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After the Cataclysm: The Political Economy of Human Rights: Volume II (Chomsky Perspectives)

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2018**7 Highlight(s) | 0 Note(s)**

Yellow highlight | Location: 412

Once again the United States succeeded in preventing a peaceful settlement. In South Vietnam, it stood in opposition to all significant political forces, however anti-Communist, imposing the rule of a military clique that was willing to serve U.S. interests. By January 1965, the United States was compelled to undermine its own puppet, General Khanh; he was attempting to form what Ambassador Taylor called a “dangerous” coalition with the Buddhists, who were not acting “in the interests of the Nation,” as General Westmoreland explained. What is more, Khanh was apparently trying to make peace with the NLF, quite possibly a factor that lay behind the elimination of his predecessors. At that point, the United States, which stood alone in understanding “the interests of the Nation” in South Vietnam, had no alternative but to extend its already substantial military campaign against the rural society of the South, where the overwhelming majority of the population lived. The United States therefore launched a full-scale invasion in a final effort to destroy the organized popular forces in the South. The invasion was accompanied by the bombing of North Vietnam, undertaken to lay some basis for the claim that the United States was “defending the South against external aggression,” and in the hope that the DRV would use its influence to bring the southern rebellion to a halt and permit the United States to attain its goals. This maneuver failed. The DRV responded by sending limited forces to the South, as most U.S. planners had anticipated. Meanwhile, the United States began the systematic bombing of South Vietnam, at three times the level of the more publicized—and more protested—bombing of the North. The war also intensified in Laos, with U.S. bombing from 1964 and military operations by a “clandestine army” of Hmong tribesmen, organized and directed by the CIA to supplement the inept “official”

army trained and armed by the U.S. military. U.S. outposts in northern Laos were guiding the bombing of North Vietnam from Thai bases. By this time Thai and North Vietnamese forces were also engaged, though on a considerably smaller scale. By 1968, the United States was conducting a bombing campaign of extraordinary severity in northern Laos, far removed from the war in South Vietnam. By 1969 the sporadic U.S.-Saigon attacks on Cambodia had escalated to intensive bombardment, and after the coup of March, 1970, which overthrew the Sihanouk government, Cambodia too was plunged into the inferno. U.S.-Saigon military actions began two days after the coup and a full-scale invasion (called a "limited incursion") took place at the end of April—"limited," as it turned out, largely because of the unprecedented demonstration of protest in the United States. This invasion and the subsequent bombing, particularly in 1973, led to vast suffering and destruction throughout the country.

Note:

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Most of the well-publicized information concerning post-war Cambodia derives from reports of refugees—or to be more precise, from accounts by journalists and others of what refugees are alleged to have said. On the basis of such reports, these observers draw conclusions about the scale and character of atrocities committed in Cambodia, conclusions which are then circulated (often modified) in the press or the halls of Congress. For example, Barron-Paul present some examples of what they claim to have heard from refugees and then conclude that the government of Cambodia is bent on genocide, a conclusion which is then presented in various forms by commentators. Similarly Ponchaud cites examples of refugee reports and concludes that the government is engaged in "the assassination of a people," giving estimates of the numbers executed or otherwise victims of centralized government policies. Reviewers and other commentators then inform the public that Ponchaud has shown that the Cambodian government, with its policies of autogenocide, is on a par with the Nazis, perhaps worse. With each link in the chain of transmission, the charges tend to escalate, as we shall see. Evidently, a serious inquiry into the facts

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It is a truism, obvious to anyone who has ever dealt with refugees or

considers the historical record or simply uses common sense, that "the accounts of refugees are indeed to be used with great care."²⁰ It is a truism commonly ignored. For example, the New York Times Pulitzer prize-winning specialist on refugees from Communism interviewed Cambodian

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Note that the observations of this man, a middle-class refugee from Vietnam with the appropriate anti-Communist credentials, do not contradict the stories of brutal atrocities told in profusion by refugees. Rather, they are consistent with the remarks by State Department Cambodia watchers and other specialists on the geographical limitations of the worst atrocity stories, and suggest that there may be a good deal of local variation rather than the coordinated campaign of state-directed genocide that the media and their main sources prefer. But this very fact suffices to consign

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If, indeed, the Cambodian regime was, as Lacouture believes, as monstrous as the Nazis at their worst, then his comment might be comprehensible, though it is worth noting that he has produced no evidence to support this judgment.⁴⁸ But if a more appropriate comparison is, say, to France after liberation, where a minimum of 30-40,000 people were massacred within a few months with far less motive for revenge and under far less rigorous conditions than those left by the U.S. war in Cambodia, then perhaps a rather different judgment is in order.⁴⁹ As we shall see, there is a considerable range of opinion on this score among qualified observers, though the press has favored Lacouture's conclusion, generally ignoring mere questions of fact.

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No doubt Rigaux, like other visitors, was shown what the regime wanted him to see. The picture he presents in his detailed observations should be worth some attention, one might imagine, and in fact might help explain both the apparent commitment of significant parts of the population to the new regime and the horror

and indignation of others at its practices. As he notes, he had no opportunity to assess the veracity of the many stories of massacre and cruel oppression, but again, we note that there is no direct inconsistency between these stories and the quite different impression obtained by visitors in a country that is, by all accounts, highly decentralized and perhaps quite varied from place to place.

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There were many other visitors to Cambodia from the Scandinavian countries, some from Communist groups, some non-Communists from "friendship associations," some journalists. Their reports appeared in the mainstream press and journals in Sweden and Denmark, but have yet to be mentioned in the United States, though the sources are hardly obscure and some of the visitors (e.g., Jan Myrdal) are quite well-known in the United States. We will not review their reports, which are in general quite favorable though often qualified by the observation that while they personally witnessed scenes throughout the country of people engaged in productive work with apparent contentment and enthusiasm (working a 9-hour day, but according to Gunnar Bergstrom, at a slower pace than is typical in Europe), they do not speak Khmer and cannot comment on what they were not shown. These visitors too report no indications of starvation

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