surplus from the society, and each 
eextracts the surplus in different ways. In theory, the process should end with a communist 
revolution, which establishes a non-exploitative, classless society (Vickery 1984). The 
principle concept however has centered on this theory of transition, from capitalism to 
communism. The society in question must obtain advanced capitalist industrialization 
and the formation of a large proletariat class before the transformation can take place. 
“The revolution which modern socialism strives to achieve is” … “the victory of the 
proletariat over the bourgeoisie in whose hands the productive forces of society have 
developed” (Engels from Melotti 1977, 136). With the onslaught of post-Althusserian 
thought and the following work Late Marx and the Russian Road, of course, this 
teleological explanation has since been revised.

For Karl Marx it was believed that communism would come first in the advanced 
capitalist countries of Western Europe. This however has proved to be false. For 
economist Samir Amin this teleological succession of modes of production reasserts the 
unity of universal history. Amin explains, “The classic line of development—slavery-
feudalism-capitalism—is not only peculiar but also largely mythical. The opposition 
between European and so-called Asian line belongs to a family of Eurocentric 
philosophies of history” (Amin 1980, ix). Historian Michael Vickery as well explains in 
his Cambodia, 1975-1982 that “all revolutionary changes which have resulted in regimes 
termed ‘socialist’ or ‘communist’ either by themselves or by their enemies have occurred 
in societies which were not in the stage of advanced capitalism and show features, 
particularly in the political instance, which would have shocked the founders of scientific 
 socialism” (Vickery 1984, 259). Although “Marx did take into consideration the
possibility that non-capitalist countries, such as 19th-century Russia could make the leap” to communism from a particularly backward precapitalist position (Ibid., 259). Stating that the Russian commune might become the foundation-stone of social regeneration only under certain conditions and only if there were a social revolution in Russia and the West (Ibid., 259). He failed however to conceptualize a society like China of 1949 or Kampuchea of 1975 making the ‘leap’ from ‘feudalism’ to socialism without ever having achieved bourgeois capitalism nor a true proletariat class. In these historical instances a nationalized peasant based agricultural communism was implemented—having leapt over many of the crucial Marxist stages. “In a leap we find the immediate unity, the immediate coincidence of destruction of the old and creation of the new, of negation and affirmation” (Leningrad Institute of Philosophy 1978, 314).

After emerging from a nine-year civil war that saw continuous invasion and bombardment, Phnom Penh fell to the peasant guerrilla forces of the Communist Party of Kampuchea, which had been besieging it since the beginning of 1975. Soon after, the Khmer Rouge implemented an extreme form of peasant based agricultural communism. According to historian Ben Kiernan, “Democratic Kampuchea claimed to be ‘the number 1 communist state’” … “In 1976, DK proclaimed itself ‘four to ten years ahead’ of the other Asian communist states, having ‘leaped’ from feudalism ‘to a socialist society straight away’” (Kiernan 1996, 25-26). And for Chandler, “‘what happened in Cambodia. Although more intense, was standard operating procedure’ in China and the USSR, a case of ‘socialist practice’” (Ibid., 26).

Despite the ideological battles fought between scholars, no one can deny that during the forty-four months of continuous revolution in Democratic Kampuchea
millions of lives were lost. Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge followed a Mao-inspired ideology that focused exclusively on the rural peasantry as its main revolutionary force and maintained the integral connection between political ideology and military strategy that believes that power comes through the barrel of a gun. The CPK also followed a military doctrine that involves a peasant led staged guerrilla warfare and the belief that the class struggle continues throughout the entire socialist period. But Maoist ideology cannot explain why Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge evacuated the cities, abolished money, abandoned the idea of industrializing the country, “promoted a ferocious nationalism, indulged in fantasies about recreating the glory days of the ancient Khmer Empire, and practiced a curious mix of doctrines that Philip Short, who has written biographies of both Mao Zedong and Pol Pot, declares should not be confused with Maoism” (Leupp 2005, 2).

While the many interpretations of the DK political manifestation discussed above shed light on the somewhat confusing Khmer Rouge revolution, Marx’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* can help explain a lot about the regime. In this political pamphlet Marx’s intention was to “demonstrate how the class struggle in France created circumstances and relationships that made it possible for a grotesque mediocrity to play a hero’s part” (Marx from SW 2000, 329). It states that social revolution “cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future” (*Ibid.*, 331). Marx describes the revolution as a surprise attack. An unexpected stroke that ushered in a new epoch. And just as Pol Pot maintained to represent the Kampuchean peasant class, so too did Bonaparte maintain
to represent the French peasant class. Both relied on the peasants for support yet both succeeded in falsifying their true intent – which was a descent into tyranny on the backs of the peasantry.

In the work Marx starts off with a particularly gripping account, “Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce. Caussidiere for Danton, Louis Blanc for Robespierre, the Montagne of 1848 to 1851 for the Montagne of 1793 to 1795, the Nephew for the Uncle” (Marx from SW 2000, 329). This interesting quote speaks volumes of the DK regime considering the history of the ancient Angkor kingdom’s extremely tyrannical political configurations and the Khmer Rouge ‘farce’ that would follow. “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past” (Ibid., 329).

Just as Marx analyzed the class formations through the gaze of his materialist conception of history that facilitated the rise of Louis Bonaparte in France, an analysis into the class formations that led to the rise of Pol Pot and Democratic Kampuchea is also needed. As Vickery contends, “Traditional Khmer society was formed essentially of three classes – peasants, officials, and royalty. Very few Khmers became merchants, and to the extent that an urban population apart from the court and officials existed, it was composed of non-Khmers, generally Chinese. This division of society probably goes back to the Angkor period” (Vickery 1984, 12). “For the mass of the population, social position was fixed, and it would have been almost unthinkable to imagine rising above the class into which one was born” (Ibid., 12). But although the population of
Kampuchea itself may have continued to believe in the ‘three class’ society of royalty, officials, and peasants, one can formulate and differentiate the classes more closely. As written by Ben Kiernan in the second edition of his work *How Pol Pot Came to Power*:

Kampuchea was considered ‘a semi-colonial, semi-feudal country’. Its society was divided into five *vanna* or classes (feudal, capitalist, petty bourgeois, peasant and worker) and these in turn into various ‘layers’ (*sratop*), very much along the lines of the Chinese Communist Party’s analysis of pre-revolutionary China. Much emphasis was placed on exploitation of the peasantry by feudal landlords (*sakdephum mchas dei*).

(Kiernan 2004, 323)

Traditionally the working class, or some form of a ‘worker-peasant alliance’ would be considered the leader, or ‘the base’, of a communist revolution, however in revolutionary Kampuchea as well as in China years earlier, it would be the peasant in alliance with the petty bourgeois that formed the ‘base’. “There was thus no policy of organizing the urban working class, or even the urban poor” (Kiernan 2004, 324). For the Khmer Rouge, the base would consist of the petty bourgeois, those individuals being only the top CPK brass, namely Pol Pot, Nuon Chea, Ieng Sary, Khieu Samphan, Hu Nim, Son Sen, and a small handful of other foreign educated *Angkar* officials. The other half of the alliance was made from the much larger population of the peasant class, which we will see later, in the Maoist tradition, was too subdivided into smaller classes. A 1977 *Angkar* document discussing the history of the National Democratic Revolution reads:

We decided clearly on [what were] the revolutionary forces… The worker peasant forces were the basic force. Next were the national petty bourgeoisie and capitalists who undertook to follow the revolution.
Concretely, we did not rely on the forces of the workers. The workers were the overt vanguard, but in concrete fact they did not become the vanguard. In concrete fact there were only the peasants.

Therefore we did not copy anyone.

(Kiernan 2004, 324)

Following the lead of Mao Tse-tung in his analysis of the classes in Chinese society, Kampuchea exhibited class differentiations in the rural areas and also within the greater ‘peasant’ class. Mao wrote a document in October of 1933 in order to rectify the deviations that had occurred in the work of land reform. In it Mao outlines a brilliant analysis of classes in the rural areas of China. I believe these classes were also present in the postcolonial pre-DK period of Kampuchea as well. Mao maintains that the rural areas consist of, I. The Landlord, II. The Rich Peasant, III. The Middle Peasant, IV. The Poor Peasant, and V. The Worker.

In his work “How to Differentiate the Classes in the Rural Areas,” Mao describes the landlord as “a person who owns land, does not engage in labour himself, or does so only to a small extent, and lives by exploiting the peasants. The collection of land rent is his main form of exploitation.” A rich peasant is “a person who owns a fair amount of good land, farms some of it himself without hiring labour, but exploits other peasants by means of land rent, loan interest or in other ways.” The middle peasant does tend to own land yet “derives his income wholly or mainly from his own labour. As a rule he does not exploit others and in many cases he himself is exploited by others.” Some poor peasants own part of their land and have few odd farm implements. But “as a rule poor peasants have to rent the land they work on and are subjected to exploitation, having to pay rent
and interest loans and to hire themselves out to some extent.” And finally, the worker, which includes the farm laborer, “as a rule owns no land or farm implements” …

“Workers make their living wholly or mainly by selling their labour power” (Mao 1967, 137-139).

We may also note that the CPK, following the ideological line of Mao Tse-tung, demonstrated a lack of emphasis on dialectical relationships between classes, apart from the generalized formula of ‘exploitation’ (Kiernan 2004). In this specific case it was the greater peasantry, or the conglomeration of the many sub-classes within the rural areas. But as Stephen Resnick indicates, “individuals in rural areas participate in several different and shifting class and nonclass processes, thereby occupying different and ever changing class and nonclass positions and giving rise to different and ever changing interests” (Resnick 2007, 28).

When the French colonial forces first established a presence in Cambodia in 1863 they quickly realized that the country had no hidden wealth. Thus the economy was never fully modernized and continued its mode of production unimpeded. The French however collected taxes but brought about only limited changes to traditional village economic life. This life consisted of what James C. Scott could have called a “moral economy.” It sees “the need for a reliable subsistence as the primordial goal of the peasant cultivator” (Scott 1976, 5). The peasant’s desire is to examine the relationships between his or her neighbors, elites, and the state in terms of whether they aid or hinder him or her in meeting that need. This experience cultivates what Scott described as rooted in the economic practices and social exchanges of peasant society—“subsistence ethic” (Ibid., 6). The mass of post-colonial Kampuchea consisted of what one could formulate as
‘subsistence peasants’, a population of mainly agricultural workers whose roots lay in the countryside, either working under ‘feudal’ landlords or for themselves by owning or renting a small area of land for cultivation. Thus the society of Kampuchea mirrored that of many areas in revolutionary China.

However, “it is the question of subsistence that is most directly related to the ultimate needs and fears of peasant life” (Scott 1976, 7). And more specifically it is the fear of starvation that leads many within the peasant community to question colonial and postcolonial economic arrangements. These arrangements can and often do lead to peasant unrest and rebellion. In Scott’s influential book of 1976 *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* he states that “the central economic and political transformations of the colonial era served to systematically violate the peasantry’s vision of social equity, we may realize how a class ‘of low classness’ came to provide, far more often than the proletariat, the shock troops of rebellion and revolution” (*Ibid.*, 4).

In Kampuchea the CPK utilized the peasantry as the shock troops of rebellion and revolution. Having seen the many similarities between Mao Tse-tung’s analysis of rural class differentiation and those of postcolonial Kampuchea, Pol Pot and the CPK cadres followed Mao’s interpretation of Marxism more closely than any other ideology. Mao Tse-tung believed that China’s pre-revolution malaise had been caused by the exploitation of imperialist forces, and his reading of Marxism provided him with a systematic explanation of this phenomenon (Lieberthal 1995). The same cause for the malaise in Kampuchea was cited by Khmer Rouge leaders as well. A history of French colonialism, neighboring Thai and Vietnamese domination of Kampuchean politics, and the continuous bombing of the countryside by American B-52s all played a role in the
establishment of DK ideology. The newly established nation had always been a pawn of imperialist powers and the CPK used this history in its following of Mao Tse-tung Thought. But it was far more than just anti-imperialism, it was the prominence of ideology, campaigns, egalitarianism, anti-intellectualism, class struggle, and self-reliance that Mao believed in that Pol Pot’s DK later exemplified with brutal consequences.

The DK revolution was not, as Antonio Gramsci explored, a ‘spontaneous’ movement of the peasant masses. It was a deliberate pseudo-Marxist-Maoist ideologically led assault on the citizens of Kampuchea led by a small handful of Parisian educated elites. It was not a mass uprising. It was an intellectually led movement. And as Kate Crehan (2002, 16) points out of Gramsci, “the intellectual, therefore, is not that s/he possesses ‘superior powers of intellect’, but that they have in society a responsibility to produce knowledge and/or to instill that knowledge into others. The function of intellectuals is, above all, ‘directive and organizational, i.e. educative, i.e. intellectual” (from Selections from Prison Notebooks 1971).

The CPK leadership studied the work of Karl Marx extensively when they were students in Paris, and sought to become what Gramsci described as ‘intellectuals’. Ben Kiernan describes these new ‘Marxists’:

In 1950, a small group of Kampuchean students in France had formed a ‘Marxist Circle’, apparently affiliated to the French Communist Party (PCF) and its ‘Khmer-language section’; its leaders were Rath Samuoeun and Ieng Sary, who later pursued widely divergent political paths. Members included Hou Yuon, with his fellow student, Saloth Sar (later known as Pol Pot)…

(Kiernan 2004, 119)
The leaders of Angkar were all intellectuals, or aspiring intellectuals, and city dwellers. And according to Haing Ngor “that was the oddest thing about them, that they were bourgeois, well educated, mixed race and urban. Fifteen years later these same people were leaders of an anti-city, anti-intellectual, racist revolutionary movement” (Haing Ngor 2007, 427).

But soon after the Circle members returned to Kampuchea, it was Mao’s interpretation of Marxist thought that challenged their intellects. According to a classical teleological reading of Marxism, as discussed above, communist revolution could only take place after a bourgeois capitalist revolution and that of course had not happened in Kampuchea. So a ‘leap’ like that of Mao’s Great Leap Forward, led by a peasant populace, fit the Kampuchean situation convincingly better. Pol Pot himself made it clear that the revolutionaries of the Khmer Rouge were influenced by Maoism. According to Ben Kiernan, “Pol Pot made a public speech praising ‘Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought,’ indicating for the first time the CPK’s ideological debt to China” on September 18, 1976 (Kiernan 1996, 330).

In his 1989 essay “Explaining the Terror,” Kenneth M. Quinn states, “There is strong evidence that the radical Communist programs in Cambodia were derived almost in toto from left-wing Chinese communism” (Quinn 1989, 219). And even Philip Short who believes that the CPK was not a Maoist movement, still shows the importance of the beliefs the two revolutions shared.

…the primacy of men over machines; the exaltation of the human will (in China) and the ‘revolutionary consciousness’ (in Cambodia); the pre-eminence of ideology over learning (being ‘red’ rather than ‘expert’); the strategy of using the countryside to surround the city and the need to eliminate the differences between them; the concern to bridge the
The gulf between mental and manual labour; and the view that revisionism, in the shape of bourgeois thought, grew spontaneously within the communist movement itself. (Short 2004, 300)

The preeminence of ideology, as Short explains above, was very important to Maoism as well as to the Khmer Rouge. Mao believed that right thinking was integral to right conduct (Lieberthal 1995). And According to Kenneth Lieberthal in his *Governing China*:

He therefore gave enormous emphasis to matters of ideology … Put differently, Mao did not use ideology as window dressing to brighten his practical actions with a theoretical gloss; rather, he saw the development and propagation of ideology as central to the success of the movement he led. One of Mao’s key sources of power, moreover, was the monopoly he had to determine what would constitute correct ideology … He would have to instill in the people certain principles and a commitment to certain types of authority that would enable him not only to remain in power but also to remold the country over which he ruled. In a political system whose technical and human limitations greatly restricted the information available to the leaders and their ability to analyze the consequences of their own policy options, moreover, ideology would be a key tool for ensuring compliance among lower-level officials.

(Lieberthal 1995, 62)

The prominence of ideology was only one of the many ways that the Kampuchean peasant revolutionaries mirrored Mao’s Chinese Communists. To Quinn, “Almost every element of the radical Cambodian revolution has an antecedent in Mao’s China” (Quinn 1989, 219). Moreover the CPK were heavily influenced by the Mao Tse-tung’s Great
Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Even further evidence of this Chinese influence was offered by Prince Sihanouk, who described Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge leadership as “intellectuals (with) a passionate love for the People’s Republic of China and a boundless admiration for Chinese Communism in its most extreme and terrible form (the Cultural Revolution)” (Sihanouk 1980, 7). And Ith Sarin, who spent five months in the jungles of Cambodia with the Khmer Rouge in 1972, confirmed, “Most of the higher cadres of the Party are pro-Chinese socialists” (Sarin from Carney 1977, 39). The Khmer Rouge seemed to even have “modeled its leadership after the Chinese” (Ibid., 39).

Kenneth M. Quinn goes on to explain the overwhelming influence Chinese Communism and Mao Tse-tung Thought had on Pol Pot and the CPK leadership:

Still additional indications of the link between the Cambodian communist revolution and Mao’s thought came in a 1978 Phnom Penh radio commentary following the June 1978 visit of Deputy Prime Minister Ieng Sary to Beijing. In it, Ieng Sary was quoted as saying that “China and Kampuchea are comrades-in-arms sharing weal and woe.” The commentary concluded by stating that “The great Kampuchea-Chinese fraternal, revolutionary friendship and militant solidarity…are based on Marxism, Leninism, and Mao Tse-tung thought…”

Finally there were several private statements by Chinese officials to an American Congressional staffer that would tend to confirm a close philosophical and ideological link between Pol Pot and Mao’s Cultural Revolution. Two representatives of the Chinese Marxist-Leninist Institute reportedly told this Congressional committee official that Pol Pot and his followers were “following the Gang of Four” and “implementing the Cultural Revolution” in Cambodia.

(Quinn 1989, 222)
This and the numerous trips Pol Pot made to China during the Cultural Revolution provide strong evidence of a direct and close ideological partnership between Pol Pot and Mao and the Cultural Revolution as well (Quinn 1989). Pol Pot understood what Mao sought to accomplish in the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution and it illuminated the CPK’s goals for Kampuchea. According to Quinn, “Mao’s dream—which became Pol Pot’s—was to transform the peasant into a modern producer with a commitment to the collective good and the elimination of selfish individualism” (Ibid., 223).

Karl D. Jackson explains the impact of Mao’s Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution even further:

It is clear that Mao’s Great Leap Forward and Great Proletarian Revolution supplied many Khmer Rouge concepts: Cambodia’s great-leap-forward rhetoric; the forced movement of people from cities; large communes, communal dining halls, and nurseries; labor surpluses that were expected to produce massive production gains; the emphasis on rice and irrigation; the attention to basic manufacturing in each commune; the desire to abolish personal interest as a prime motive for human behavior; the puritanical reaction against bourgeois consumerism; the primacy of willpower over weapons and machines; the superiority of common sense over academic and technical learning; the overwhelming power of heroic labor; the manual labor as a means of self-rectification. (Jackson 1989, 244).

Pol Pot saw the revolution taking place in a much shorter duration of time in Kampuchea however. And following in the footsteps of Mao and his attempt to speed up the transition to achieve full socialism with the Great Leap Forward and the Great
Proletariat Cultural Revolution, Pol Pot implemented his bold plan of a utopian peasant communism that surpassed even his mentor in sheer brutality. The biggest and most significant difference, however, between the Chinese and Kampuchean communist revolutions were its individual national experiences. Pol Pot frequently repeated that it “was Mao’s injunction to his visitors not to copy indiscriminately the experience of China or any other country, but ‘to create your own experience yourselves’ (Short 2004, 300).

Despite the similarities between the two revolutions’ ideologies, it is quite obvious that Maoism in China was never carried to the extremes reached in Pol Pot’s Democratic Kampuchea (Jackson 1989). Mao never forcibly emptied the cities, never elevated bloodshed to a national ritual, and never engaged in simultaneous military conflicts with all bordering nations (Ibid.). “Although Maoist goals guided many of Democratic Kampuchea’s economic and social transformation schemes, other intellectual antecedents were responsible for the uniquely extreme character of the Cambodian revolution” (Ibid., 245).

There is not much doubt in the connections ideologically between the Mao Tsetung Thought of the Chinese Communist Party and the Khmer Rouge of Cambodia. Angkar has never denied and has in fact publicly praised and emulated the Chinese Communists and Maoism. But what has so far not been dealt with was the view from the other direction. We know how much the Cambodian revolutionaries looked up to the ideology and practice of Mao and the CCP, but how was the ideology and practice of the CPK in Democratic Kampuchea viewed from Beijing.
After the fall of Phnom Penh and the establishment of Democratic Kampuchea in April of 1975, Mao was apparently well pleased with what Pol Pot was able to achieve. Upon Pol Pot’s arrival in Beijing Mao reportedly told him, “You have achieved in one stroke what we failed with all our masses.” (Mao from Quinn 1989, 222). But Mao’s death and the subsequent attack on the ‘Gang of Four’ led to a loss of Chinese support for Pol Pot’s Democratic Kampuchea (Quinn 1989). “In a 1979 meeting with a delegation of American governors, Deng Xiaoping said, ‘We don’t agree with some of Pol Pot’s policies. Frankly, some of those policies were unpopular’” (Ibid., 222). Even with that said Kenneth M. Quinn believes that “their [Pol Pot and Ieng Sary] words confirm that in carrying out their radical revolution in Cambodia they were indeed using the Cultural Revolution as their model” (Ibid., 222).

All of the above information when, combined with the fact of the relationship between the Cultural Revolution Group and the Phnom Penh branch of the Sino-Khmer Friendship Association and the numerous trips Pol Pot made to China during the period of the Cultural Revolution, provide strong evidence of a direct and close ideological partnership between Pol Pot and Mao and the Cultural Revolution.

(Quinn 1989, 223)

But even if Democratic Kampuchea was indeed using the Cultural Revolution as their model and publicly praising Mao Tse-tung Thought as their ideological influence, the China-Kampuchea relationship was still pragmatic. China offered DK large-scale economic aid, technical training, military supplies and a market for its meager exports, and in return DK provided a secure base for China’s strategy to contain Vietnam (Short 2004). Also Deng Xiaoping met with Pol Pot in Beijing and Shanghai to discuss DK’s aid
requirements. “Deng told him that military assistance would be provided free, and that – in the words of the final accord, signed the following February – ‘it will be up to the Cambodian government to decide how the [Chinese] military equipment and supplies are allocated and used. China will not interfere, nor impose any condition, nor demand any privilege’” (Ibid., 301). Also the Chinese government later revealed that economic assistance alone to DK in 1975 totaled more than 300 million dollars (Ibid., 302). Even though Ieng Sary maintained that DK had to preserve its independence and dignity without asking for help from any other country, “[i]n fact, substantial food aid did come in from China, but it was never publicly acknowledged” (Ibid., 289).

So in a sense, China, prior to Mao’s death and after, while still weary about many of Pol Pot’s policies, still maintained a pragmatic but close relationship. After the fall of the Phnom Penh and the subsequent sealing off of DK from the rest of the world, one could call the China relationship the only one Democratic Kampuchea enjoyed. Although Mao did not agree with all of Pol Pot’s policies in DK, and later Deng stated that they were indeed ‘unpopular’, during Pol Pot and Mao’s meeting in 1975 Mao had a lot to say. He began by declaring his approval of the Kampuchean Revolution:

You have a lot of experience. It’s better than ours. We don’t have the right to criticise you…Basically you are right. Have you made mistakes or not? I don’t know. Certainly you have. So rectify yourselves; do rectification!…The road is tortuous…Now our situation [in China] is exactly as Lenin predicted – a capitalist country – but we don’t carry it out. How many years will it take to change that? Until we become communist? Even under communism, there will still be a struggle between what is advanced and what is backward. So this matter is not clear.

(Mao from Short 2004, 299)
As one can see from the above discussion, Mao Tse-tung Thought did indeed influence Pol Pot’s Democratic Kampuchean revolution. Even beyond the thought of Karl Marx, Maoism might have been the most influential of all the ideologies that influenced Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge leadership. But what is most striking is that fact that although Maoist ideology permeated DK’s ideology, the fact is when those ideologies were put into motion on the ground Pol Pot’s Democratic Kampuchea pushed the envelop maybe a bit further. Taking some of the thoughts of Mao and implementing them with literal atrocity. For Haing S. Ngor in his memoir originally published as *A Cambodian Odyssey* in 1987:

To me, the fault didn’t lie with an individual man but with an outside country: China. For four years I had been looking at Chinese trucks, Chinese-made weapons, Chinese-made uniforms. I had heard Chinese-style music. Almost everything about the Khmer Rouge, from the jargon about ‘independence-sovereignty’ to sending the city people to learn from the peasants in the countryside, was an imitation of Mao Tse-tung’s Cultural Revolution. Without China, the Khmer Rouge could never have come to power, or stayed in power as long as they did.

(Haing Ngor 2007, 391)

As vigorously suggested above, CPK leadership utilized Mao Tse-tung’s interpretation of Marxian thought as their main revolutionary ideology. The Khmer
Rouge, just as Louis Bonaparte and Mao Tse-tung did earlier, utilized the peasantry as a tool for communist revolution. Pol Pot’s Democratic Kampuchea and Mao’s China illustrates the problematic of a historicist-teleological reading of Marx. It maintains that History is the history of European domination. That without the implementation of capitalist development, ‘third world’ history is pre-history, and the only logic that is relevant is capitalist logic. This renders pre-capitalist societies irrelevant. The only history that is relevant is that of Europe’s. But this is the greatest of the transition debates. Why did the transition to communism not take place in the ‘first world’ where it was projected? One has to assume that the teleological dialectic is also irrelevant. As we have explored above, the transition from a pre-capitalist peasant society to a communist society can and has taken place throughout history, from Bonaparte’s France to Mao’s China to Pol Pot’s DK, the unfortunate problem however is the tyranny that had followed.
“Smash the Viets! Smash them until you break their backs!”19

Ethnic Nationalism and the ‘Vietnamese’ Purges of Democratic Kampuchea

Benedict Anderson wrote in *Imagined Communities*, “since World War II every successful revolution has defined itself in national terms” (Anderson 1993, 2). The Khmer Rouge led Kampuchean revolution was no different. One of the most important driving forces of the revolutionary movement was its emphasis on Khmer ethnic-nationalism. The Communist Party of Kampuchea leadership employed the use of Khmer identity and Angkor history as a justification for the extermination of ethnic minorities within Democratic Kampuchea. Stressing an ancient hatred felt towards Vietnam, the Khmer Rouge systematically eliminated or exiled almost the entire ethnic Vietnamese population of Cambodia, along with other minorities like the Thai, Chinese, Muslim Cham, and the indigenous ‘hill tribes’. Using Eric Hobsbawm’s statement that “Marxist movements and states have tended to become national not only in form but in substance, i.e., nationalist”, this chapter hopes to exhibit some ways in which Angkar, and its ideological leanings, exhibited a Khmer chauvinist ethnic-nationalism as a characteristic of their political religion (Hobsbawm 1977, 13).

For historian Carlton J. H. Hayes in his 1960 volume, *Nationalism: A Religion*, the author equates nationalism as part and parcel of a political religion. Reflecting on the cult of a nationalist religion, Hayes explains:

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19 *Pol Pot’s Little Red Book*, (Locard 2004, 176)
Since its advent in western Europe, modern nationalism has partaken of the nature of a religion…

Nationalism, like any religion, calls into play not simply the will, but the intellect, the imagination, and the emotions. The intellect constructs a speculative theology or mythology of nationalism. The imagination builds an unseen world around the eternal past and the everlasting future of one’s nationality. The emotions arouse a joy and ecstasy in the contemplation of the national god who is all-good and all-protecting, a longing for his favors, a thankfulness for his benefits, a fear of offending him, and feelings of awe and reverence at the immensity of his power and wisdom; they express themselves naturally in worship, both private and public. For nationalism, again like any other religion, is social, and its chief rites are public rites performed in the name and for the salvation of a whole community.

…It is primarily spiritual, even other-worldly, and its driving force is its collective faith, a faith in its mission and destiny, a faith in things unseen, a faith that would move mountains.

(Hayes 1960, 164-165, author’s italics)

When one speaks of Khmer pride then and now, it is the grandeur of Angkor that overwhelmingly exemplifies DK’s religiosity of nationalism. The cultural and religious sites of Angkor that flourished from approximately the 9th to 15th centuries are of the utmost importance to the Khmer people of Cambodia. It is the crowning achievement and symbol of the Khmer god-king’s absolute power (Yimsut 2003). And according to Ronnie Yimsut, “It was and still is the heart and soul of Cambodia” (Ibid., 2). This ‘heart and soul’ has been used to unify the Khmer people for hundreds of years as well as the symbol of national pride and heritage. Its likeness has donned the national flag of
Cambodia from its post-colonial inception until today, even during the DK regime. In a sense, Angkor is the genesis of Khmer nationalism. As Seanglim Bit wrote in his *The Warrior Heritage*, “To be Cambodian is to be a warrior, the creator and builder of Angkor Wat.” ...“to be a Cambodian is to be a descendent of a people that produced architectural masterpieces of the Angkor era” (Seanglim Bit 1991 *from* Brinkley 2011, 14). As discussed in the preceding chapters, Pol Pot and the CPK made use of Angkor and the Khmer nationalism it evoked to mobilize cadre and justify the revolution and one of the many aspects it sought to achieve – a ‘pure Khmer’ society free of foreign influence, dominance, and culture.

Some have blamed the atrocities of Democratic Kampuchea on American foreign policy makers, mainly Nixon and Kissinger and their infamous bombing campaign of the Cambodian countryside that ultimately drove thousands to join the Khmer Rouge movement. Or the revolutionary aberration was the “work of a few homicidal maniacs, particularly Pol Pot, Khieu Samphan, and Ieng Sary” (Jackson 1989, 37). For Karl D. Jackson, it is wrong to lay blame on the American foreign policy makers of the early 1970s for the carnage that accompanied the Kampuchean revolution, but at the same time, it is also wrong to dismiss the revolution as an insane deviation by murderous maniacs. After all, “insanity usually refers to the absence of stable and rational behavior, the inability to connect means with ends over a long period of time” (*Ibid.*, 38). If this statement is true then Pol Pot, Nuon Chea, Khieu Samphan, Ieng Sary, Son Sen and the other top leaders of the Khmer Rouge movement would most definitely not be insane, despite their unimaginable ruthlessness. As David P. Chandler ponders of “Brother Number One”: 215
It has been impossible for me to penetrate what may be a façade, a series of masks, or a chosen repertoire of skills to discover a rougher, more diabolical, supposedly more genuine Pol Pot. Throughout his life, the man seems to have tailored his performance to fit the people he was with, making a “genocidal maniac” hard to find. Indeed, the disjunction between his genteel charisma and the death toll of his regime is one of the mysteries that hangs over his career and poses serious difficulties in trying to make sense of his life.

(Chandler 1999, 5)

Among the CPK cadres their political goals were explained with logic and clarity. Many of the leaders that would make up Angkar traveled on what Benedict Anderson called ‘educational pilgrimages’ and some even wrote their political goals in their Ph.D. dissertations in Paris. And they sought to make their political goals a reality in Cambodia (Jackson 1989).

Political philosopher John Keane explains that, “Ideologies are upwardly mobile, power-hungry, and potentially dominating language games. They make falsely universal claims” (Keane 2003, 144). In the case of the Khmer Rouge elite, this statement fits perfect. Although interpretations of the ideology behind Pol Pot’s totalizing regime have varied greatly between scholars, ‘power-hungry and potentially dominating’ would be widely accepted as one of Democratic Kampuchea’s most striking characteristics. But an overtly racist, anti-foreign, and extremely anti-Vietnamese, Khmer ethnic-nationalist ideology is probably an interpretation not heard as often. But ultimately, the basis of the

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20 see Khieu Samphan’s successful 1959 doctoral dissertation, “Cambodia's Economy and Industrial Development”
21 for the seminal work on race and Democratic Kampuchea, see Ben Kiernan (1996) *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-79*
Khmer Rouge ideology is still up for debate among the intellectuals that write on the subject. In his 1984 volume *The Rise and Demise of Democratic Kampuchea*, Craig Etcheson explains a hybrid Khmer ethnic-nationalism:

The declaratory ideology of the KCP [Kampuchean Communist Party, CPK and KCP can be used interchangeably] can be described as a combination of three elements twisted together almost beyond recognition in a creative, organic synthesis: sociocultural values and dispositions from *traditional Khmer culture*, certain strands of communist revolutionary thought, and traces of radical Parisian Jacobinism. Because Khieu Samphan, Hu Nim, Hou Yuon, Saloth Sar [Pol Pot], Ieng Sary, and other leaders of the KCP selected political goals from abstract concepts, and then brutally wrenched Cambodian society in an attempt to realize their vision of society, many analysts have concluded that they broke totally with the past, eradicating all hints of the life and society that had come before. This is only partially true. The *KCP leaders wished to reorganize Khmer existence along the lines of an extremely chauvinistic conception of a “pure Khmer” society, obliterating only those aspects of Khmer culture that they regarded as having been borrowed from or influenced by foreign cultures*. The tragedy was that the Khmer people have always been great borrowers, and thus almost everything was ‘contaminated.’

(Etcheson 1984, 28, *my brackets & italics*)

Although social, economic, and political relations in Cambodian society were radically restructured after the seizure of Phnom Penh, communal ownership and communal cultivation had its origins in Khmer past. Francois Ponchoud proclaimed that “some (but by no means all) Buddhist beliefs facilitated the rise and dominance of the Khmer Rouge” (Ponchaud 1989, 152). As discussed in previous chapters, the
egalitarianism of the sangha, or Buddhist order of monks, was used to justify the radical egalitarianism imposed by Angkar. This was all the more reason why Marxist-Leninist political theory, Maoism, and other strands of communist revolutionary thought fit the CPK leadership’s conception of history. Interestingly, from a conventional anti-communist perspective, historian and Pol Pot biographer David P. Chandler concurs that the CPK was “the purest and most thoroughgoing Marxist-Leninist movement in an era of revolutions” (Chandler 1999, 3). “By contrast, another historian, Michael Vickery, characterized the DK as an anti-Marxist ‘peasant revolution,’ whereas Hanoi’s publicists and their Cambodian protégés saw it as a Maoist deviation from orthodox Marxism” (Kiernan 1996, 26). And yet another author S.S. Sethi wrote, “The Pol Pot—Ieng Sary regime proclaimed ‘Mao’s ideas’ its official state ideology” (Sethi 1979, 34).

Still others believe the Democratic Kampuchean regime to be forthrightly national in origin, based upon a mixture of totalitarian ideologies, and the “chauvinistic” … “preservation of Khmer race or blood” (Thion 1987, 156). A radical revolution based on Khmer ethnic-nationalism, or a hybrid nationalist-fascist authoritarian regime. Commenting on Khmer Rouge’s ideology, Michael Vickery states, “Not only was Khieu Samphan’s plan non-Marxist, but when the revolution finally occurred it was quite different from Samphan’s projections” (Vickery 1984, 266). Even Cambodian observers questioned whether the ideas of the Khmer Rouge had anything “to do with socialism or communism” and portrayed the revolution as driven by extreme nationalism bordering on xenophobia (Boun Sokha 1979 from Jackson 1989, 241). For Vickery, it was not inspired by Mao’s Cultural Revolution either. “The Cultural Revolution was thus on every point the opposite of the Cambodian experience in which technology was ignored and
technicians from cities transformed into peasants with no purchasing power or capital-generating potential at all” (Vickery 1984, 273). Thus the Khmer revolution had less to do with communism and more to do with ethnic-nationalism, mainly an anti-Vietnamese nationalism. So much so that after 1977 even the United States’ military and intelligence establishment felt the strong anti-Vietnamese drift and “realized that the victory of chauvinism over Marxism would make DK a useful partner, whatever its excesses” (Ibid., 290). Thus the “concept of total national independence springs primarily from the centuries-old Khmer fear of foreign invasion rather than from any twentieth-century foreign ideology” (Jackson 1989, 249).

The philosophy behind the Khmer Rouge may not have been the ‘fascism’ practiced by Mussolini, but as we have discussed in previous chapters, the regime fits the generic definition of fascism in many ways. According to Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, fascism is “a political philosophy, movement, or regime that exalts nation and often race above the individual and that stands for a centralized autocratic government headed by a dictatorial leader, severe economic and social regimentation, and forcible suppression of opposition” (Webster’s 1986, 450). However the DK ‘fascist’ political manifestation may have been one of what Hayes cites as “totalitarian and dictatorial nationalism” (Hayes 1960, 144). Following Hitlerian Germany, Mussolini’s Italy, but also Russia under Stalin, the CPK’s dictatorial nationalism was skeptical of religion, “contemptuous of its moral teachings, and bent on subjugating if not destroying it, they patronized and inculcated in their following an emotional and essentially religious devotion” (Ibid., 145). Khmer nationalism, just as all “modern and contemporary nationalism”, according to Hayes, “ appeals to man’s ‘religious sense.’ It offers a
substitute for, or supplement to, historic supernatural religion.” …“in what is essentially a religion of modern secularism. Which incidentally explains how people can be at once Communist and nationalist” (Ibid., 176). Hayes goes on to describe nationalism’s religious devotion in relation to Hitler and Stalin’s political manifestations:

Especially Communist Russia and Nazi Germany were “churches” as well as states, each with its dictator as pontifex maximus; and they were churches not old and staid and conventional, but pristine and zealous. Their creeds (that is, their ideologies) were novel; their banners and rituals and slogans were novel—and attractive. No wonder that their converts were numerous, particularly among the young. Persons who had lost or were deprived of contact with the Christian or Jewish God, wanted new gods, and now they got them; in Germany, a Dionysus-like tribal god of blood and soil; in Russia, a Lucretian god of fatalism and materialism; both attended by plenty of ritual, sermons, and fanaticism.

(Hayes 1960, 145).

Whatever the inspirational ideology behind the revolution was, there is no debate over the political goals of the Khmer Rouge. The CPK wanted to establish a radical Khmer regime in Democratic Kampuchea unlike anything seen before; one with a preference for practice at the expense of theory. As one of CPK’s leaders Ieng Sary explained to a Palestine Liberation Organization visitor in 1976, “We did not act with the guidance of definite theories, but followed our feelings and carried out the struggle in a practical way” … “What is important is the determination and faith of the principle revolutionaries. We did not study in ideological schools, but practiced a struggle in the light of the concrete situation” (Ieng Sary from Chandler 1987, 165).
Democratic Kampuchea was like no other regime before or since. In a mad race to achieve a new society Pol Pot and his clique would stop at nothing regardless of the human toll Cambodia sustained. In Pol Pot’s 1977 speech to CPK cadres he indicated that political “enemies came from abroad,” therefore he emphasized the need for indigenous Khmer goals and methods.

Now that we have established that we need a line, what kind of line is it? A line copied from other people will do no good. This line should be based on the principles of independence, initiative, self-determination, and self-reliance, which means that we must rely primarily on our own people, our own army, our own revolution and on the actual revolutionary movement of the masses in our own country.

(Pol Pot 1977, H22)

In decrees sent to the provinces Angkar declared that:

There is one Kampuchean revolution. In Kampuchea there is only one nation, and one language, the Khmer language. From now on the various nationalities [listed according to province] do not exist any longer in Kampuchea…Those who do not abide by this order will reap the consequences.

(Hawk 1987, 127-128)

The anti-foreign animosity shared by the Khmer Rouge leadership had its place due partly to Cambodia’s history. Since the time of Angkor’s medieval glory, foreign invaders have encroached on Cambodia’s territory. “Without mountains to the north or south, Cambodia lay vulnerable to invaders who wished to possess the rich land and labor of the people” (Lafreniere 2000, 12-13). “From the west, Thailand seized the Angkor region. Vietnam encroached from the east. Then France colonized Vietnam and, in 1863,
imposed a Protectorate on Cambodia” (Kiernan 2004a, 16). Many times these foreign invasions led to retaliatory ethnic violence. For example, following a Vietnamese invasion, a French missionary wrote in 1751 that the new Khmer King Ang Snguon gave orders or permission to massacre all the Cochinchinese [Vietnamese] who could be found, and this order was executed very precisely and very cruelly; this massacre lasted a month and a half; only about twenty women and children were spared; no one knows the number of deaths, and it would be very difficult to find out, for the massacre was general from Cahon to Ha-tien. (Kiernan 2004a, 16)

Similar to the Chinese Cultural Revolution’s campaign to destroy the “Four Olds” (old thoughts, old culture, old customs, and old habits), Pol Pot and his Angkar, aimed at destroying the institutions and organizations of the previous regime and start anew (Quinn 1989, 191). In the Party’s view, Khmers had become the slaves of foreign imperialists during the previous regime, thus all aspects of the previous “slave period” were to be liquidated (Pol Pot 1977, 14). As discussed in the preceding chapters, because all institutions of the past were to be destroyed, one of the first to be attacked was organized religion. Although described by Charles F. Keyes as the basis of Khmer ethnic identity, Buddhism was targeted for eradication. Another institution Angkar sought to eliminate was the monarchy. After the Khmer Rouge regime was firmly in power Prince Norodom Sihanouk was relieved of any role in the government or society and the monarchy was abolished in 1976 (Quinn 1989, 192). As Anthony Barnett wrote, the main thrust of the Khmer Rouge regime was to “retain the initiative after 1975”, and use it’s
“brutal power to impose and consolidate rule” and “establish control throughout the country” … “Both policies and consequences were determined by that struggle” (Barnett 1983, 215).

As Kenneth M. Quinn explains in his essay “Pattern and Scope of Violence,” because the old system was seen as dominated by foreigners “Pol Pot and his followers concentrated on the steps necessary to ‘break’ the old system: that is, to destroy the patterns of political authority, economic activity, and cultural tradition that had characterized it” (Quinn 1989, 180-181). Their first step was to empty all the cities, towns, and villages and resettle the population on agricultural communes (Ibid., 181). And the second step was to arrest and execute officials and military personnel from the foreign backed Lon Nol government; and the third was to neutralize those elements in society perceived to be threatening to Angkar’s rule and desirous of a return to pre-revolutionary Cambodian society (Ibid., 181). These elements were of course the non-Khmer, ethnic minorities, and anyone seen as being corrupted by foreign manipulation.

After the political functionaries of the previous Lon Nol regime were executed, Angkar targeted intellectuals, doctors, lawyers, teachers, engineers, and other Western educated bourgeoisie for death. The Khmer Rouge leaders were what Prince Sihanouk called “ultra-nationalist” and their ideology marked these people as tainted by the foreign influence of the cities, thus they were seen as non-Khmer, and became political enemies that needed to be destroyed in order to cleanse Kampuchea (Sihanouk from Ponchaud 1978, 137). Partha Chatterjee, discussing the work of Hans Kohn, wrote that “nationalism represents the attempt to actualize in political terms the universal urge for liberty and progress” (Chatterjee 1986, 2). This is evident in the case of the Khmer Rouge. Like

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many other nationalist movements, the leaders believed that they were saving their state from the oppression of foreign imperialism and domination. Thus targeting foreigners, ethnic minorities, and the urban Western-educated bourgeoisie made complete sense in order to achieve liberty and progress. But Chatterjee goes on to proclaim that although nationalism represents an urge for progress and freedom, “it could also give rise to mindless chauvinism and xenophobia and serve as a justification for organized violence and tyranny” (Ibid., 2). While Angkar claimed to be pursuing a communal based peasant utopia of freedom and democracy, they were systematically destroying non-Khmer minorities and all other foreign influenced people and institutions. The “imaginative power of nationalism” employed by the CPK leadership was purely Khmer in ideology, and vicious in application (Anderson 1993, 158).

In the attempt to maintain total sovereignty and achieve a ‘pure Khmer’ society, the Khmer Rouge effectively sealed off the country from the rest of the world. The boarders were closed, foreign embassies and press agencies expelled, television and newspapers were shut down, radios confiscated, mail and telephone use stopped, and speaking in foreign languages severely punished (Kiernan 1996, 9). Even worse was Angkar’s suppression of what Cambodians could say to one another. Display of any education or knowledge was interpreted as foreign contamination and was brutally punished, so talk between people was extremely careful. Many were executed for moral offenses, including “the use of old, happy words” when “young militia members were eavesdropping on conversations” (Ibid., 180). Ben Kiernan, in his brilliant work The Pol Pot Regime, described this new Cambodia:

In the first few days after Cambodia became Democratic Kampuchea, all cities were evacuated, hospitals cleared, schools closed, factories emptied, money abolished,
monasteries shut, libraries scattered. For nearly four years freedom of the press, of movement, of worship, of organization, and of association, and of discussion all completely disappeared. So did everyday family life. By 1977, parents ate breakfast in sittings; if they were lucky their sons and daughters waited their turn outside the mess hall. Human communication almost disappeared. Democratic Kampuchea was a prison camp state, and the eight million prisoners served most of their time in solitary confinement. (Kiernan 1996, 8-9).

In a Khmer chauvinistic appeal to rebuild the country, Democratic Kampuchea was transformed into a society based on an economy of communal agriculture cultivated by slave laborers and sustained by Angkar’s violence. The Khmer Rouge leaders were desperate to begin the task of economic reconstruction, which they believed should be based almost entirely on agriculture (Ablin & Hood 1987, xxxv). Thus the foreign tainted ‘new people’ who escaped the first round of executions were not seen as Khmer and were immediately herded into the countryside to begin forced labor. As Marlowe Hood and David A. Ablin explain in the essay “The Path to Cambodia’s Present”:

…the Khmer Rouge instituted a massive system of collectives and work camps. The primary emphasis, as it had been five hundred years earlier, was on rice: “With rice we can have everything!” The conditions in the countryside varied greatly at the outset, becoming more uniform as Pol Pot consolidated power. Even from the beginning, however, there was a general disregard for the physical well-being of most toilers: inadequate food, nonexistent or primitive health care, many hours and days of labor with
little rest. The majority of those who died in Democratic Kampuchea—probably between 1.2 and 2 million people—fell victim to some combination of exhaustion, starvation, and disease.

(Ablin & Hood 1987, xxxvi-xxxvii)

Pol Pot and his followers sought to achieve their ‘pure Khmer’ society by maintaining an agricultural prison state. By doing so, Angkar could oversee its workforce and eliminate all those that were tainted in the eyes of the Khmer Rouge leadership. And those seen as tainted were either non-Khmer in race, or influenced in some way by foreigners. Class status had no real significance. In Kampuchea, you were either a cadre, a peasant, or tainted. “Membership into the single approved race was a condition” (Kiernan 1996, 26). As Ben Kiernan explains, “non-Khmers, who comprised a significant part of the supposedly favored segment of the peasantry, were singled out for persecution because of their race” (Ibid., 26). Thus, “the Khmer Rouge appeared to have planned to eliminate systematically all those judged as incapable of fitting into the new” (Quinn 1989, 194).

Pol Pot and his colleagues were entranced by the exercise of power and by the praxis of prolonged and unrelenting revolutionary warfare within Democratic Kampuchea (Chandler 1987, 166). To bring about the social transformation they envisioned through internal war, Khmer Rouge leaders depended on the hard work and loyalty of everyone in the country. The masses were the ones on whose behalf the revolution had taken place, but on the other hand, the revolutionaries must always be on guard against them, at least on an individual basis (Ibid.). Although, according to Angkar, “99 percent” of the masses supported the revolution, those who opposed it were thought
to permeate every level of society, including the cadre of the CPK itself (Ibid., 167).

Eliminating those enemies would become the calling card of the Khmer Rouge revolution. As David P. Chandler explains, “In other words, forming all of Kampuchea’s people into collective life, swiftly and thoroughly, was not intended merely as a means of transporting society in a rewarding way. Rather, as some documents assert, the main purpose of collectivization was to expose its enemies and prevent the old society from reemerging” (Chandler 1987, 167). And according to Khmer Rouge officials, these “enemies” were redefined as the “setrew prowatisas (historic enemy)” of the Khmers—the Vietnamese (Kiernan 1996, 298).

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“For some Khmer, the immigration of various groups into Cambodia is coupled with the legend of historical Vietnamese occupations of Cambodia” (Goshal 1995, 17). Many Khmer believe that the Vietnamese have treated Cambodia as part of an expanding Vietnam. As the tale of Daran Kravanh in *Music Through the Dark* notes, “Around 1630, a Cambodian king married a Vietnamese princess. As part of the bride price, the king allowed the Vietnamese to establish customs posts in the productive Mekong Delta. Eventually the Vietnamese claimed this land as their own, renamed Prey Nokor ‘Saigon,’ and soon the Cambodians living there were surrounded by ten times the number of Vietnamese” (Lafreniere 2000, 13). Chandler noted:

The two peoples lived on different sides of a deep cultural divide, perhaps the most sharply defined of those in effect in nineteenth century South East Asia; it was to be savagely exploited in the 1970s, first by Lon Nol and later by Pol Pot and his xenophobic armies. (Chandler 1983b, 127)
Within the ranks of the worker-peasants on the collective farms, Vietnamese “enemies” were embedded, at least in the eyes of the Khmer Rouge leadership, everywhere. Weeding out these traitors of the revolution thus became the number one priority of Pol Pot and his CPK. The regime’s report entitled “Revolutionary Tasks, 1976,” opens with a discussion of the party’s plan to intensify the Khmer revolution. In doing so, the enemies that remained must be “beaten, pulverized, and uprooted,” even in the ranks of the party (Chandler 1987, 168). As the report made clear, the major reason to wage the revolution was “to extirpate its enemies, compared to ‘microbes’ (merok) embedded inside it” (Ibid., 169). Through systematic arrests, interrogation, torture, and execution, the Khmer Rouge regime lost sight of its previous, supposedly ‘socialist,’ revolutionary goals and instead descended into a paranoid realm focused on the physical destruction of all real or perceived “enemies” of the revolution.

In the beginning of the Democratic Kampuchean movement the political goals and ideologies seemed clearer. As the cities were evacuated and the work force was herded to the countryside, a radical ‘pure Khmer’ society based, no longer on the Buddhist metanarrative, but on a slave labor peasantry, seemed to be the ultimate goal of the revolution. But as mass murders of ethnic minorities and those contaminated by the Vietnamese accelerated, the actual acts of killing began to take over the revolution. Khmer Rouge leaders insisted on eliminating all enemies of their ideology. And for the most part, these enemies were non-Khmer in origin, suspected of being non-Khmer, had non-Khmer relatives, spent time outside of Khmer territory, pro-Vietnamese, or in other words, ‘tainted’.
At the bottom of the violence was ethnicity. To Haing Ngor in his *Survival in the Killing Fields*, “‘Pure’ Khmers have dark brown skins. Vietnamese and Thais have pale yellow skins” (Haing Ngor 2007, 412). He continues:

To most Asians, including our neighbors, the lighter the skin colour, the higher the status. They look down on Cambodians for having darker skins than themselves. Cambodians, who are shy by nature, sometimes outwardly appear to accept a lower status while inwardly resenting it. Speaking different languages and belonging to competing nations have added to the friction. So does having long memories. Every Cambodian schoolchild knows that a Siamese invasion caused the downfall of the ancient Cambodian empire at Angkor. Every Cambodian knows the legend of the Vietnamese who used Cambodians’ heads for cooking stones.

But of our two neighbors, we dislike the Thais less.

(Haing Ngor 2007, 412)

Just as Hayes indicates of nationalist religions, “Suffering from a kind of inferiority-superiority complex” they seek “compensation through aggression, or threat of aggression, against their neighbors and former foes” (Hayes 1960, 146). Anyone even suspected of being pro-Vietnamese was regarded as “contaminated and, therefore, expendable in the ‘new’ and ‘pure’ society it wanted to create” (Kissi 2003, 311). This was true within the ranks of the Communist Party of Kampuchea as well as the countryside. So in order to rid the CPK of its “enemies”, Pol Pot started a murderous purging campaign within his own party. The execution of traitors within the regime was nothing new, but this time the search for ‘microbes’ within the party consumed the leadership. Pol Pot revealed his new campaign in a meeting of CPK cadre. Pol Pot’s
speech on this occasion was devoid of the triumphant optimism of his earlier speeches, leaving in its place a more muted menacing tone (Chandler 1999). It was peppered with references to “enemies” and “traitors” and one passage referred to a “sickness in the party” (Ibid., 129). The speech entitled “Report of Activities of the Party Center According to the General Political Tasks of 1976” was given to party leadership on December 20, 1976, and has since been translated by David P. Chandler in a compilation of documents called Pol Pot Plans the Future. In parts of the speech Pol Pot warns of the “enemies” or “microbes” within the Party.

…while we are engaged in a socialist revolution, there is a sickness inside the party, born in the time when we waged a people’s and a democratic revolution. We cannot locate it precisely. The illness must emerge to be examined. Because the heat of the people’s revolution and the heat of the democratic revolution were insufficient at the level of people’s struggle and at the level of class struggle among the layers of the national democratic revolution, we search for the microbes within the Party without success. They are buried. As our socialist revolution advances, however, seeping more strongly into every corner of the Party, the army and among the people, we can locate the ugly microbes. They will be pushed out by the nature of socialist revolution… If we wait any longer, the microbes can do real damage… Contradictions exist. If we scratch the ground to bury them, they will rot us from within. They will rot society, rot the Party, and rot the army… To give an example: the string of traitors that we smashed recently had been organized secretly during the people’s revolution and the democratic revolution… Many microbes emerged. Many networks came into view.

(Pol Pot from Chandler 1988, 183-184).
Despite extensive purges from 1975 to 1977 of thousands of party “microbes,” Pol Pot still believed the fate of the revolution was in jeopardy as long as there continued to be enemies embedded within the party, army, the communal farms, and the ministries. Party purges accelerated mostly targeting the eastern zones of Cambodia, and S-21, the regime’s brutal interrogation facility at Tuol Sleng, teemed with new inmates. While the numbers are not exact, “in the first half of 1978, the center welcomed at least 5,760 prisoners for interrogation, torture, and execution—roughly as many as in all of 1977” (Chandler 1999, 147). “Most of these were connected with purges of the east, which began in May 1978 and continued through October, sweeping up military personnel” …

“The party secretary of the zone, Sao Phim, committed suicide in June; his brother-in-law Muol Sambath (Nhim Ros), secretary of the northwestern zone, was then arrested and brought to Tuol Sleng” (Ibid., 147).

Pol Pot specifically targeted the Eastern Zone cadres because he felt that their bordering on Vietnam had made them sympathetic to the hated Vietnamese. Khmer Rouge leadership decided that the eastern zone cadres and population had “Khmer bodies with Vietnamese minds (khluon khmaer khuo kbal yuon) and began a large-scale program to eliminate them” (Kiernan 1983, 138). Over 100,000 perished over the next six months. As Ben Kiernan describes in his essay “Wild Chickens, Farm Chickens, and Cormorants: Kampuchea’s Eastern Zone Under Pol Pot”:

In the Eastern Zone of Kampuchea, whose population after the evacuation of Phnom Penh numbered 1.8 million, the executions in 1975-76 were somewhat fewer, probably well under 10,000. But in 1977-78, deaths among residents of the Zone exceeded 100,000. This is despite the fact recriminations and economic hardship might have been expected to occur in the aftermath of such a devastating civil war as that from 1970-75,
but to cease or decrease (as they did temporarily, in 1976) as the new regime consolidated itself. Other forces were at work and the time lag before the largest massacres, particularly those of 1978 in Kampuchea’s Eastern Zone, gives them a decidedly more deliberate and premeditated character.

(Kiernan 1983, 142)

Other zones suffered massive elimination campaigns as well, but the purge of the supposedly Vietnamese-tainted Eastern Zone was by far the most extensive. “Tuol Sleng records show that by 19 April 1978, Eastern Zone personnel being held there numbered 409; the largest number from any of the other Zone was only forty-eight, from the Northwest (Kiernan 1983, 187). Commanders of Khmer Rouge divisions were arrested and soldiers were rounded up and executed. Kiernan explains just one of the many scenarios: “In the first three weeks of May [1978], Pauk summoned the commanders and political commissars of the three Eastern Zone Brigades and five Regional Brigades to ‘meetings’ at his headquarters in Sra village north of Highway 7. As they arrived they were disarmed, arrested and executed” (Ibid., 187, my brackets).

The Eastern Zone unfortunately received the brunt of the party purges, but through the eyes of an increasingly paranoid Pol Pot, it was necessary. In a sense it was a way of purging his own history. It is significant because Pol Pot finally alienated himself from his own revolutionary origins, which lay in the east, and from his long-term relationship with the Vietnamese Communist party (Chandler 1999, 147). Chandler states, “Perhaps he blamed the east—an amalgam of Vietnam and his own gullibility—for the troubles besetting the country” (Ibid., 147). Whatever way it is phrased, the east was more severely punished than any other Zone because of its proximity to Vietnam.
Fear of the Vietnamese consumed DK leadership. Documents from S-21 confirmed Pol Pot’s suspicions that the CPK was “riddled with Vietnamese agents who had undermined Cambodia’s economic revolution” (Chandler 1992, 141). Soon every person in DK, from Party leadership to countryside peasant, was suspected of being a Vietnamese enemy. The party’s standing committee demanded regional cadre to “round up ethnic Vietnamese and turn them over to state security,” and “Vietnamese women married to Khmer were hunted down and killed” (Ibid., 141). As the documents contend, towards the end of the Khmer Rouge regime the intensity of CPK led ethnic-Vietnamese massacres increased. As Chandler put it, “fighting against the Vietnamese was being pursued with the greatest vigor” (Ibid., 141).

Pol Pot and a small clique of Khmer Rouge leaders effectively used terror to weed out all the “Vietnamese” enemies of the revolution. The enemies of the revolution were the Vietnamese, and the Vietnamese were the enemies of the revolution. During this moment in DK’s history, the words “enemies” and “Vietnamese” were interchangeable. Or as Chandler states of Steve Heder’s view, “Those targeted as incompetent or as counterrevolutionaries were often labeled ‘Vietnamese’” (Chandler 2000, 151)

Terror spread throughout the party of Democratic Kampuchea like wildfire. Arrests, interrogations, torture, and executions increased dramatically at S-21 as Pol Pot’s violent campaign picked up steam toward the end of the 1970s. The terror mirrored that of the totalitarianism described brilliantly by Hannah Arendt when she wrote in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that “terror in totalitarian government has ceased to be a mere means for suppression of opposition, though it is used for such purposes. Terror becomes total when it becomes independent of all opposition; it rules supreme when nobody any
longer stands in its way” … “then terror is the essence of totalitarian domination” (Arendt 1951, 464). Once the mechanism of terror takes hold it takes on a life of its own. It sees “Vietnamese” enemies and traitors everywhere. Everyone is a potential target. And within Democratic Kampuchea during the paranoid campaigns of terror unleashed within the CPK, purging friends was not out of the question. Pol Pot was desperate to maintain his radical revolution and eliminate “enemies” at any cost.

Of course, torture and execution are not new methods of punishing enemies. They have been used before, from ancient times to modern day, to rid regimes of opposition. But what seems to be the most striking aspect of the Khmer Rouge’s torture was its distinctly racist aspect. It seems that even at DK’s interrogation center, S-21, the Party continued to define their enemies as being non-Khmer. Even if the individual being tortured was a Khmer, they were still “for all intents and purposes Vietnamese” (Chandler 2000, 150). In an eerie way Pol Pot’s Democratic Kampuchea may have mirrored the policies of Hitler’s National Socialist regime more closely than the communist regimes of Mao’s China or Stalin’s Soviet Union. Of course all four regimes used brutal torture to extract information and punish their enemies, but the ideology behind the torture was different between the regimes. David Chandler explores this more closely in his 2000 work *Voices from S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot’s Secret Prison*:

The ways in which some prisoners were made to pay homage to pictures of Ho Chi Minh and Lyndon Johnson suggest that they were being erased from Pol Pot’s Cambodia in the same fashion that Nazism’s racial enemies, even before they were killed, were erased from Hitler’s Europe. Although most of the victims had been born into the same “race” as their assassins, racist mechanisms came into play in their arrest, torture, and
executions. Turning the victims into “others,” in a racist fashion—and using words associated with animals to describe them—made them easier to mistreat and easier to kill.

A similar process of distancing has been described by writers dealing with the Holocaust and the Indonesian massacres of 1965 and 1966.

(Chandler 2000, 150-151)

The similarities shared between Pol Pot’s Khmer revolution and Hitler’s wartime Germany were further expressed by the Australian journalist, John Pilger, when he visited Phnom Penh in August 1979. Pilger called Pol Pot “an Asian Hitler” in one of his articles in the Daily Mirror. William Shawcross examined Pilger’s articles further, highlighting their concentration on Nazism and the Holocaust:

On a huge center spread of Tuol Sleng and a mass grave the Mirror declaimed, “Echo of Auschwitz,” “12,000 died here. The killers, like the Nazis, photographed their victims before and after death,” and “Murder, Nazi Style.” Again and again Pilger compared the Khmer Rouge to the Nazis. Their Marxist-Leninist ideology was not even mentioned in the Mirror… Their intellectual origins were described as “anarchist” rather than Communist. The torturers in Tuol Sleng were called “a gestapo” and Tuol Sleng itself “might have been copied from the original”—Auschwitz.

(Shawcross 1984, 139-140)

Fearing that these “Vietnamese” enemies were surrounding him, Pol Pot wiped out many of his closest friends during his bloody purges. Most of these comrades were senior members in Democratic Kampuchea’s government. From the “Standing Committee of the People’s Representative Assembly” (PRA), Second Vice Chairman Peou Sou alias Khek Pen, Member Sor Sean alias Sa Sien, Member Mey Chham alias
Mey Son, Member Thang Si alias Chou Chet, and Member Ros Preap alias Ruos Preap were all purged. Of the “State Presidium”, First Vice Chairman So Phim alias So Vanna, and Second Vice Chairman Nhim Ros alias Muol Sambat were also eliminated. And from the “Government”, close friends, Deputy Prime Mininster Vorn Vet alias Sok and Minister of Information Hu Nim alias Phoas were destroyed as well (Carney 1989, 100-101, Table 2). Even up until a year before his death at age of seventy-eight in a Khmer Rouge encampment on the Thai-Cambodia border, Pol Pot continued to believe that he was still the “Original Khmer” surrounded by “enemies”. According to Chandler, “Pol Pot moved against Ta Mok (who had become second in command, replacing Nuon Chea, in 1995), Nuon Chea, and Son Sen, accusing them of contacts ‘with the Vietnamese’” (Chandler 1999, 180). On June 9, 1997, Pol Pot ordered loyal followers, led by a cadre named Saroeun, to assassinate close longtime friend and ex-Deputy Prime Minister of National Defense Son Sen, alias Khieu, along with his wife, nine children, and three other family members (Ibid., 180). Pol Pot suspected Son Sen of “contacting ‘the Vietnamese’ via family members connected with the CPP” (Ibid., 180). The liquidation of CPK “ Vietnamese,” both real and imaginary, ultimately maintained the level of unprecedented power Pol Pot needed to commit acts of terror and social transformation. A coup from within the party was avoided due to these brutal purges and extreme paranoia of the “Vietnamese” “Other”.

In a section called “Purging Friends” in David P. Chandler’s biography of Pol Pot titled *Brother Number One*, the author describes the arrest and eventual execution of two of Pol Pot’s oldest comrades, Ney Saran and Keo Meas. Their relationships dated back to the early 1950s when Pol Pot used his pre-Revolutionary name Saloth Sar. Arrested and
brought to Tuol Sleng, they never doubted that a mistake had been made considering they were old friends of Pol Pot. Keo Meas had been a militant for years, even going to Vietnam and China with Saloth Sar in 1965-66 (Chandler 1999, 128). Chandler explains how this loyal party member and close friend of Pol Pot’s met the same fate as other imagined enemies:

His confession consists of several letters to “Pouk” (Pol Pot) protesting his innocence and desperately trying to rekindle friendship and explain the “1951-1960” controversy. On September 24, for example, he recalled a conversation in 1964 when Pol Pot had told him: “In France there were some Khmer who could never be Khmer.” This fragmentary reference, perhaps to Thiounn Mumm, was not followed up as Meas succumbed to more punishment, claimed to be a loyal Khmer, and tried to keep Pol Pot’s attention (“I wrote a letter several months ago: did you ever receive it?”). In 1966, perhaps on the way home from China, Pol Pot had told him, “Our Cambodia wants to get away completely from Vietnam and the Soviets.” Meas had agreed, but his confession became more agitated as he was accused of founding a new, pro-Vietnamese party. “I feel these accusations are absurd,” he wrote. “They are incomprehensible. I…did nothing of the sort…This is extremely serious. If comrade Pouk doesn’t forgive me, then my road can only lead to death.” There was no word from his old friend. (Chandler 1999, 128, my italics)

Notice how the emphasis is on being a loyal Khmer, not a loyal communist. The definition of “enemy” is almost always framed in racial terms. Thus an enemy of the Khmer revolution could not be a real Khmer, and if the enemy was Khmer in origin he or she was labeled as a disloyal ‘Vietnamese.’ In other words, “Facists need a demonized
“enemy” and “each culture specifies the national enemy” (Paxton 2004, 37). For DK the enemy was the Vietnamese.

Pol Pot’s other old friend Ney Saran, succumbed to the same fate as Meas. Although less of his confession survived, Saran, not new to the party’s involvement in squeezing out false admissions, noted: ‘If you want to force me to respond, then torture me and I will’ (Chandler 1999, 128). The director of Tuol Sleng prison, Comrade Duch, ordered his “subordinates to ‘use the hot method for prolonged periods’ on Ney Saran, adding that ‘even if it kills him this wouldn’t be a violation of the Organization’s rules.’ Saran was interrogated for another week before being put to death” (Ibid., 128). In Pol Pot and Duch’s minds, Keo Meas and Ney Saran were Vietnamese conspirators tracing back to the 1950s. Real or imagined, friends or foes, they were merely two bumps on the road to a “pure Khmer” society. Just as Hannah Arendt wrote, “From a totalitarian point of view, the fact that men are born and die can be only regarded as an annoying interference with higher forces” (Arendt 1951, 466).

As nationalist paranoia overwhelmed him, Pol Pot saw enemies in even one of his oldest friends, and one of the early public leaders of the communist movement, Hu Nim. Hu Nim (alias Phoas) was one of three ex-Sihanouk Ministers who fled to the forests in 1967 and became a leader in the liberation movement after 1970 along with Hou Yuon and Khieu Samphan—called “The Three People’s Heroes” by the Chinese (Boua & Kiernan 1982, 117). After the fall of Phnom Penh in 1975, Hu Nim became Information Minister in Pol Pot’s DK government. He was the number five comrade in the Khmer Rouge movement at the time of his arrest. In April 1977, Hu Nim was sent to S-21 in order to complete the political supremacy of four men; Pol Pot, Ieng Sary, Son Sann and
Khieu Samphan, who had been Parisian students together in the 1950s (Ibid., 118). The most disturbing aspect of Hu Nim’s story was the extent of torture and the physical and mental toll it took on him. From his arrest on April 10, 1977, until his execution July 6, 1977, Hu Nim compiled ‘confessions’ totaling more than two hundred pages, with each page handwritten and signed (Ibid., 118). It was crucial to his torturers that Hu Nim establish that he was ethnically flawed and a traitor from the beginning of the Khmer Rouge movement. Although many personal details in his confessions were true, the principle burden is obviously untrue and obtained only after extremely brutal torture. “Hu Nim, apparently in his own hand, asserts that he was from 1957 onwards ‘an officer of the CIA’” (Ibid., 119). Hu Nim wrote fantastical accounts of his tainted life. Notice again that he confesses along racial lines. According to Angkar Hu Nim is an enemy because he had been ‘tainted’ by foreigners.

On the surface it seemed that I was a ‘total revolutionary’, as if I was ‘standing on the people’s side’…If the people listened to my speeches on the open parliamentary platform about ‘opposing American imperialism and its lackeys’, it sounded very sharp. But in fact, deep in my mind, the essence was service of the American imperialists… I wrote a thesis for my law doctorate which even took a progressive stand (on reform of economic administration)… These were the cheapest acts which hid my reactionary, traitorous, corrupted elements, representing the feudalist, capitalist, imperialist establishment and the CIA…

(Hu Nim from Boua & Kiernan 1982, 125)
In one of the most grotesque moments of Hu Nim’s torture he writes:

I am not a human being, I’m an animal.

(Hu Nim* from Boua & Kiernan 1982, 119)

After confessing that he was an animal tainted by the Americans and not ethnically Khmer, and S-21 leaders agreed that he was not Khmer, Hu Nim was ‘crushed to bits.’

After continuous Khmer Rouge raids into southern Vietnam in order to retake Kampuchea Krom, the hated communist forces of Vietnam invaded Cambodia and toppled Democratic Kampuchea on January 7, 1979. Pol Pot and a handful of senior CPK officials’ dream of achieving a radical ‘pure Khmer’ peasant utopia within Cambodia ultimately led to an obsession with exposing “Vietnamese” enemies to the revolution and became one of the most violent chapters in world history, causing the deaths of millions. Ideologies aside, total political, social, and economic transformation, I believe, was a primary goal, but the paranoid campaign to expose its “Vietnamese” enemies soon overcame all other revolutionary goals or ideologies. In the end, it was the enemies created by the regime itself, and the “Hanoi Khmers” alienated by the party’s attempt to destroy perceived enemies, who ultimately brought about its downfall (Chandler 2000, 48).

Because the chauvinist Khmer Rouge regime was so consumed by defining and punishing the perceived ‘Vietnamese’ it effectively destroyed itself from the inside out. By revisiting this tragic time in Cambodia’s history in writings now and again, one can see just how far to the extreme ethnic hatred can go. Examining Angkar’s ideology, practice, and enemies more carefully shows a very anti-communist perspective to what was commonly viewed as the most thoroughgoing Marxist-Leninist movement ever. By
highlighting the revolution’s Khmer origins and its hatred felt towards the Vietnamese it is easier to see its ethnic-nationalist leanings – an ethnic-nationalism that is one of the many characteristics of Democratic Kampuchea’s political religion.
“Just hearing the name ‘Angkar’ gives us goose flesh.”

Some Concluding Comments

Cambodians hate their fellow Cambodians
accuse each other, kill each other,
offer their lovers, their children to crocodiles,
for greed and foolishness daze their minds.

Men, women,
praise Marxism-Leninism,
instead of their parents or Buddha,
they let their people live on trakuon to please their lords.

Thus, turtles can’t lay eggs anymore.
Scum, thieves, bastards
grasping at overnight fortunes
kill their mothers, destroy their Buddhas.

(U Sam Oeur 1998, 149)

U Sam Oeur penned these verses of his poem *May My Sacred Vows Come True!* as a witness to his country’s entanglement with history. A history not of Khmer Theravada Buddhism nor Western political ideology, but rather, the intermediate realm

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22 *Pol Pot’s Little Red Book*, (Locard 2004, 121)
that operates between them, where culture, knowledge, politics and spiritual faith assemble in a space of violent sacred syncretism. This dissertation operates in that same space. It is a space where the autobiographical reflections and published memoirs of tortured pasts meet with historiography and philosophical inquiry; a space where the political and the religious cohabitate yet are in constant conflict; a space that contains the spiritual, mystical, and aesthetic disintegration of a society and the implementation of a totalitarian organization as the substitutive source of transcendence, truth, beauty, and knowledge; a space of vicious despiritualization into which Angkar reconfigures itself as the new ‘god’ – to be pneumopathologically followed by its believers and at the same time feared by its victims.

The story of that space, where I locate the Voegelinian notion of ‘political religions,’ is not however a nationally or culturally specific one. It is universal; one that has been told and retold from many different angles and spiritual faiths, over many different lands and times. It is at once the narrative of Democratic Kampuchea and later of the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and Al-Qaeda to name but a few. It can be one of the most compelling and widespread ways of analyzing modern regimes of terror. The term ‘political religion’ has been used to describe the totalitarian dictatorships of the Left and the Right – regimes established by Lenin, Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin, but it can just as well describe those led by Pol Pot, Milosevic, Kambanda, and Osama Bin Laden. These political movements, whether they indicate a formal state government, a paramilitary formation, or an international terrorist network, resemble established religions, or schools of spiritual thought, and by transcending the separation of faith and state they represent a reversion to ancient and primitive times when deity and sovereign were one. This
reversion encompasses more than just the cults of personality exhibited by a few of the tyrants listed, it is as well, the perverse ideologies they sought to profess. More specifically how these ideologies were to be recognized as a “carrier of development toward the end realm,” where the problem comes not only of philosophy, but of transcendence (Voegelin 2000, 61).

Rather than merely retelling the all-to-familiar story of Communism in Cambodia this dissertation tries to evoke its pseudo-religious pathologies instead. It is a work of excavation – a hollowing of something out of the quarry of literature on Democratic Kampuchea in an effort to illuminate what had always already been there. The Communist Party of Kampuchea exercised an anti-religious atheistic state as Angkar – a pseudo-religious theistic political organization. The previous faith of Khmer Theravada Buddhism, and its blend of elements from Hinduism, animism, and ancestor-spirit worship, was replaced by what Voegelin called “a conscious apocalypse,” where the system claiming to be the “rational-theoretical, national-economic, or sociological is replaced by ‘myth.’ The ‘myth’ is created purposely to bind the masses emotionally and to arouse in them the politically effective expectation of salvation” (Voegelin 2000, 62). And in the case of Democratic Kampuchea, since the myth could not be legitimated through transcendent revelation, a new concept of truth was developed – a concept of “the so-called organic truth” (Ibid., 62). The truth that had been present in Cambodia since the great kings of Angkor ruled as divine tyrants. Angkar sought to represent the new kings of Angkor. The leadership of the Communist Party of Kampuchea was to be the originating site of the so-called organic truth. The truth that “promotes the existence of the organically closed, inner-worldly national community. Knowledge and art, myth
and customs are true if they serve the purpose of the racially bound nationhood” (*Ibid.*, 62). Thus the formation of myths becomes more similar to the actual symbolism of a kingdom of spirituality in which transcendent experiences are combined into a tangible unit (*Ibid.*, 62-63). That tangible unit was *Angkar*. Although extremely difficult and almost incapable of being understood and evaluated, it was however regarded as real, its physical existence was determined by the corpses it left in the mass graves that dot the Cambodian landscape. “By one estimate, 34 percent of Cambodian men aged twenty to thirty died, as did 40 percent of aged thirty to forty and 54 percent of people of both sexes over sixty” (Valentino 2004, 139). That happened in just forty-four months of continuous revolution.

The premise upon which this exploration of Democratic Kampuchea has been undertaken is that the readers’ knowledge would be incomplete if the politco-religious and socio-spiritual dimensions of *Angkar*’s activities were ignored. The Communist Party of Kampuchea’s high-ranking officials synthesized a number of the characteristics *Angkar* exhibited from the transformation of religious language to reeducation strategy – from ‘bonns’ to ‘meetings,’ from *wats* to prisons, from *sangha* to slaves. The religiosity of its politics could never be separated from the politiosity of its religion.

Inner communion with *Angkar* is the process wherein labor is completed and spiritual energy is allowed to flow from the CPK Center to the populous. Through the rule of *Angkar* the physical world becomes part of a more spiritual universe. The first reality is usurped by the second reality configured by *Angkar*. This second reality is a pneumopathalogical reality; one where the ideologically driven individual is allowed to
suspend the rule of law and commiserate with the omnipotent Angkar in a state of exception that rewards violence and builds up hate.

Although Italian cultural historian Emilio Gentile in his *Politics as Religion* wrote that Rudolf Rocker was probably the first to use the concept of a ‘political religion’ for historical analysis of various phases in relations between religion and politics in his volume *Nationalism and Culture* from 1937. It was the work of Eric Voegelin that “not only broadened the traditional concept of the religious, but also adopted the term ‘political religion’ extensively to define various forms of the sacralization of power, the state, and politics, from the classical world to modern times” (Gentile 2006, 56). He placed the question of political religion in a historic context that lasted millennia and covered both the cult of the Pharaoh and the totalitarian religions of the twentieth century. His work interprets the movements of our time not just as political movements but also and above all as religious ones. The essence of Voegelin’s reflections concerns the mutual permeation between religion and politics in movements that constitute a ‘political community’; however the life of the individual within the political community cannot be restricted to matters of organization and power because it is “also within the field of religious order, and knowledge of a political situation is incomplete on a crucial point if it does not cover the community’s religious forces and the symbols through which those forces find expression” (*Ibid.*, 57).

For Michael Burleigh political religions “were not simply cynical usurpations of religious forms” (Burleigh 2007, xi). The French Revolution with its Cults of Reason or the Supreme Being “were what the Italian thinker Luigi Sturzo in the mid-1920s referred to as ‘the abusive exploitation of the human religious sentiment’. Like much earlier
attempts to realise heaven on earth” … “these resulted in hell for many people” (*Ibid.*, xi). These dystopian political manifestations continued through the Jacobin phase to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with the Russian nihilists, the scientific socialism of Marx and Engels, National Socialist, and fascist cults. These latest secular ideologies such as nationalism, racism, and scientism became the objects of devotion and refocused religiosity. As Burleigh articulates in *Sacred Causes*, “By the end of the century, when God was invoked by all sides in a catastrophic world war, the ‘strange gods’ of Bolshevism, Fascism and Nazism were already discernible as alternative objects of religious devotion” (*Ibid.*, xiii).

These ‘strange gods’ became the agents of transcendence. They were to achieve the ultimate existence above and apart from the material world. Each of these revelations also created its own group of symbols for the evils they perceived. As Voegelin describes in *The Political Religions*, “Kant’s devil is human desires; Fichte drew up the figure of Satan Napoleon; for positivist apocalypse, religion and metaphysics are Evil; the bourgeoisie belongs as evil to the proletariat; the chosen race is tied to an inferior race, above all the Jews as ‘counter race’” (Voegelin 2000, 61). *Angkar* and the military of Democratic Kampuchea saw the evils of their ideology in almost everything that surrounded them – from the bourgeois, educated, and foreign, to the religious, wasteful, and lazy. The wheel of the Khmer Rouge revolution found evil in its own people and its own culture. Those individuals who fit perfectly within their fantasy were to witness the ‘end realm,’ those who did not saw only an end.

Peg LeVine articulated in *Love and Dread in Cambodia* that in Democratic Kampuchea a larger dynamic of spirit politics emerged. *Angkar* was perceived as more
than a parental figure, even though it separated families, executed its adults, and ideologized its children. “Angkar’s elusive and destructive power functioned as an agentless victimizer – in a culture that has a cosmological system based on random-orderedness” (LeVine 2010, 171). Many survivors’ narratives tell of “Angkar’s power without physical evidence, just as legitimacy is given to spirits in rocks and trees. The visceral experience of ‘other’ was evidence of its existence.” …“torture is something you can see; but Angkar is there even when you don’t see it” (Ibid., 171). Angkar infused the exercise of violent political power within the space of a sacred syncretism. It provided not only governance over a people; it professed an ideology that was interpreted as a variant of religious experience. It was a politico-religious mechanism of contradiction, both tangible and intangible, one might not see it but one can be touched by it. Angkar had the power to arrest, judge, and execute. It could summon anyone at anytime and sacrifice with impunity. And for LeVine, “underlying its elusive and fierce powers, it has reeled itself back into a fugitive state – but is alive within the collective psyche of those who survived this period of history – and it is their anxiety about Angkar rising again that matters – regardless of how grounded this is in reality” (Ibid., 171).

The language of the political religion of Democratic Kampuchea presented throughout this dissertation says more about where it originates than what it entails. The majority of the evidence of Angkar’s wrath comes from survivor memoirs. Published or unpublished, written or spoken, these first-person narratives have the ability to go beyond the limited range of principles, theories, and methods of historical research and writing. They provide a personality that outweighs the findings, interpretations, and evaluation of certain source materials. Memoirists like Haing S. Ngor, Pin Yathay, U Sam Oeur,
Chanrithy Him, Luong Ong, Laurence Picq, Denise Affonco and others offer their own and their family’s suffering as a representation of what happened to millions of those who toiled during the Khmer Rouge regime. Even as the authors pass away from this world, their stories continue to resonate what still haunts the Cambodian consciousness – that they are a people that cannot and will not rest; that cannot and will not forget. Even as the Khmer Rouge Tribunal in Phnom Penh draws to a close in the coming years, in a sense, the story of Democratic Kampuchea cannot and will not be concluded.

In 2008’s *Ghost Train to the Eastern Star* travel writer and novelist Paul Theroux re-creates an earlier odyssey that took him from Eastern Europe through the Caucasus to Southeast Asia, Japan, and back again on the Trans-Siberian Railroad. In it he recalls his displeasure in not being able to traverse from Bangkok to Cambodia in 1973, saying that this travel had been impossible at that time because “the Thai side of the border had been thick with refugees” and “the whole of Cambodia was in the grip of the Khmer Rouge, ruled by the reclusive tyrant Pol Pot” (Theroux 2008, 341). However, during his twenty-first century journey he was finally able to cross into Cambodia from Aranyaprathet to Poipet and what he discovered was a country and a people haunted by the ghosts of a nightmarish past. “The negative vibrations” he “felt were not imaginary”…“they were the effect of people’s faces, a distinct derangement of features”…“and especially their eyes, hold a look of terror” (*Ibid.*, 344). Of the Cambodian people Theroux observed tortured faces, ones that have seen horrors, and felt a “creepy feeling” that he attributed to “bad vibes” (*Ibid.*, 344).
From the border crossing he handed over five dollars and boarded a bus for the next one hundred and fifty miles to Siem Reap. From there he hopped on a tuk-tuk and careened through the city to a Chinese-looking villa called the Green Town Guest House. It was from this place, with its noodle shop in the courtyard, that Theroux wrote of what he noticed as he walked the streets of Siem Reap over the next few days:

No matter where I went here, I had a sense the place was haunted. I was creeped out – maybe an effect of my awareness of Cambodia’s violent recent history, though I had not yet read the Pol Pot biography. The ghostliness was present even in the sunniest parts of town, a suggestion of the hideous past, of blood and unburied bodies, of torture, trickery, lies, punishment – like the darkness I had felt rising from the earth when I walked through Dachau, the stink of evil.

Most Cambodians have a memory of the bad years; perhaps they conveyed this sense of psychic trauma, carried it around with them. The hurt was apparent in their posture, in their voices, in their eyes. Another haunted landscape…

(Theroux 2008, 346)

Paul Theroux’s feelings have not been his alone. U Sam Oeur wrote of his emotions as he recalled just how haunted a place the Killing Fields of Choeung Ek could be in his memoir *Crossing Three Wildernesses*. As a visitor standing on a depression where hundreds of bodies were buried remembering other such places in Cambodia, like a crocodile farm in Siem Reap where Khmer Rouge leaders threw live victims into their jaws, U Sam Oeur could “feel the presence of those poor souls who were thrown to them. And you wonder how long it will take the land to cleanse itself of this carnage” (U Sam Oeur 2005, 283).
I too have walked the streets of Siem Reap, the paths of Choeung Ek, the halls of Tuol Sleng. I too have looked into the traumatized eyes, have witnessed the haunted locales, and felt the ‘negative vibrations.’ This dissertation was conceived from exposure to these feelings, faces and places. An exposure that left the impression that academic history or political science alone could not explain the horrors of the Khmer Rouge legacy. More needed to be philosophically excavated. More needed to be literally exhumed. More needed to be examined through the gaze of the spiritual, mystical, and aesthetic realms. This study may be only one step down that long trail through the Cambodian forest, but at least it is a step in the right direction.
Sigmund Neumann’s 1942 volume *Permanent Revolution: Totalitarianism in the Age of International Civil War*, later reprinted in 1965, is a classic study of the social structure of totalitarian rule. It has lost none of its immediacy and relevance in the seventy years since it was first published. Although Stalinism, Fascist Italy, and National Socialism have since come to disastrous ends, the problems of totalitarianism and dictatorships are still with us. One of the essential features of their continued existence lies within the differentiation between political leaders and followers. It is “the very existence of society by necessity” that “reveals the basic discrepancies between democratic and dictatorial governments” (Neumann 1965, 44).

“The modern dictator is the demagogic leader of the people and the absolute master of the machine” … “as ‘the superhuman leader’ he is a stranger to his people—a marginal man, nationally, socially, psychologically” (Neumann 1965, 72). Pol Pot was at once ‘the superhuman leader’ and the mysterious executive of an omnipotent and omnipresent *Angkar*. It was not until 1977 that the secretive “Brother Number One” revealed that *Angkar* was the Communist Party of Kampuchea and its secretary-general was the leader of the revolution. And it wasn’t until the later years of the Khmer Rouge

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23 [Pol Pot’s Little Red Book](Locard 2004, 198)
regime that his own younger brother, Saloth Nhep, recognized Pol Pot as the former Saloth Sar, the brother who had left the family behind for the maquis some twenty years before (Brinkley 2011).

Neumann characterizes the rise of a man like Pol Pot to “[n]ational mind and design, political fate and fortune, and the inner structure of the dictatorship” (Neumann 1965, 72). He is not at least the product of his own world. “His followers and, no doubt, his lieutenants are part of this definition” (*Ibid.*, 72). Nuon Chea was just that lieutenant. Defined by the secret code name “Brother Number Two,” Lau Ben Kon, was born in Battambang in 1926 to Sino-Khmer heritage. He later, with Pol Pot and other high-ranking CPK cadres, would make up *Angkar* – the all-knowing and all-pervasive god-like Center of the Khmer Rouge political religious mechanism. Although Pol Pot may have later commanded the limelight of the political scene, not much is known of Nuon Chea’s character, function, or achievements. “And yet these lieutenants are an essential feature which differentiates the modern version of dictatorial rule from its classical prototype” (Neumann 1965, 73). As Neumann continues:

> The lieutenants reflect the daily life of dictatorship. They are the power behind the throne, the driving force of modern demagogic rule, the backbone of its institutions. The structural characteristics of modern dictatorship, therefore, find in the subleaders their definite expression certainly more than in the supreme leader, who often rises to power through specific opportunities unique and closely connected with anomalous personality patterns. This is not as true of the Number Two Men. They are usually more typical of the particular national features of the dictatorship, even though they reflect only distorted national characteristics. (Neumann 1965, 73)
Yet the political lieutenant is sadly neglected in the abundance of literature. Pol Pot has many biographies written of him; Nuon Chea – none. However knowledge and information of his time as deputy secretary-general of the Communist Party of Kampuchea is becoming to come to light. After the 1998 death of Pol Pot in the jungle of the Thai-Cambodian border, Nuon Chea represents the highest-ranking Democratic Kampuchean official in detention and currently on trial for crimes against humanity at the United Nations backed Khmer Rouge Genocide Tribunal in the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), along with former foreign minister Ieng Sary, and former head of state Khieu Samphan. Ieng Thirith was also to stand trial but was deemed unfit for court due to an ongoing mental illness. Kaing Guek Eav, or Comrade Duch, the notorious commandant of the regime’s secret Phnom Penh prison, Tuol Sleng, was tried and convicted of crimes against humanity on July 26, 2010. The court “sentenced him to thirty-five years in prison—by almost every reaction an exceedingly light sentence for a man who oversaw the torture and deaths of 15,000 people” (Brinkley 2011, 333). His sentence has since been appealed to life, and now Duch will never conceivably walk out of prison a free man one day.

As the Khmer Rouge Genocide Tribunal unfolds in Phnom Penh under the watchful eye of the United Nations and a slew of international donors, most of its victims have continued to shy away. Many of those that live outside of the capital have no access to electricity, much less a television to view the proceedings. Joel Brinkley in his 2011 book, *Cambodia’s Curse*, said, “Cambodians were barely aware. Various surveys and anecdotal evidence—I asked every Cambodian I met about the trial—showed that most people simply weren’t paying attention” … “Others shrugged and professed to have little
interest. They were too busy. The trial was on during the day, when they were at work in the rice paddies” (Brinkley 2011, 335). Most reporting of the trial has focused on corruption, political manipulation, and money shortages. “In fact, the trial had offered new demonstrations of impunity and injustice. Already donors have given more than $100 million to the court, knowing that some was lost to corruption. Now the court is asking for another $93 million for just the next two years—not enough time, more than likely, to complete another trial” (Ibid., 335). After the Duch conviction, the court has indicted the remaining defendants at the same time, trying them together, mindful of their ages and health. Nuon Chea and Ieng Sary are in their eighties. Khieu Samphan is in his seventies and in frail health. So what will become of the Tribunal?

On September 19, 2007, Nuon Chea was arrested at his home in Pailin and flown by helicopter to Phnom Penh to await trial. At long last “Brother Number Two,” a man who many believe ordered the killings of millions of Cambodians, was going to have his day in court. Since the testimony began, charging Nuon Chea (as well as Ieng Sary and Khieu Samphan) with crimes against humanity, genocide, murder, and religious persecution, the political lieutenant has steadfastly denied any role in the destruction of Cambodian society and the crimes in which he is accused. Even at one time demanding that the result of the revolution was the work of American foreign policy makers.

Since his sentencing, Comrade Duch has been the lead witness to the crimes of the remaining defendants, and the most outspoken critic of Nuon Chea’s role in the decision making process of the regime. On March 27, 2012, Voice of America Khmer correspondent Kong Sothanarith wrote that Duch testified that he met frequently with Pol Pot’s lieutenant on the state of the S-21 facility and the enemies it was to crush. Duch
continued two days later to inform the tribunal that Nuon Chea ordered the torture and extraction of confessions from those housed at Tuol Sleng. Kong Sothanarith reported, “Duch said Nuon Chea also ordered him to execute all remaining prisoners at S-21 as Vietnamese-led forces ousted the Khmer Rouge from power and pushed them out of the capital. ‘He said, ‘Comrade, clear them out,’ Duch quoted Noun Chea as saying. Duch said that he asked to spare the lives of four prisoners, but those prisoners were later killed by other prison cadre as Vietnamese troops reached Phnom Penh” (Kong Sothanarith 2012).

Winner of Outstanding Documentary at the Hong Kong Film Festival, Thet Sambath’s Enemies of the People: A Personal Journey into the Heart of the Killing Fields, provides visual representation into the cult of the political lieutenant. In the film “Brother Number Two” is interviewed for hours at a time over close to a ten-year period. It is a personal journey by journalist and filmmaker Thet Sambath, “whose family was wiped out in the killing fields, but whose patience and discipline elicits unprecedented on-camera confessions from perpetrators at all levels of the Khmer Rouge hierarchy” (Thet Sambath 2009). Nuon Chea is one of those people. After years of interviewing the political lieutenant, just as the order to arrest him is called in from Phnom Penh, he relents and offers a veiled apology to all those lives his policies may have destroyed. It was not, however, an admission of guilt. Nuon Chea believed, and still believes, his work was for the preservation of the nation. His supposed ‘crimes’ were merely decisions made for the better interest of the people—for the citizens of Democratic Kampuchea.

But “[t]o the political lieutenant,” Sigmund Neumann suggests, “the human equation is almost completely blotted out. He has essentially no interest in the
individual’s well-being; he is concerned solely with the preservation of the leader’s rule. Above all, he has to be reliable for the dictator, not popular with the masses” (Neumann 1965, 87). So, in other words, close to 2 million Cambodian’s blood seems to be just as much on Nuon Chea’s hands as those of his one-time superior.
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