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The economist behind the Khmer Rouge

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Updated | 2:59 p.m. As my colleague Seth Mydans reports from Phnom Penh, four senior members of the Khmer Rouge appeared before a war-crimes tribunal in the Cambodian capital on Monday, charged with responsibility for policies that caused the death of as much as one-fourth of the population in the late 1970s.

One of those former leaders is Khieu Samphan, a 79-year-old economist with a doctorate from the Sorbonne, who was Cambodia's nominal head of state when the Khmer Rouge implemented its plan to radically transform the country's society and economy.

Since he was one of the chief architects of the Khmer Rouge project, some observers have argued that Khieu Samphan's 1959 doctoral dissertation, "Cambodia's Economy and Industrial Development," foreshadowed the radical agrarian nightmare to come.

Part of the dissertation was published, in English, by an academic journal in Berkeley in 1976. According to that translation, more than a decade before office workers were driven from Phnom Penh at gunpoint to perform forced agricultural labor in the countryside, the young economist in Paris argued that the kind of work done in Cambodia's cities by bureaucrats, merchants and bankers was "unproductive."

In his analysis of Cambodia's economic structure, Khieu Samphan wrote:

these branches of activity add no value to the society from the perspective of the economy as a whole. They simply profit from a transfer of value issuing from other productive activities within society (agriculture, crafts, small industry). And the transfer of produce within society does not enlarge the total value of production obtained by society in any way. The distinction made by the Scottish economist Adam Smith between productive and unproductive work deserves to be carefully considered here.

This is far from saying, for example, that a civil servant or a soldier would be useless to society. However, the greater the reduction in numbers of individuals concerned with general social organization, the greater the number who can contribute to production and the faster the enrichment of the nation.

While the distinction between productive and unproductive labor in Khieu Samphan's dissertation was not original — it came from Adam Smith and was the subject of a famous critique by Karl Marx — the dry language of that part of the dissertation is somewhat chilling to read in retrospect, knowing that so many Cambodians were

subsequently worked to death in the fields.

As Sophal Ear, an expert on post-conflict reconstruction, explained in a study of Cambodia's economy that discusses Khieu Samhan's dissertation, after the Khmer Rouge took power in 1975:

The economy underwent massive restructuring; all money was virtually banned and banks were closed. Markets were all but destroyed. All who had lived in the cities were now to work in the countryside…. The leaders of the Khmer Rouge movement, Saloth Sar (better known to the world by his nom de guerre Pol Pot) and Sorbonne-educated economist Khieu Samphan, to name but two, sought to recast Cambodia anew…. The Khmer Rouge's goal was simple: the rustication of an economy.

According to Charles Twining, the author of a chapter on the economy in "Cambodia 1975-1978," two months before the fall of Phnom Penh in 1975, a Khmer Rouge party congress, "reportedly presided over by Khieu Samphan, is generally thought to have made the decision to evacuate cities and abolish all currency after the takeover. The fact that the cities were all emptied within several days of the fall, with the people knowingly directed to spots in the countryside where they camped at least temporarily, does not give the impression of a sudden, knee jerk action. This had all been organized before hand."

Here is the part of the dissertation published in the September 1976 issue of The Indochina Chronicle in its entirety:

"Underdevelopment in Cambodia," by Khieu Samphan