



## BOOK REVIEW

***Violence and the Civilising Process in Cambodia* by Roderick Broadhurst, Thierry Bouhours, and Brigitte Bouhours  
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015**

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“Violence,” Soviet-born author and biochemist Isaac Asimov wrote, “is the last refuge of the incompetent.” We as a human species are undeniably a violent one, and since time immemorial, we have yet to co-exist without violence. The theme and study of violence is at the core of *Violence and the Civilising Process in Cambodia* by Australia National University researchers Roderic Broadhurst (Professor of Criminology), Thierry Bouhours (Visiting Research Fellow), and Brigitte Bouhours (Visiting Scholar), who present us with a criminological analysis of patterns of violence in Cambodia. Their temporal scope spans the era of French colonization (1863-1945, 1945-1953), anti-colonial conflicts, and beginning with independence, Cambodia’s civil war (1967-1975), years under Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) rule (1975-1979), and post-conflict development (1979-present). To determine whether

### VIOLENCE AND THE CIVILISING PROCESS IN CAMBODIA

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certain key transitions in Cambodia over a one hundred and fifty year period have played a role in the prevalence and forms of

violence, the authors draw from English and French archival sources, constabulary statistics, victim surveys, and newspaper reports. By applying German sociologist Norbert Elias' theses from his 1939 work *The Civilising Process* to the Cambodian case study, they seek ultimately to assess the "utility of civilising processes in understanding the forces driving societal and individual change" (34).

The book consists of eleven chapters that proceed in chronological sequence from the French colonial advent in the 1860s to the present-day autocratic rule of the Hun Sen regime. The second chapter applies the comparative method in its examination of rural banditry in early twentieth century Cambodia and similar issues in Early Modern Europe. Chapters three and four highlight colonial-era crime and crime control, outlining Protectorate administrative and judicial reforms and how they effected crime and violence (32). Chapters four and six examine two "golden years"—of the French Protectorate and of Sihanoukism, respectively—with the fifth chapter in between placing focus on a spike in violence both characterizing and accompanying the anti-colonial war. Subsequent chapters analyze the Civil War (1967-1975), Democratic Kampuchea (DK, 1975-1979), and Vietnamese occupation (1979–1991) years, periods that could not be greater contrasts with one another. The tenth chapter covers the early Hun Sen years to 2012, noting a continued decline in interpersonal violence carrying on with the end of Vietnamese rule. The final chapter returns to the book's theoretical approach,

evaluating whether civilizing and/or de-civilizing forces may help us to make sense of rises violence over the past one hundred and fifty years of Cambodian history.

The study is from a criminological perspective, so one ought not to be overly critical of its attempts at historical analysis and theoretical application. The authors' empirical question, for one, seems to discount—whether wittingly or unwittingly—the nature, form, and legacies of violent colonial exploitation: "[are] trends in non-Western societies, particularly in a developing country such as Cambodia, similar to those in Western societies that show an overall progressive decline in interpersonal violence starting as early as the fifteenth century?" (2). There is no comparison between what occurred in the Kingdom of France and in its own Protectorate of *Cambodge*. A secondary theoretical question asks whether "Western-developed macro-social theories of crime and violence may apply in non-Western contexts" (2). Much like with the first question, the binary here is false. Can we truly discuss Cambodia from the French occupation to the present without the "West"? French efforts to preserve Cambodia as a geographic space that it could rule while imposing nationalistic images of domination (French superiority over Khmers) spurred the Cambodian national consciousness and "Cambodia" as a discursive construct. France's routine exploitation of its Khmer subjects fueled the very fires of radicalism that characterized DK, as the CPK's intellectual thrust lived and studied in France and sought ways to end French

colonial exploitation. To discuss violence in Cambodia, then, is precisely to speak of France. The authors also disclaim that their core sociological concepts of “modernisation, modernity, and development,” which raise “suspicions of Eurocentric, Orientalist, colonialist, or neocolonialist value judgments and discourses,” are not merely reproduced in their work “in a normative sense but as descriptors of observed sociological phenomena” (11). But often, the language that the authors use to describe Khmer practices seems to betray such attitudes without the requisite nuance. It is equally difficult to discuss the violence in DK without acknowledging the deep French cultural/historical imprint on the CPK leadership, with the notorious Pol Pot, and Khieu Samphan, among others, listing French revolutionaries (Pol Pot in his own handwritten 1952 article) as inspirations.

In addition, the authors’ somewhat problematically use of “hemoclysm” (187) instead of genocide to describe the mass killings of the DK era. The CPK targeted, with intent, to “destroy in whole or in part” (hemoclysm neither denotes intent, nor a final solution) all ethnic minorities in Cambodia in its pursuit of Khmer ethnic purity. Ben Kiernan’s *The Pol Pot Regime* (1996) and subsequent work makes a convincing case (with Khmer sources and interviews with survivors) that the CPK sought to exterminate ethnic Chinese in what he later characterized as “the worst disaster ever to befall a Southeast Asian ethnic Chinese community.” Alternatively, the authors might have made a compelling argument that the CPK pursued a form of

ethnic cleansing, per Norman Naimark’s definition in *Fires of Hatred* (2001), as he analyzes nongenocidal examples (deportations and excessive violence). “Hemoclysm” falls a tad short, containing neither the important emphasis on intent and totality in Raphael Lemkin’s 1948 definition, nor its flexibility and explanatory value.

Attempts by Broadhurst, Bouhours, and Bouhours to get at the semiotic significance behind types of violence leave a bit to be desired. Alexander Hinton’s anthropological study on the Cambodian cultural model of disproportionate revenge (“a head for an eye”), for instance, receives due attention on pages 216-217, but in far too brief a compass. What were the patterns of *sângsoek* (revenge), *karsângsoek* (disproportionate revenge), and violence in Cambodian history over the century-and-a-half under examination? Or the cultural semiotics of meaning behind corporal punishments? One problem of approaches concerns how the authors critique Hinton’s anthropological premise in *Why Did They Kill? Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide* (2004) that cultural models are often internalized differentially, vary in distribution and saliency, and have disparate degrees of motivational force for people. After a summary of his positions, they criticize his approach for its “ethnocultural explanation” and argue that “disproportionate revenge and associated affective and cognitive processes have been observed almost everywhere in the history of humanity and are more likely associated with sociogenetic and psychogenetic

development than any particular ethnic culture” (217). But Hinton does not discount these factors in his quest to uncover previously unacknowledged cultural roots of genocide in Cambodia, nor does he state that disproportionate revenge is a uniquely Khmer phenomenon. Broadhurst and company, by contrast, rely on theories of Emil Durkheim and Norbert Elias, which do indeed have their place in the discussion. But Hinton, in fact, pays homage to like scholars, stating that choices to practice revenge or to hold grudges are not made in isolation, as human behavior is at once enabled and constrained by sociocultural structures that include cultural models. He references Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “habitus,” Anthony Giddens’ notion of “practical consciousness,” and Michel Foucault’s “discourse” in his 1998 article “A Head for An Eye,” which became a chapter in the 2004 monograph. But Hinton does not defer to these concepts at the expense of a nuanced cultural anthropological analysis of disproportionate revenge and, thus, it is rather unfair for Broadhurst et al. to characterize his approach as “ethnocultural.”

Some smaller issues are also worthy of mention if only to clear the record. Although completely understandable in light of their book’s overall goal, the authors have presented a study on Cambodia *without* Cambodian sources, preferring instead to rely on French and English ones that foreground colonial perspectives. This reviewer would have liked to see the authors reference the relevant Khmer language sources in the chapter on DK

instead of English and French secondary sources and translated Documentation Center of Cambodia (DCCAM) findings. The authors’ mention of the practice of liver eating as corporal punishment without explanation of its ritual symbolism in Khmer lands appears out of context as if to highlight an inherent Khmer barbarity (clearly not the authors’ aim). Scholars have explored ritual violence successfully in Asian nations: *Death By Thousand Cuts* (2008) by Timothy Brook, Gerome Bourgon, and Geoff Blue provides one such example that succeeds in presenting a nuanced picture of violent practice—this one state-sanctioned corporal punishment—without *apologia*. They succeed in providing proper context and taking seriously the semiotics of violence behind *lingchi* (“death by a thousand cuts”) while remaining highly critical of the Euro-American fetishistic gaze toward *Others* and their supposed barbarism. Lastly, the authors rely a bit too heavily on former ambassador Kenneth Quinn’s 1989 chapter in Karl Jackson’s 1989 *Cambodia 1975-1978 Rendezvous with Death*, which, although a useful part of the discussion, is hardly the final word or the most authoritative on CPK ideological origins.

To sum up, what the *Violence and the Civilising Process in Cambodia* authors produce is no doubt a social sciences perspective on the suitability of Elias’ theory to the 1863-present period of Cambodian history. Readers ought to expect that when consulting this piece, and might benefit from reading *Violence and the Civilising Process in Cambodia* in con-

junction with, or alongside, the most recent historical and anthropological scholarship on Cambodia. Excellent companion readings include Penny Edwards' landmark *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation* (2007), John A. Tully's *France on the Mekong* (2002), and Geoffrey Gunn's *Monarchical Manipulation in Cambodia* (2018).