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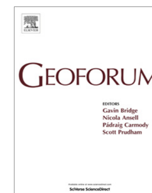

Dead labor, landscapes, and mass graves: Administrative violence during the Cambodian genocide

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ABSTRACT

An estimated 300 mass grave sites, and more than 19,000 burial pits, have been unearthed in Cambodia. These graves mark the sites where approximately 2 million Cambodians died, either from starvation, disease, or execution. In recent years considerable research has directed attention both to the forensic study of Cambodia's mass graves and also to the politics of memorialization in Cambodia. Less attention has addressed the actual, material production of mass graves during the genocide; consequently, our understanding of the social relations that embody concrete forms of violence remains inadequate. In this paper I draw conceptually on 'administrative violence' as a means of bridging direct and structural violence. In so doing I detail how law-making and law-preserving forms of violence intersect with the imposition of structures of violence. This paper therefore makes two contributions—one theoretical, the other empirical. On the one hand I contribute to the burgeoning geographic literature on violence, specifically, through an elaboration of administrative violence; and, on the other hand, I reconsider the spatial practices of Democratic Kampuchea, thereby contributing to a more geographically-informed understanding of the Cambodian genocide.

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1. Introduction

"You will be soil for the rice field."

Slogan of the Khmer Rouge[1]

Located 60 km south of Phnom Penh sits a rather banal looking earthen structure. Spanning some 12 km in length, 15 m in height, and approximately 20 m wide, the Koh Sla Dam is covered with short grass and scrub. It is crisscrossed by narrow footpaths that connect the surrounding stilt houses and rice paddies. As a site of violence, the dam remains unmarked. No placards inform the visitor of its brutal past; no monuments have been erected to remember the dead. And yet, nine thousand men, women, and children perished at the site, killed or left to die at the hands of the Khmer Rouge (Tyner et al., 2012).

Construction on the dam began in 1973 near Sre Lieu Village in the recently liberated Kampot Province. Labor was provided by thousands of Cambodians who were forcibly relocated to the site. Conditions were horrific, with many thousands of people—perhaps the majority—dying of starvation, exposure, and disease. Indeed, so high was mortality that the Khmer Rouge established a mobile hospital (designated as Zone 35 Hospital) at the site. However, because of a lack of properly trained medical personnel and a lack of proper medicines, few patients actually received adequate care (Tyner, 2012c). In fact, survivors recall that patients were as likely to die of improper medical care as they were from disease or execution.

Construction on the project was slow and, throughout 1975, local Khmer Rouge officials re-doubled their efforts. Additional work-brigades were deployed to the site and work continued through 1977. Laborers continued to suffer. Malaria and cholera were rampant; many people died also from injuries sustained during construction. Srey Neth, a survivor, was assigned to bury members of her unit who died in mass graves. She recalls: "I was forbidden by [the Khmer Rouge] from telling others about the number of deaths." She explains that "Sometimes they [the Khmer Rouge] woke me up in the middle of the night and ordered me to take bodies to be buried.... The number of bodies I buried ranged from two to six per night" (quoted in Rasy, 2007, p. 18).

Prum Samon writes first-hand of the death associated with the Koh Sla Dam. Throughout the genocide, Prum lost 13 immediate family members, including his grandfather, father, three brothers, a sister, and numerous aunts, uncles, and cousins. One of those relatives who perished was a cousin, Heat, who labored at Koh Sla. Heat was seventeen-years-old when she was assigned to a women's mobile work unit at the site. One day, Prum recalls, Heat "was very hungry, so she picked an ear of corn and cooked it. Before the corn was ready to eat, the unit chief caught her and

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[1] Quoted in Khuon (1997, p. 102).

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gathered people around for a meeting. The unit chief tied her arms in back of her, grabbed the hot corn from the fire, and put it into her mouth, severely burning her. He then declared that Heat had betrayed Angkar [foot note] and the cooperative. Everybody at the meeting was threatened to not follow in her footsteps'' (Prum, 2006, p. 45). Although Heat was not executed for her 'crime', she would later become seriously ill and die of starvation.

The mass graves at Koh Sla today stand as silent testimony to the violence of the Cambodian genocide. The recollections of Srey Neth and Prum Samon likewise bear witness, but in different ways, to the production of mass graves. For Srey Neth, it was her job, her work, to literally produce mass graves, to transform 'nature' into an object: a grave. For Prum, conversely, his story provides insight into the laborers who were buried in the graves dug by Srey Neth. Together their narratives highlight the social relations hidden beneath the surface appearance of mass graves as material sites of violence.

In this paper I propose that Cambodia's mass graves reveal the administrative logic of the Khmer Rouge and, in so doing, provide insight into the spatiality of death that constitutes genocide. I argue that 'administrative violence'—and, in particular, Walter Benjamin's notion of law-making and law-preserving violence—conforms readily to the *production* of mass graves. Mass graves, in other words, should be viewed not simply as observable features indicative of past violence; or, conversely, as the disorganized burial of largely anonymous victims. Rather, mass graves should be understood as indicators of administrative calculations that are intimately associated with the establishment and continuance of law itself.

Simply put, the direct violence that accompanied the Khmer Rouge's rise to power was a process of law-making violence and, by extension, a practice of primitive accumulation or, stated differently, a form of 'proto-capitalism'. Once in power, and as the space-economy of Cambodia was transformed, a series of law-preserving practices were initiated—necessary to facilitate the continuation of economic policies. Together, I maintain that a more administratively-based understanding of Khmer Rouge governance, which is evidenced in specific, primary Khmer Rouge policies and documents, provides a necessary theoretical linkage between (1) direct and structural violence; and (2) the theoretical and empirical understanding of the Cambodian genocide. Consequently, this paper makes two contributions—one theoretical, the other empirical. On the one hand I contribute to the burgeoning geographic literature on violence, specifically, through an elaboration of *administrative violence*; and, on the other hand, I reconsider the spatial practices of Democratic Kampuchea, thereby contributing to a more geographically-informed understanding of the Cambodian genocide.

2. Violence, landscape, and mass graves

The geographic study of 'death' and 'violence' on the landscape is a comparatively small yet vibrant sub-field that is dominated by three broad approaches. First, scholars have long addressed the location, distribution, and cultural significance of cemeteries and other *deathscapes* (Kniffen, 1967; Francaviglia, 1971; Yeoh, 1991; Zelinsky, 1994; Yeoh and Tan, 1995; Kong, 1999; Teather, 2001; Maddrell and Sidaway, 2010; Romanillos, 2011). This research has, in part, highlighted the significance of 'death' for the living and the politics of mourning. A second and related body of literature—dominated by anthropologists—has addressed the archaeology of (mass) grave sites (Mant, 1987; Skinner, 1987; Jessee and Skinner, 2005; Juhl and Olsen, 2006; Perera, 2006; González-Ruibal, 2007). Here, the focus has addressed primarily the physical evidence found in mass graves as a means of contributing to the criminal prosecution of war crimes (cf. Gassiot Ballbé and Steadman, 2008). Lastly, geographers and other social scientists have written extensively on the memorialization of violent landscapes (Charlesworth, 1994; Johnson, 1995; Foote, 1997; Tyner et al., 2012). This research has emphasized the contestation over the meanings of violence and have (often) stressed that official memorials do not simply testify a 'real' history but rather represent what some want to believe, or what some want others to believe. Memorials and sites of violence, therefore, ''narrate history in selective and controlled ways—hiding as much as they reveal'' (Dwyer and Alderman, 2008, p. 168).

Common to all three approaches—the study of deathscapes, of mass graves, and the memorialization of landscapes of violence—have at their core a concern with the legacy that mass death has for survivors. In their extensive study of war dead, for example, Capdevila and Voldman (2006: xiii–xiv) explain that they are concerned ''with the fate of those killed in war, through what happens to their remains (bodies, fragments of bodies, bits, ashes, the absence of remains), as well as with the attitudes of survivors and their feelings in the face of tragic events.'' My concern, however, is different; my focus is less on the remembrance of mass graves, but instead—as the accounts of Srey Neth and Prum Samon testify—on the actual 'production' of mass graves [Fig. 1].

In this paper I re-position the mass graves that mark Cambodia's post-genocide landscape as 'dead labor'. Marx (1990), in his critique of capitalism, conceived of 'dead labor' as labor-power, the expended energy, that is embodied within a *thing*, whether that thing is a machine, a factory, or even a piece of fruit. For Marx, the term 'dead labor' was used metaphorically, to call attention to the previous activities that went into the making of some*thing*, for the ''product of labor is labor which has been congealed in an object, which has become material'' (Marx, 1988, p. 71). Mitchell (2000, 2003, 2007), however, asks geographers to consider the concept in less-than-metaphorical terms. Thus, in calling attention to the violence that surrounds the production process, Mitchell highlights the exploitative and oppressive working conditions of farmworkers; the dangers of prolonged exposure of pesticides and insecticides; and the dangerous migratory journey to the fields themselves. Indeed, the labor that is embodied in commodities—the living labor that reanimates dead labor—is frequently injured or killed in the labor process. In other words, living laborers, through the transformation of dead labor, may become (quite literally) dead laborers.

Mitchell forces us to think of the dead laborers that lay buried beneath the ground. I acknowledge Mitchell's lead and consider, on the one hand, how mass graves were *produced* by living labor

Fig. 1. Mass grave site at Trapeang Chhouk, Kampong Chhnang Province, Cambodia. Photo by author.

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