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To live and let die: Food, famine, and administrative violence in Democratic Kampuchea, 1975–1979

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ABSTRACT

Between 1975 and 1979 approximately two million people died in the Cambodian genocide. We argue that the mass violence that transpired during this period was a manifestation of the Khmer Rouge's attempt to make life. Through a focus on the production of both violence and vulnerability we direct attention to the contradictory policies and practices forwarded by the Khmer Rouge that were designed to maximize life through the maximization of death. Specifically, we consider the mass starvation that accompanied the genocide as a structure of violence; we forward the argument that the rationing of food constitutes a calculated yet contradictory policy, namely that food rations represent in material form an inner contradiction of fostering life and disallowing life. Subsequently, the policy of forced rations—which imposed a particular space of vulnerability on Cambodia's population—resulted in massive loss of life through starvation and disease that were not the unintended side-effects of poor research, poor planning, or poor implementation on behalf of the Khmer Rouge, but rather were the necessary consequences of a proto-capitalist form of state-building.

Introduction

The Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK; also known as the 'Khmer Rouge') constitutes one of the most violent and inhumane apparatus of state terror in the twentieth-century. Between April 1975 and January 1979 the Khmer Rouge carried out a program of mass violence that is, in many respects, unparalleled in modern history. In just under four years, approximately two million people died from starvation, disease, exhaustion, inadequate medical care, torture, murder, and execution. The total number of deaths translates into one-quarter to one-third of the country's pre-1975 population (Heuveline, 1998; Kiernan, 2003).

What accounts for the systemic and systematic violence that gripped Cambodia? How are we to conceive of the active 'taking' of life and of the 'disallowal' of life of so many people in such a short span of time? Conventional accounts of the Cambodian genocide focus on the destructive practices initiated by the Khmer Rouge: the brutal evacuation of all towns and cities; the forced relocation of people into communes and work-camps; the abolition of currency and private property; and the targeted execution of doctors, teachers, engineers, and multiple other 'classes' of people that did not belong to the planned utopia envisioned by the Khmer Rouge. Most accounts highlight also the rhetoric of the Khmer Rouge—that Democratic Kampuchea, as the country was renamed, was to become an autonomous, self-sufficient state free from foreign domination.

These accounts provide only half the story. Yes, the Khmer Rouge upon assuming power (in fact, even before) embarked upon a massive, destructive policy of eradication. However, what is less appreciated is that the Khmer Rouge intended to *build* an entirely new state and society. And while the Khmer Rouge actively destroyed the existing societal infrastructure—health, education, commerce, religion, and family—they also planned to replace these with their own infrastructure. The Khmer Rouge for example proposed—if not fully implemented—an assemblage of biopolitical practices that addressed the management of marriages, births, and fertility at the level of the population. These practices included, but were not limited to, forced marriages and the allocation of increased food rations for pregnant or nursing women, both to facilitate reproduction. Moreover, a system of 'care centers' for infants, children, the aged, and disabled was proposed. Accordingly, child-care centers were to be established in co-operatives, factories, offices, ministries and even military units; within these centers children would be educated and taught the means necessary to increase production according to the concrete situations in which they resided.

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In short, practices in Cambodia that we now designate as 'genocidal' were in fact practices of state-building and, ironically, life-making. Therein lays the crux of our paper: the mass violence—and death—associated with the CPK leadership was a manifestation of their attempt to *make life*. Such a statement is not to absolve the Khmer Rouge of responsibility; nor is it to diminish the brutality of Khmer Rouge practice. Rather, it is to direct attention to the contradictory policies and practices forwarded by the CPK that were designed to maximize life through the neglect of (selected) lives. Recognition of such contradictions may better enable us to understand the coordinates of the Cambodian genocide; to articulate more precisely the calculated management of life and death that underscored the genocide; and to more effectively argue that famine-related deaths should be prosecuted as crimes against humanity (cf. DeFalco, 2011, 2013a, 2013b).

In this paper we consider mass starvation as a structure *of* violence. Specifically, we forward the argument that the rationing of food, as *intentionally* imposed and administered by the CPK, constitutes a calculated yet contradictory practice—a practice that signifies the overall attitude toward life and death during the genocide. Specifically, the food ration represents, in material form, the inner contradictions of fostering life and disallowing life. It is, in other words, a unity of opposites, for on the one hand it provides nourishment and sustenance while, on the other hand, it acknowledges its own limitations. Achille Mbembe writes of biopower: "To exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power" (2003: 12). As the technology by which death comes to be regulated, the ration is established as a material expression of state sovereignty: it literally makes the living as it makes the dead.

The starvation that marked Democratic Kampuchea, accordingly, was viewed by members of the CPK not as a *famine*—but rather as a technical problem stemming from aberrant causes—including the failure of inept or traitorous low-level cadre. For the CPK elite, there *could be no scarcity of food because the population was producing a surplus*. And while any given individual might endure periods of hunger, these could not be viewed as a condemnation of state-practice, for the state was actively—indeed, aggressively—implementing policies designed to foster life. Indeed, when CPK leaders were confronted with reports of famine, they blamed these problems on 'internal enemies' or from mistakes of local officials in implementing CPK policy (DeFalco, 2011: 147).

This paper is organized into seven sections. We begin by reviewing recent geographic writing on administrative violence and challenge the distinction between killing and letting die. In Sections 2 and 3, we supplement these notions with concepts developed in the literature on famine and vulnerability. We propose that – through administrative violence – vulnerability to mass starvation and disease is actively and intentionally *produced*. In Sections 4 and 5, we explore the organization and consequences of agriculture, trade, and security policies under the Khmer Rouge, drawing comparisons between other historical and contemporary famine events. In Sections 6 and 7 we apply these examples to demonstrate how the CPK's transformation of Cambodia's "space of vulnerability" managed death in the name of managing life. It is this informed and intentional production that makes persuasive the argument for holding CPK policy-makers directly responsible for famine deaths, for it was precisely the design and implementation of such purposeful administrative violence that generated those conditions.

Letting die as administrative violence

Recent years have witnessed an upswing in the geographic writing—and theorizing—of violence (Loyd, 2009, 2012; Springer, 2008, 2009, 2011, 2012; Tyner, 2009, 2012a, 2014a; Tyner & Inwood, 2014). This work has, specifically, sought to deepen our understanding of violence; to critically question not simply the consequences or remembrances of violence, but also the 'act' or 'event' of violence. This is seen most notably in the recent work addressing the philosophical distinction between 'killing' and 'letting die' (cf. Anglin, 1998; Li, 2009)—a distinction that has tremendous bearing on our understanding of famine.

For many bioethicists and philosophers, the act of killing is considered to be morally worse than letting die. Such a presumption hinges on our understanding of agency: to 'kill' is considered an action whereas 'letting die' is perceived as an omission, or lack of action. This moral partition, likewise, is premised on a distinction between 'negative' and 'positive' duties. And while these differ by culture, in general we can identify the existence of duties not to harm others, which require restraint; these are termed negative duties. We also have positive duties whereupon we have duties (some might say, obligations) to help others.

The dichotomy between 'positive' and 'negative' duties, as well as between 'killing' and 'letting die' significantly inform international law and, specifically, the prospect of prosecuting states for human rights abuses. Simply put, international tribunals and war-crime trials focus attention on forms of direct, physical violence (i.e. extrajudicial executions, war-rape, and torture); these are actions for which both an 'individual' may be found guilty and where the intent was specifically to harm others. The failure to provide positive duties, such as adequate medical care or even food, is generally not viewed as a crime against humanity; this holds even if those 'inactions' lead to the death of hundreds of thousands of people.

For Galtung (1969) direct violence occurs when there is an *identifiable* actor who commits an act of violence. Structural violence, conversely, occurs when no such actor is identifiable. Galtung (1969, 170–71) elaborates that "whereas in the first case [direct violence] these consequences can be traced back to concrete persons or actors, in the second case this is *no longer meaningful*. There may not be any person who directly harms another person in the structure. The violence is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently unequal life chances" (emphasis added).

Galtung's conceptualization of structural violence has been influential but, as a whole, remains challenging. Indeed, Gupta (2012, p. 19) allows that structural violence, conceptually, is both necessary and problematic. In part, this consternation arises from Galtung's original focus on outcomes, rather than processes. Gupta (2012, p. 20) elaborates that for Galtung, violence was present when outcomes (or conditions of living) were unequal. Thus, structural violence is found when groups of people are denied access to food, water, and shelter; structural violence is also found whenever groups of people are excluded from particular forms of recognition and representation, including but not limited to citizenship rights, rights before the law, and rights to education (Gupta, 2012, 20).

However, lurking beneath a focus on unequal structures is a more difficult question: What role does 'intentionality' play in structural violence? As we have seen, direct violence is characterized by intentionality of an identifiable actor while structural violence appears as a 'crime without a criminal' (Gupta, 2012, 21). Intentionality, however, is a slippery concept for two reasons. First, to argue, morally, that a failure to act is intentional, one must satisfy three conditions: ability, opportunity, and awareness. Following Green (1980, p. 196), to fail to act involves not performing an action but having the ability to perform the action. Posed as a question, is an individual in a position to prevent a harm (or death) but, through his or her inaction, fails to do so? Second, there is the condition of opportunity. Does any particular individual have the opportunity to