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Reflections on Cambodia

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In April of 1970, I, along with thousands of other college students, went on strike. We were protesting the bombing of Cambodia. It was a heady time, untroubled by any actual knowledge of Cambodia. Not that *anyone* knew very much about Cambodia then.

By 1975, the Communist Khmer Rouge had come to power and Cambodia dropped from sight. No foreign visitors were permitted, and no news got out. Cambodia remained hidden for years. Even after the Khmer Rouge were driven from power in 1979, Cambodia suffered another 20 years of civil war between the government in Phnom Penh and the Khmer Rouge guerrillas in the mountains and jungles. It is only in the last ten or so years that Cambodia has been at peace and has reentered the world. Foreign visitors, including international businessmen, now flock to Cambodia. One of the almost three million visitors to Cambodia in the past year was me.

I went to Cambodia primarily to see the ancient temples of Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom. They were built in the 12th century, when Angkor was the capital of the Khmer empire and the largest city in the world, with a population of one million. I had first read about Angkor Wat in a Buddhist-art class in 1972. By then, Angkor Wat was off limits to foreign visitors, shrouded in mystery and veiled by war. By some miracle, it and the other temples in the region were untouched by the long years of war. Several hundred years of neglect in the jungle have taken a toll, however, and in recent years many foreign universities and governments have sent experts and aid to help in the restoration of these spectacular wonders of the ancient world. To see what one of the minor temples looks like before restoration, check out the movie *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*, which was filmed at a temple near Angkor Wat that has been overgrown by the surrounding jungle.

The other reason to visit Cambodia was to see the killing fields. During their five years in power, the Khmer Rouge killed somewhere between 1 and 2 million people, out of a population that had stood around 10 million. This didn't come to light until after the Vietnamese army invaded Cambodia and drove the Khmer Rouge out of Phnom Penh. Pictures of piles of bodies and bones, reminiscent of Auschwitz, began to appear in the world press. Since then, many details have emerged about the Khmer Rouge's killing spree. Everyone refers to this as the Cambodian genocide.

So I went to Choeung Ek, about eleven miles from Phnom Penh. Choeung Ek was a camp where approximately 20,000 Cambodians were murdered by the Khmer Rouge. Most had their heads bashed in with axes or hoes. Babies were smashed against trees, women were raped and then murdered, and the bodies were tossed into open pits. Today it is the site of a museum and a Buddhist memorial dedicated to the memories of those slain. The

memorial has a glass front and multiple levels, and on each level is a different kind of bone: skulls on the bottom shelves, hip bones on the top. As you walk around the site, you can see lying on the ground fragments of bones, teeth, and clothing that continually work their way to the surface from the burial pits. The Cambodians say that there are many restless souls at Choeung Ek, souls that are not yet at peace. It is a very moving experience.

Cambodia suffered deeply under the Khmer Rouge. Perhaps as much as 20 percent of its people were murdered in killing fields like Choeung Ek or died as a result of starvation or disease following the expulsion of the urban populations to the countryside and the forced collectivization of agriculture. But calling these murders “genocide” troubles me.

Cambodia is now and was then one of the most ethnically unitary countries in the world: 95 percent of all Cambodians are ethnically Khmer; the remaining 5 percent include Chinese, Vietnamese, Laotians, Hmong, Cham, and others. And 95 percent of all Cambodians, of whatever ethnicity, are Buddhist. Most of the killings were Khmer on Khmer, although the Khmer Rouge did also target Cambodia’s very small Cham Muslim minority.

The term “genocide” historically refers to the mass extermination of a race or ethnicity, as with the Turks and the Armenians, or the Germans and the Jews, or the Serbs and the Bosnians. It doesn’t seem to fit what happened in Cambodia, except for the scale of the slaughter.

Rather, what happened in Cambodia is what happened in the French Revolution, and in Stalin’s purges and mass collectivization campaigns, and in Mao’s Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution, only on a proportionately larger scale. It was mass murder in the name of equality. It wasn’t “genocide”; it was Communist utopianism carried to its logical extreme. The Khmer Rouge, who called themselves Maoists, believed that the most important social and political value was equality and that in order to create their new, classless society in which everyone was equal, it was necessary to exterminate anyone who might be smarter, or better educated, or wealthier, or more talented than anyone else. Thus, they killed the educated, the bourgeoisie, the middle classes, and the rich; movie stars, pop singers, authors, urban residents, and workers for the former government; and anyone who protested — as well as the families of all the above. Towards the end, they also killed cadres who were thought to be a political threat. Whatever their crimes were, the Khmer Rouge do not seem to have been motivated by racial, ethnic, or religious hatred.

Why then do Cambodians and the world call the mass murders by the Khmer Rouge “genocide”? I can think of several possible reasons. One is the superficial similarity to other mass slaughters — as noted earlier, the pictures of the Cambodian killing fields look very much like the pictures from the German concentration camps. Surely many people who are largely ignorant of history know only that similarity. Another reason is the fact that the victims of genocide are sympathetic. The U.N. creates commissions, and wealthy countries send money. Cambodia today is filled with NGOs bringing aid of

various kinds. The desire for international sympathy might explain why Cambodians use the genocide label.

However, I suspect that the most important reason for the usage worldwide is that many people in the international media, international agencies, and international NGOs (not to mention academia) are reluctant to face up to the crimes committed by Communism in the name of equality. To do so might call into question the weight attached by them to equality as the most important social value and undermine the multicultural faith that evil is predominantly the product of inequality, racism, ethnic hatred, or religious fanaticism. That cannot be permitted, so such crimes must be either ignored or mislabeled. And, of course, the remaining Communist regimes in the world are only too happy to cooperate in characterizing the killing fields as the products of irrational paranoia on the part of Pol Pot and his gang rather than the perfectly rational result of the quest for perfect equality.

No one has ever been punished for the Khmer Rouge's crimes. After the Vietnamese army drove Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge from power, they continued to be recognized as the Cambodian government by much of the world. Pol Pot kept his seat in the U.N. until the early 1990s, supported by both China and the U.S. (to our everlasting shame). He died in his bed in 1998 surrounded by his wife and grandchildren. The trial of four senior members of the Khmer Rouge is still under way. They are the only ones to have ever been charged. All the rest have effectively if not formally been forgiven, as the price of the political settlement that finally brought peace to Cambodia.

Justice has not been and may never be served. All we can do is bear witness. I am glad I went to the killing fields to see the evidence of these horrible crimes, even as the world ignores their true meaning.