

Chomsky's betrayal of truths



Steven Lukes

"It is the responsibility of intellectuals", Noam Chomsky wrote in 1967, "to speak the truth and to expose lies." His fine essays of those years brilliantly exposed the ways in which liberal intellectuals contributed to what he rightly called the "deceit and distortion surrounding the American invasion of Vietnam".

What, then, is Chomsky doing contributing to deceit and distortion surrounding Pol Pot's regime in Cambodia? Last year he published a book *After the Cataclysm: Postwar Indochina and the Reconstruction of Imperial Ideology* with Edward Herman, in which the record of that horrendous regime is subjected to an extraordinary and perverse scrutiny, the conclusions of which are twofold: that the atrocities and number of killings are most probably greatly exaggerated; and that they are, in any case, "a direct and understandable response to the still more concentrated and extreme savagery of a United States-assault that may in part have been designed to evoke this very response".

Before dealing with Chomsky's conclusions, a word about his focus of concern and method.

His concern, he says, is "US global policy and propaganda, and the filtering and distorting effect of Western ideology," in particular, the role of the "free press" in "the engineering of consent", discrediting socialism and communism by misdescribing the facts and "effacing US responsibility". The "mass media of the West", he thinks, "has discovered Cambodia's travail... precisely because of its ideological serviceability". He claims that "we have not developed or expressed our views here on the nature of the Indochinese regimes", but of course he does and must have such views, since his aim is to show how the nature of these regimes has been distorted and misdescribed.

He does this by following an apparently rigorous but actually ludicrous method: demanding "verifiable evidence", documentary sources, etc., and thus discrediting refugee reports and "material that is subject to no check". He also exultantly attacks observers (such as Francois Ponchaud) for "carelessness with regard to quotes, numbers and sources". Of course, such carelessness is always deplorable, but Chomsky pursues it here with a pedantry that is grotesque, given the circumstances, the meagre results he attains and the consistency and obvious responsibility of the observers in question (on whom he in any case relies when it suits his case).

Indeed, Chomsky in turn protects himself against refutation by the facts, writing:

"When the facts are in, it may turn out that the more extreme condemnations were in fact correct. But even if that turns out to be the case, it will in no way alter the conclusions we have reached on the central question addressed here: how the available facts were selected, modified, or sometimes invented to create a certain image offered to the general population. The answer to this question seems clear, and it is unaffected by whatever may yet be discovered about Cambodia in the future."

What, then, of Chomsky's conclusions? Of course, propaganda has been made out of the Cambodian tragedy: inflated figures, faked

photographs, invented atrocities, and so on. Of course, apologists have obscured or completely eliminated "the United States role in turning Cambodia into a land of massacre, starvation and disease". It is indisputable that the United States bombings made the Cambodian tragedy possible. But what responsible person, let alone intellectual, can doubt that Cambodia between 1975 and 1978 suffered a regime of terror, with mass killings, brutal forced labour, the systematic elimination of cultural life, the abolition of the family, the extraction of confessions, and tortures and atrocities of all kinds? Many reliable observers, journalists and relief-workers concurred in reporting these things, as do refugee reports, which have been repeatedly checked for consistency. Of course, many deaths resulted from starvation and disease, and from Chomsky's favourite cause, "peasant revenge", but the mass graves surrounding purpose-built villages tell their own story, in any case well corroborated, as do the regime's abolition of printing presses, destruction of books, and its order that the population was to wear black. No reasonable person can doubt that the Cambodian experiment was a ghastly exercise in mass terror and forced collectivization, not merely of labour, but of life.

What then are we to think of Chomsky's suggestions that the deaths in Cambodia were "attributable in large measure to peasant revenge, undisciplined military units out of government control, starvation and disease that are direct consequences of the United States war, or other such factors", that "the evacuation of Phnom Penh, widely denounced at the time and since for its undoubted brutality, may actually have saved many lives", that "programmes of vocational training for 12-year-olds are... not generally regarded as an atrocity in a poor peasant society", that "much of the population may well have supported the regime", particularly if "decisions were taken collectively in the cooperatives and even in the army", that "the Khmer Rouge programmes elicited positive response from sectors of the Cambodian peasantry because they dealt with fundamental problems rooted in the feudal past and exacerbated by the imperial system with its final outburst of uncontrolled barbarism?"

There is only one possible thing to think: that Chomsky has become so obsessed by his opposition to the United States' role in Indochina but he has lost all sense of perspective. His argument is a case of massive overkill, discrediting reliable and responsible observers and scholars, and converting the truth that the United States was indirectly responsible into the lie that it was directly so.

But the responsibility of intellectuals is not only a matter of telling the truth and exposing lies. It is also a matter of using language responsibly. Chomsky is, after all, a world authority on the use of language. Consider, however, these examples of language abuse.

First, *inappropriate analogy*, in comparing the Cambodian regime, not to the Nazis but to "France after liberation, where a minimum of 30,000 to 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 United States war in Cambodia". Second, *fudging abstraction*, as in the suggestion that "the worst atrocities have taken place at the hands of a peasant army, recruited and driven out of their devastated villages by United States' bombs and then taking revenge against the urban civilization [sic] that they regarded, not without reason, as a collaborator in their destruction and their long history of oppression". And third, *illicit conjunctions*, as when Chomsky writes that:

"it is an effective tactic to focus on real or invented atrocities committed in underdeveloped ex-colonies that use the phrase 'socialism' in reference to their programmes of mass mobilization under authoritarian state control to carry out industrialization and modernization."

What, pray, are real and invented sentence?

It is sad to see Chomsky writing these things. It is ironic, given the United States' Government's present pursuit of its global role in supporting the seating of Pol Pot at the UN. And it is bizarre, given Chomsky's previous stand for anarchist-libertarian principles. In writing as he does about the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia, Chomsky betrays not only the responsibilities of intellectuals, but himself.

Ralph Miliband
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5 December 1980

Dear Steven,

Many thanks for sending me your THES article and the material from Milton Osborne.

I am extremely unhappy with your article and want to tell you why in detail.

You ask: 'What, then, is Chomsky doing contributing to deceit and distortion surrounding Pol Pot's regimes in Cambodia?'. This is a very grave and damaging accusation, which demands careful and specific evidence of 'deceit and distortion'. There is no such evidence in your article.

You say that Pol Pot's regime is subjected by Chomsky and Herman to 'an extraordinary and perverse scrutiny'. Not so. At no point do they claim that their book constitutes a 'scrutiny', extraordinary, perverse or otherwise of the Pol Pot regime. In fact, your own quotation from them to the effect that 'when the facts are in, it may turn out that the more extreme condemnations were in fact correct'. This clearly indicates that they do not claim to have conducted the 'scrutiny' you suggest. It could also be taken to suggest an honest admission that the facts are not in. Instead, you treat it as an attempt by Chomsky to 'protect himself from refutation by the facts'. This is unwarranted and unworthy. One might as well say that Lukes is trying to protect himself from accusations of this and that by saying (as you do) 'of course, propaganda has been made out of the Cambodian tragedy'. Imputations of this sort are best avoided.

You attack Chomsky's 'focus of concern and method' on grounds which strike me as odd. You say that he follows 'an apparently rigorous but actually ludicrous method', which turns out to be a demand for 'verifiable evidence', 'documentary sources', material that can be checked. What the hell is wrong with that? You say that Chomsky 'exultantly' attacks Ponchaud (why 'exultantly'?) for 'carelessness with regard to quotes, numbers and sources', which you don't dispute and indeed half admit by saying that 'such carelessness is always deplorable', but then go on to attack Chomsky for 'a pedantry that is grotesque', 'given the circumstances, the meagre results he attains' and so on. This is simply bluster. I am afraid (note the use of language, pedantry, grotesque, 'meagre' results) rather than what is here appropriate, namely the fact that Chomsky and Herman's analysis of Ponchaud and other reporting does cast doubt on a great deal that appears in the material analysed.

You yourself speak of 'inflated figures, faked photographs, invented atrocities'; of the fact that 'of course apologists have obscured or completely eliminated' the U.S. role; and so on. You don't seem to me to make nearly enough of this. That is a large part of Chomsky and Herman's case; and it does not involve 'deceit and distortion', but the combating of deceit and distortion under extremely difficult conditions.

As I see it, the real difference between you and Chomsky is that you see the regime itself as having been mainly responsible for deliberate mass terror and mass killing, and he does not. You speak of 'the Cambodian experiment' as a 'ghastly exercise in mass terror and forced collectivisation', and ~~xxxx~~ suggest a kind of extreme extension of Stalinist collectivisation in Russia. My own feeling is that much of what happened in Cambodia between 1975 and 1978 was not the result of the 'experiment' you refer to, simply because there was nothing like the apparatus of terror and the administration of 'collectivisation' that such 'experiments' require. The figure of 3,000,000 people killed by the regime ~~are~~, on this score, absurd, and an exercise in simple invention. The Russians had the apparatus, and so

had the Nazis. The Cambodians did not. There was very little unorganised killing in either Russia or German-occupied territories, or at least not a great deal, and a massive amount of organised killing. The reverse seems to me to have been true in Cambodia. This does not make the matter any better, but it is a different picture from the one now prevalent and peddled by media with suspect motives. On the whole, Chomsky seems to me closer to the truth than you are, with the large caveat that the facts are not in. But for you to treat what he says and what you quote him as saying as 'deceit and distortion' is absolutely wrong. I would myself want to be more categorical than is Chomsky in denouncing the Pol Pot regime, but that has nothing to do with the kind of denunciation of Chomsky and Herman in which you engage, in language so inflated and with so little argument. You seem to me to have been so influenced by the quite horrifying reports about what happened in Cambodia that you are hitting out at people who do not deny that a lot of terrible things did happen, but who want to apply nonetheless canons of evidence which are not in the least 'grotesque'. I don't think this is apologetic and I am truly sorry that you should have thought it necessary to have written as if it was. Chomsky is no sacred cow, and I think his politics are some way from mine. But he is a man of great courage and integrity and it would take a lot more than you provide here to convince me that your strictures on him are merited.

Yours ever
Ralph

Ralph Miliband

P.S. I will be back in London in mid-December and I would like the proofs of my article sent there, please. I don't, after this extreme delay, want the thing to go adrift.



Darling?

Yes my sweet love.

Kiss me again.

Aaah.

Ooooh.

Do you know something my little potted shrimp? This is the loveliest Boxing Day I've ever had.

And me. And me.

I've forgotten all about that silly thesis.

Silly silly thesis.

And you're not thinking about your old lecture notes are you?

A million miles away, my princess. Do you think anyone else in the department is having such a good time as us?

Impossible.

Isn't it wonderful when you feel so close to someone that you're almost one being?

A single body.

A single ego.

But still of course with 'our independence intact.

Absolutely. Both living our own lives alongside each other.

And yet this time last Christmas we were just two people who passed each other in the departmental corridor.

Two names in the prospectus.

Just two members of the General Academic Board.

Not any more.

Never again.

Aaah.

Ooooh.

And you're sure you liked my present?

Loved it. Just what I wanted. Can't wait to see their eyes when I walk in with it on the first day of term. The best briefcase in the faculty.

It's real leather, you know.

I know my sweet.

And with an extra wide gusset for your big fat books.

Is that what they really said? Oh you funny funny shrimp face. And did you like yours?

You know I did. Such lovely books, so clever. That beautiful Fay Weldon and that naughty Annis Nin.

We'll read some more tonight. Perhaps the one about the evil baron. Before the late night film.

Oh yes please. But after the cold champagne.

And the liqueur chocolates. Yummy scrumptious.

My boy. And if you are good shall have the Tia Maria. Such a baby. Such a baby.

A really just a little boy.

Because you are. Come to Mummy for another kiss.

Sir,—Anthony Arblaster took Dr Parkes, UGC chairman, to task for omitting in his speech to the CVCP whether qualified school-leavers will as readily be able to gain admission to higher education and in their subjects of choice (*THES*, December 12). Clearly Dr Parkes's error was to assume these matters to be axiomatic.

From the viewpoint of higher education as a whole, the difficulty is likely to be quite different and could centre on whether enough qualified school-leavers seek higher education. The age participation rate (APR) of those minimally qualified for entry to higher education is at best static and has been so since 1972-73. The APR of the university share has continued to rise, albeit slowly, during this period. The Government has declared support in the universities for a constant home student population in spite of the bulge in 18-year-olds which peaks in 1982-83. For the next three years or so, it will be more difficult for school-leavers to gain university entry but they can overflow into the empty places in other institutions of higher education—they are not lost to the system.

Chomsky and truth

Sir,—Steven Lukes's "Chomsky's Betrayal of Truths" (November 7) is itself a betrayal of truths.

Lukes, in dissecting the argument of Chomsky (in his book *After the Cataclysm: Postwar Indochina and the Reconstruction of Imperial Ideology*) makes the point that in pursuing the case against the mass media Chomsky has employed "a pedantry that is grotesque" and that "his argument is a case of massive overkill".

Lukes believes that the implication of the Chomsky thesis: that the Western media and the United States State Department have exploited and distorted the situation in Indochina in order to serve ideological interests is not as significant as the actual and undisputed fact of the atrocities committed by the communists.

But is Chomsky's purpose merely to relativize the facts of the mass exterminations, or is it to point out—in this second volume—the evidence of the systematic manipulations of the media and the consequent loss of verifiable truths, truths that would show the calculations of the State Department, the corporate elite, and the mass media to be destructive to the evolution of societies who would seek some alternative to the regimes currently propped up by the United States?

By ignoring the first volume of the Chomsky/Herman book, Lukes has attempted to judge the thesis of Chomsky on the particular data he uses in connexion with Indochina. He does not even mention this first volume: *The Washington Connection and Third World Fascism*, and makes it seem that Chomsky had no business quarrelling with the facts presented by the experts and the mass media in regard to Indochina.

If in investigations it is discovered that gross lying has taken place, and that lying seems part of an overall scheme which has as its basis some mechanism of deceit that goes well beyond the present

Mr Arblaster will probably be familiar with the Conference of University Administrators' *Final Report on Forecasting and University Expansion* (1973) which explored the relationships between APR and demographic changes. In a nutshell, between now and 1995 if university entry conditions are unchanged, the university population could decline from the present 300,000 to 250,000. So we lose one student in six—is this to be translated into one department in six: or one university in six? It would be ostrich-like to assume that unit costs will be allowed to climb 20 per cent higher than they need be.

The realistic alternative is "rationalization" which will be traumatic for some. Rationalization is like a road accident—everyone hopes that it will happen to someone else. If the universities do not rationalize themselves, it will surely be imposed and the UGC would be failing in their duty if they did not catalyze the process with urgency so as to pre-empt the wielding of blunt instruments with considerably less sensitivity than was demonstrated by the Atkinson report.

There is another way. If the Government funds the university

issue of Indochina, then is it not reasonable—especially when one has already exposed the devastating fact in a previous volume—to seize upon the pattern of propaganda here—especially in the dissonant reality of real horrors committed by the communists?

No major American journal has reviewed the first volume. The selective criticism of Steven Lukes is itself motivated by something that does damage to Lukes' own perspective, else why does he not address himself to the disturbing conclusion of Chomsky: the impulse behind the distortion of the facts in Indochina is an impulse that ignores all considerations of morality and operates exclusively for economic gain.

It is precisely this kind of cold-blooded manipulation of truth that carries with it the tragedy of Vietnam, the torture chambers of Latin America, the corrupt and brutal military fascist rule that destroys the integrity of Western values and is part of the nemesis we see enacted in Iran today: the consciousness of a Brzezinski confronted by the consciousness of a Khomeini: the ruthlessly realpolitik versus the compulsively mythopoetic.

No, Noam Chomsky has identified and documented the case against the United States: that great lies are being told in order to consolidate a status quo which cruelly deprives millions of people from their natural desire for justice and reform. Steven Lukes has attacked Chomsky in the context of the issue of Indochina and utterly trivialized the moral potency of the Chomsky thesis.

But perhaps this was the intent of Mr Lukes and *The THES*.

And when I read a book I usually take cognizance of the first half of it, especially when I am attempting a summing up of its theme.

Yours sincerely,

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even more. Mr Andrews' comments simply fail to address that issue.
Yours faithfully,
MARK BLAUG,
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Postwar Indochina

Sir--The correspondence prompted by Steven Lukes's comments (THE S, November 7) about a major section of *After the Cataclysm: Postwar Indochina and the Reconstruction of Imperial Ideology* is distinguished by its common quality of category mistake. Professors Chomsky and Herman claim to have set out not "to establish the facts with regard to postwar Indochina," but rather to investigate their refraction through the prism of Western ideology...? Despite this caveat, they do attempt to provide an explanation for the "fearful toll" exacted in Cambodia after April 1975. A constant reiteration of the theme of peasant revenge and undisciplined troops leaves the reader in no doubt whatsoever of the alternative establishment of the facts which they seek to expound. It is this unsubstantiated argument which merits Steven Lukes's criticism that Chomsky has lost all sense of perspective.

I would point out that in the course of their analysis, Chomsky and Herman rely greatly on the writings of Ben Kiernan and Steven Heder, especially to refute refugee accounts of organized terror. Yet, in the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* in 1978, Kiernan maintains: "It is quite clear that I was wrong about an important aspect of Kampuchean communism: the brutal authoritarian trend within the revolutionary movement after 1973 was not simply a grassroots reaction, and expression of popular outrage at the killing and destruction of the countryside by United States bombs, although that helped it along decisively. There can be no doubting that the evidence also points clearly to a systematic use of violence against the population by that chauvinist section of the revolutionary movement that was led by Pol Pot". Moreover, in a paper presented in June 1980, Heder wrote of "The relentless use of terror by the party apparatus as a whole against the population as a whole and by the Pol Pot, Ta Mok/Duch coalition at the Party Center."

Yours faithfully,

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Letters for publication should arrive on Tuesday morning at the latest. They should be as short as possible and should be written on one side of the paper only. The editor reserves the right to cut or amend them if necessary.

The truth about Indochina

Noam Chomsky (right)
replies to charges by
Steven Lukes (left)



In *THES* (November 7), Steven Lukes alleged that I am "contributing to deceit and distortion surrounding Pol Pot's regime," referring to a chapter in my book with E. S. Herman, *The Political Economy of Human Rights* (1979). He then wrote to me, requesting comments. I sent him a point-by-point analysis, showing that the "quotes" he gave in support of his claims were, without exception, fabrications or seriously distorted, and that nothing remained of his argument when these and other errors were eliminated. Two months have passed with no response. A letter by Michael Leifer (*THES*, January 23) adds new falsifications and prompts me to comment publicly, though I am reluctant for two reasons: it is Lukes's responsibility, not mine, to correct his false statements; space is unavailable to demonstrate the most significant point, namely, the remarkable consistency of misrepresentation.

Here is one example. Lukes describes our "ludicrous method: demanding 'verifiable evidence', documentary sources, etc., and thus discrediting refugee reports and 'material that is subject to no check'." The phrases he quotes are lifted from the following sentence: "We stress again that it is the verifiable evidence, of however minor a nature it may be, that determines how much faith a rational person will place in material that is subject to no check." Our statement is a truism: to evaluate unverifiable reports, one must determine the credibility of the reporter where his account is verifiable. This truism Lukes certainly accepts. Thus, I do not doubt that he would discount reports of United States germ warfare in Korea, because the sources lack credibility when subject to verification elsewhere. Using the device of "quotation" in this manner, one could prove anything.

Furthermore, we explicitly rejected the position Lukes attributes to us. Our chapter begins with the statement that "in the case of Cambodia, there is no difficulty in documenting major atrocities and oppression, primarily from the reports of refugees." We warned against the very falsification in which Lukes engages: "People who have expressed scepticism about the press barrage are commonly accused of refusing to believe the accounts of miserable refugees, a line that is much easier to peddle than the truth: that they are primarily raising questions about the credibility of those who report—and perhaps exploit—the suffering of the refugees and what they are alleged to have said." We gave voluminous evidence to demonstrate the lack of credibility of sources on which the media uncritically relied, also citing examples of quite credible reports of atrocities. We raised virtually no questions about refugee testimony; in fact, we criticized the media for failing to take account of such testimony, citing many examples. We never demanded "documentary sources", but rather reviewed those that have been presented, showing that in many crucial cases they were seriously misrepresented or fabricated, as often later quietly conceded.

This is only one example, but a typical one. Let us now consider equally gross errors of reasoning. Lukes correctly quotes us on our actual topic: United States global policy and propaganda, not "the nature of the Indochinese regimes", on which "we have not developed or expressed our views here". He then writes: "but of course he does and must have such views. Since his aim is to show how the nature of these regimes has been distorted and misdescribed." He then proceeds on the assumption that we are doing what we explicitly deny: giving our views concerning the Pol Pot regime.

The error is transparent. Our task was to compare the evidence available with the picture that reached the public, and we demonstrated that there was a systematic bias, not only with regard to Cambodia. This analysis yields no direct conclusions about the actual facts, but only about the ways in which available evidence is used. We made this point explicitly, and repeatedly, so that there could be no confusion. Lukes even cites one such passage: "When the facts are in, it may turn out that the more extreme condemnations were in fact correct. But even if that turns out to be the case, it will in no way alter the conclusions we have reached on the central question addressed here: how the available facts were selected, modified, or sometimes invented to create a certain image offered to the general population." Lukes writes that with this remark, Chomsky "protects himself against refutation by the facts". Note the ingenious technique. Lukes begins by fabricating a position that he attributes to me. Then he cites our explicit rejection of his fabrication, concluding that by rejecting it, we protect ourselves against the facts. I heartily recommend this device to any aspiring polemicist.

It is, of course, true that we "had views", though we made no effort to develop them, our topic being a different and quite legitimate one. Our highly tentative conclusions were similar to those of United States intelligence analysts whom we cited, and of François Ponchaud, whom Lukes praises, though we refrained from endorsing his comments on the alleged achievements of the regime, or his more careless charges (which he removed from the American edition of his book, while leaving them in the simultaneous world edition and later translations, to which some remarkable lies were added, as we showed).

Lukes presents what he calls our "two-fold" conclusions: "that the atrocities and number of killings are most probably greatly exaggerated; and that they are, in any case, 'a direct and understandable response' to the US assault. Let us consider these claims.

On the scale of atrocities, we draw no firm conclusions except to say that the record was "substantial and often gruesome." We cited estimates ranging from "possibly thousands" killed (Nayan Chanda, the highly regarded correspondent of the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, which estimated the population at 8,200,000 as our book went to press) to 2,000,000 killed (Jean Lacouture at about the same time as Chanda), including US intelligence estimates ranging from thousands to hundreds of thousands killed, numbers also offered by Lacouture when he retracted his 2,000,000 figure. As noted above, we stated that the higher figures might prove to be correct. We then showed that the higher the estimates, the greater the publicity they tended to receive, even after they were withdrawn as fabrications.

Turning to our second "conclusion", note that Lukes again seriously distorts what we wrote. The source is our discussion of a 1971 study by Charles Meyer on the roots of peasant violence. We comment that "If a serious study of the impact of Western imperialism on Cambodian peasant life is someday undertaken, it may well be discovered that the violence lurking behind the Khmer smile... is not a reflection of obscure traits in peasant culture and psychology, but is the direct and understandable response to the violence of the imperial system, and that its current manifestations are a no less direct and understandable response" to the United States assault. Our actual statement is highly qualified,

and is a more muted version of conclusions of Cambodia specialists. Thus, in a book published at the same time as ours (*Before Kampuchea*, 1979), Milton Osborne discusses the grim conditions of life of the Khmer peasantry, concluding that "any attempt to understand rural revolution in Cambodia" that did not take them into account would be "dishonest and misleading", and that the terror was in large part "surely a reaction to the terrible bombing of Communist-held regions that went on until August 1973." We cite David Chandler ("Paying off old scores or imaginary ones played a part" in the killings, "but to a large extent, I think, American actions are to blame") and many others to the same effect, including refugees; and including Ponchaud, Lukes's favourite, who writes that peasants who suffered terrible atrocities in 1968 "were firmly resolved to pay back a hundredfold the evil that had been done to them." Recall that Lukes bitterly condemns us for raising the possibility that "peasant revenge" may be one factor, alongside of many others, in accounting for post-war deaths and killings.

Turning to Leifer, he repeats Lukes's error of reasoning cited above and claims that our "constant reiteration of the theme of peasant revenge and undisciplined troops leaves the reader in no doubt whatsoever of the alternative establishment of the facts which they seek to expound." Leifer reads very carefully. What we "constantly reiterated" was that these factors would be (and are) examined, in serious work, though regularly ignored in the propaganda we reviewed.

Leifer claims further that we "rely greatly on the writings of Ben Kiernan and Steven Heder, especially to refute refugee accounts of organized terror." Yet... in 1978 "Kiernan wrote that the 'brutal authoritarian trend' after 1973 was attributable in part to the Pol Pot faction, 'not simply a grass roots reaction, and expression of popular outrage at the killing and destruction of the countryside by United States bombs, although that helped it along decisively.' And Heder wrote in the same vein in July 1980. Now to the facts. First, Leifer conveniently predates Kiernan's article, which appeared in December 1979, well after our book was published. In fact, the research Kiernan discusses was begun as our book went to press, as Leifer surely knows. We could hardly have referred to this article, or to Heder's still later one. Secondly, we never referred to Heder "to refute refugee accounts" on any topic.

Third, we nowhere attempted "to refute refugee accounts of organized terror"; rather, we discussed flimsy and sometimes fabricated documentation provided by commentators, noting that crucial questions remained open as we wrote in 1978. Finally, note that Kiernan's point is perfectly consistent with our tentative suggestion that "popular outrage" may have been one crucial factor, regularly ignored. All of this is not untypical of Leifer's way with facts, as documented in the chapter he misrepresents.

Our two volumes show in detail the ways in which intellectuals often tend to provide services for state propaganda. We did not expect this to be a welcome conclusion. It is of some interest to note the intellectual level of the response, as well as the consistent failure even to consider the most significant examples we discussed: namely, apologists for ongoing violence for which one's own state bears direct responsibility.

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Suspending Chomsky's disbeliefs



Steven Lukes

In the *THES* (November 7) I accused Noam Chomsky of "contributing to deceit and distortion surrounding Pol Pot's regime" in his book with E.S. Herman, *After the Cataclysm* (1979). He asserts (*THES*, March 6) that my case is based on "fabrications" and "gross errors of reasoning". Let us see.

Chomsky claims that Herman and he were exclusively concerned with demonstrating the "systematic bias" in the Western media and that they did not give their "views concerning the Pol Pot regime". But this is untrue, as any reader of the book can attest. It advanced a clear thesis about what it was plausible to believe had happened in Pol Pot's Cambodia. That thesis goes well beyond the self evident truths that the US bombing was one major precondition for what occurred and that "peasant revenge" may be one factor, alongside of many others, in accounting for postwar deaths and killings. It asserts that Pol Pot's regime was "simply forcing the urban population to the countryside where they were compelled to live the lives of poor peasants, now organized in a decentralized system of communes", that it enjoyed widespread peasant support, and that "the deaths in Cambodia were not the result of systematic slaughter and starvation organized by the state but rather attributable in large measure to peasant revenge, undisciplined military units out of government control, starvation and disease that are direct consequences of the US war, or other such factors". This is not just my reading of their books. A reviewer highly sympathetic to them and sharply critical of me (in *Kampuchea Bulletin*, Jan/Feb 1981) takes them to have argued "that the available evidence suggests that the majority of the killings were not centrally ordered and were most likely personal and unofficial settling of accounts by peasants".

Chomsky and Herman contrasted this thesis with that "to which the propaganda machine is committed: that the Khmer Rouge leadership was committed to systematic massacre and starvation of the population it held in its grip", complaining that it "became virtually a matter of dogma in the West that the regime was the very incarnation of evil with no redeeming qualities". Their thesis, in short, was the basis on which they made their case for systematic *bias* in the media, (engaged in "engineering consent to the priorities and structures of contemporary state capitalism"). To establish it they attacked the credibility of those recording refugee testimony that refuted it.

They wrote: "Most of the well publicized information concerning postwar 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 auto-genocide, is on a par with the Nazis, perhaps worse"

But they completely fail to discredit the evidence these authors have amassed. William Shawcross has written that the interviews conducted by Paul (of Barron Paul) "seemed carefully done. Paul recorded a great many horror stories: about the forced march from Phnom Penh; the appalling rigours of life in the new work camps; the destruction of all traditional social relationships, including the family; the use of murder, and the threat of murder, as a means of control". He considers these stories have a consistency that, even allowing for the natural tendencies of refugees to exaggerate, confirms their basic truth. Father Francois Ponchaud, the author of *Cambodge Année Zéro*, and probably the man who has made the most thorough study of the refugees from democratic Kampuchea, agrees with him. So do I.

Chomsky chose (and still chooses) to discount much of this evidence, arguing that "the apparent uniformity of refugee testimony is in part at least an artefact reflecting media bias". To which the only appropriate response is Ponchaud's: "... it is surprising to see that 'experts' who have spoken to few if any of the Khmer refugees should reject their very significant place in any study of modern Cambodia. These experts would rather base their arguments on reasoning; if something seems impossible to their personal logic, then it doesn't exist."

What then of the sources on which Chomsky does rely? Chomsky and Herman clearly endorsed Ben Kiernan's questioning "the assumption that there was central direction for atrocities" and that they extended throughout the country. But Kiernan now writes "I was late in realizing the extent of the tragedy in Kampuchea after 1975 and Pol Pot's responsibility for it" and that there is "a left wing argument - still held, apparently by Noam Chomsky - which suggests that, although Pol Pot made numerous brutal errors, the assumption of something especially outlandish about his regime is a chimera bred up by the Western (and Vietnamese) news media". Michael Leifer (*THES*, January 28) has quoted the clear acknowledgements by Kiernan and Stephen Heder (on whom Chomsky also relied) of the Pol Pot regime's "systematic use of violence" and "relentless use of terror". Chomsky's only reaction is to observe that these statements postdate his book.

In his *THES* reply, Chomsky also cites "Nayan Chanda, the highly regarded correspondent of the *Far Eastern Economic Review*" as giving a low estimate of the number of atrocities. But Chanda has recently written of "this land which Pol Pot's killer squads turned into a country of orphans, widows and mass graves", where "each village seems to have its local Auschwitz" and ("the overriding emotion of the Khmers ... is a fear that the brutal Pol Pot regime will return"). He writes that under Pol Pot, "the killing seems to have been part of an overall genocidal policy, but often to have been mindless slaughter by a regime gone mad".

Chomsky also cites Milton Osborne to support his thesis about the effects of US bombing. But Osborne has recently written that the numbers (in his sample) killed by order of the authorities "were staggering and observes: "What happened in Kampuchea went so far beyond the paying off of old scores that an observer ends by reaching an impasse in searching for any overall explanation for such a descent into savagery." Part of the explanation, he suggest, lies in "an absolute determination on the part of the Khmer Rouge leadership to erase the past".

The facts are coming in, and "the more extreme condemnations" are being proved correct. But Chomsky claimed and claims that this should "in no way alter the conclusions we have reached". His argument, presumably, is that it was plausible to disbelieve what has now turned out to be true. But what is it *now* plausible to think about Pol Pot's Cambodia? The writers cited above, on whom Chomsky has relied, are in no doubt. Is Chomsky?

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7th May, 1981.

Dr. Steven Lukes,
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Oxford, OX1 3BJ.

Dear Steven,

Thank you for sending the file of your controversy with Noam Chomsky and its peripheral results. I really do strongly agree with Noam Chomsky, and I think that your original attack was grossly unfair while your later justification was quite unworthy of you. You consistently ignore the stated intentions of the authors of THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF HUMAN RIGHTS, and your polemic actually endorses Leifer's astonishing complaint that Chomsky and Herman did not observe the contents of books that were published after theirs had already gone to press.

In short, you do not come out of any of this very well, and it is remarkably honest (or perhaps a bit ingenuous) of you to have felt that the exchange was worth circulating.

It all makes me very sad...

Yours,



Ken Coates

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The dispute about atrocities in Kampuchea

Sir, — In our study of US foreign policy and ideology (*Political Economy of Human Rights*, 1979), E.S. Herman and I distinguished two types of bloodbath: "benign or constructive bloodbaths", which are satisfactory to US interests, and "nefarious bloodbaths", committed by official enemies. In a series of case studies, we showed that the former are typically treated with silence, denial or apologetics, while the latter are seized upon for propaganda purposes, often with reliance on evidence that is dubious or simply fabricated. Atrocities that we could mitigate or terminate are ignored or denied (eg, the US-supported massacres in Timor), while those beyond our reach elicit great outpourings of humanitarian sentiment and outrage (eg, Pol Pot massacres). While there are exceptions, this tendency is striking and plays a significant role in creating an ideological climate supportive of continuing atrocities.

As one example in our book, we dealt with Khmer Rouge atrocities (volume II, chapter 7), showing that the reaction fits the general pattern quite well. Since these atrocities could be attributed to an official enemy and there was little that could be done about them, there was massive denunciation, consistent fabrication of evidence, obliteration of past history (including the US role), refusal to evaluate the credibility of those transmitting evidence (as we would do routinely in the case, say, of germ warfare charges against the US in Korea), and selection of the most extreme condemnations from the range of available evidence. We also described the ludicrous pretence that a great debate was raging over Khmer Rouge atrocities, with the courageous defenders of human rights compelled to combat powerful forces offering apologetics for Pol Pot. Since real examples were notably lacking, examples were fabricated.

We began our chapter on Cambodia by pointing out that "there is no difficulty in documenting major atrocities and oppression, primarily from the reports of refugees" and that "the record of atrocities in Cambodia is substantial and often gruesome," and noting finally that "When the facts are in, it may turn out that the more extreme condemnations were in fact correct." Since we were aware that our critical analysis of the propaganda barrage might be misinterpreted by careless or unscrupulous readers, we emphasized repeatedly the obvious point that exposure of propaganda implies nothing about the reality that is being exploited. Thus, after noting that the more extreme condemnations might prove correct, we added that that would "in no way alter the conclusions we have reached on the central question addressed here: how the available facts were selected, modified, or sometimes invented to create a certain image offered to the general population."

In *The THES* (November 7, 1980), Steven Lukes claimed that I was contributing to "deceit and distortion" by

engaging in apologetics for the Khmer Rouge. In response (March 6), I reviewed examples of his evidence, showing that it was a mélange of "deceit and distortion". Space restrictions prevented a complete review, but as I noted, I had sent Lukes a point-by-point demonstration (December 7) that the "quotes" he used as evidence were in each case fabricated or seriously distorted, exactly in the manner of those I reviewed in print. In a second try (*THES* March 27), Lukes silently abandons all the "evidence" I reviewed in print, tacitly conceding its true character, and offers further examples, no less specious.

Lukes begins by stating that I claimed that we were "exclusively concerned with demonstrating the 'systematic bias' in the Western media and that [we] did not give [our] views concerning the Pol Pot regime". What I wrote was that our primary concern was the propaganda system, but that we also indicated our "highly tentative conclusions" about the facts, which were "similar to those of US intelligence analysts whom we cited, and of François Ponchaud", in the sanitized American edition of his book.

Lukes then presents his new "evidence". He cites our description of how the Vietnamese and Cambodians faced the problems left at the war's end. We wrote that in contrast to the Vietnamese, "the victims in Cambodia undertook drastic and often brutal measures to accomplish this task [of returning the population from the urban concentrations to which they had been driven by US bombardment], simply forcing the urban population to the countryside where they were compelled to live the lives of poor peasants. . . ." measures that carried a "heavy cost". How does this condemnation of the Khmer Rouge for their "brutal measures" become an exculpation of them? A little clever editing suffices. Omitting the context, Lukes writes that our "thesis. . . asserts that Pol Pot's regime was 'simply forcing the urban population to the countryside. . .'" (etc as we wrote); nothing more. (as this we wrote). That we denied Pol Pot atrocities.

Lukes proceeds to state that our thesis asserts that "the deaths in Cambodia were not the result of systematic slaughter and starvation organized by the state but rather attributable in large measure to peasant revenge, undisciplined military units out of government control, starvation and disease that are direct consequences of the US war, or other such factors" (this, a quote from our book). Now to the facts. The context is a discussion of Senator McGovern's call for military intervention on the grounds that 2 million people or more were "systematically slaughtered or starved by their own rulers". We noted that he would presumably not have made this recommendation (which was at once condemned by US Cambodia specialists) if the numbers killed were less, say, by a factor of 100 (referring to Jean Lacouture's position that a factor of 100 or 1000 is a relatively unimportant mat-

ter), or "if the deaths in Cambodia were not the result of . . . systematic slaughter and starvation". We did not "assert" that the latter possibility was true, as is quite explicit and subject to no misunderstanding; rather, we concluded that "facts do matter."

This particular fabrication is quite revealing. It also appears in Luke's first article. While space prevented me from responding in full in print, including this case, in my letter to him of December 7 I specifically pointed out that in this case too he had grossly misrepresented what we wrote. In repeating the same fabrication, Lukes reveals his true commitments with perfect clarity.

Lukes states that we "fail to discredit the evidence" of refugees presented by Barron-Paul, Ponchaud, etc. Nor did we try, as we made explicit. Rather, we showed that Barron-Paul are totally unreliable when subject to verification and that Ponchaud's book, while "serious and worth reading" (specifically, with regard to the atrocities in Cambodia, which Ponchaud graphically records from the testimony of refugees), is nevertheless deeply flawed, for reasons we document. We also noted the significant fact that work of this nature (particularly, Barron-Paul) would be dismissed out of hand, given what we documented, if devoted to an exposure of Western crimes.

Lukes cites our comment that "the apparent uniformity of refugee testimony is in part at least an artefact reflecting media bias", failing to add that we demonstrated this by extensive citation of refugee reports and scholarly studies (including Ponchaud's reports, when one attends to their content).

The remainder of Lukes's effort consists of quotes from others, some true, some false, all irrelevant to our chapter or to what I wrote, along with a reiteration of Leifer's false statement to which I have already responded, that we "relied" on Kiernan and Heder; a falsehood does not become true by reiteration. He then states that "The facts are coming in, and 'the more extreme condemnations' are being proved correct. But Chomsky claimed and claims that this should 'in no way alter the conclusions we have reached'". He interprets this statement as meaning that "it was plausible to disbelieve what has now turned out to be true". But we meant what we wrote, not what he wishes we had written: our conclusions had to do with the way the evidence available was used, and these conclusions stand even if the more extreme condemnations were to prove true, exactly as we explained in the quote given above. Suppose, in fact, that the evidence now coming in did support the more extreme condemnations. Then my conclusion would be that we were correct in writing that "it may turn out that the more extreme condemnations are in fact correct". Lukes's increasingly desperate effort to misunderstand the trivial point we emphasized is again quite revealing.

It would be quite easy to cite reports

concerning the Khmer Rouge that are either positive, or that deny familiar claims about the scale of atrocities: eg, Ponchaud, who wrote of the "genuine egalitarian revolution" in Cambodia, where there is a new "spirit of responsibility and 'inventiveness'" that "represents a revolution in the traditional mentality" of the new pride shown by men and women engaged in constructive work; or the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, which estimated the population at 8.2 million (higher than the 1975 estimate) in January 1979, when our book went to press; or the CIA, which estimated Pol Pot killings at 50-100,000 in its 1980 demography study; or relief agencies that estimate the current population (after the 1979 famine) at 6-6.5 million, in contrast to the familiar claim that Pol Pot reduced the population to 4 million. It is again revealing that Lukes avoids real cases and concocts quotes to try to support his claim that we offered apologetics for Pol Pot.

Lukes asks finally what I think we should now believe about Pol Pot's Cambodia. I would be glad to discuss this with a person who accepted the basic ground rules of rational and honest discussion. But plainly there is no reason for discussing this matter with Steven Lukes, as he has amply demonstrated.

Sincerely yours,

NOAM CHOMSKY

Department of linguistics and Philosophy
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Cambridge, Mass.

Sir, — I refer to the dispute between Steven Lukes, Noam Chomsky et al over the nature of Chomsky's writings on Kampuchea.

Chomsky's position has been disastrous ever since the Khmer Rouge victory in 1975. By continually concentrating on mistakes which journalists and writers made and on the way in which western governments exploited the stories out of Kampuchea, he deflected attention from the far more important issue — whether or not gross abuses of human rights were being committed there.

I assume, given his intellect, that had Chomsky actually gone to talk to Kampuchean refugees in Thailand he would have realized that a terrible crime was indeed being committed. His political influence is such that he could have played an important part in mobilizing opinion against the Khmer Rouge. Had world opinion, left as well as right, been so mobilized (as happened, for example, in the case of Chile after 1973) then much greater pressure could have been brought to bear — at least upon the Khmer Rouge's principal sponsor in Peking.

Instead Chomsky's well-known views helped lead many people throughout the world into the illusion that the horror stories about the Khmer Rouge were either planted by the CIA, fabricated by journalists or both. That is a sorry role. Steven Lukes is absolutely right to criticise him.

Yours faithfully,

WILLIAM SHAWCROSS

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