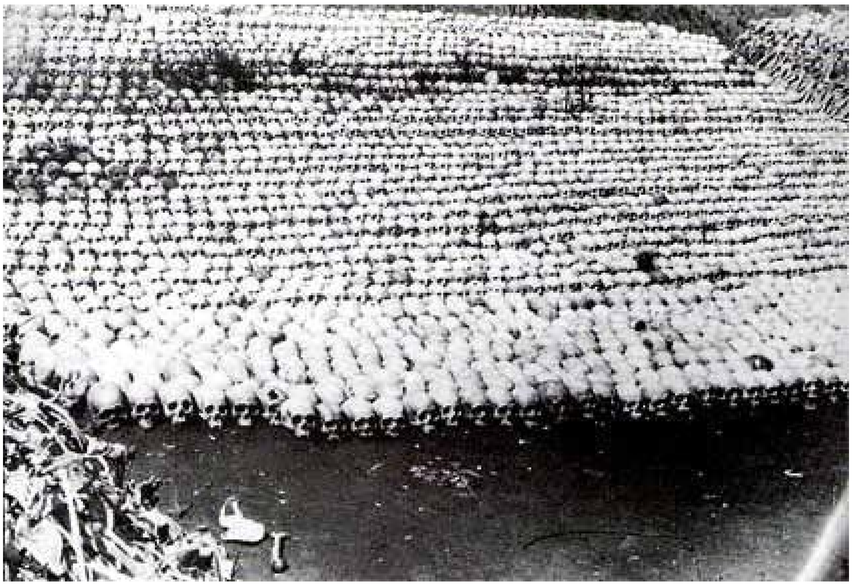
“If we have rice, we can have everything”: a critique of Khmer Rouge ideology and practice



Junge Linke on the Khmer Rouge's reign of terror in Cambodia, and its origins.

1. The Khmer Rouge have become synonymous with the terror of ‘communism’. Regardless of the context in which someone today makes the case for a different society, Pol Pot and his alleged ‘stone-age communism’ is always invoked as a counter-‘argument’, along with the KGB and the Berlin Wall, Stalin and the Gulag, all of which supposedly show what happens if people attempt to change society radically. ‘Democratic Kampuchea’[1] seems to be made for this purpose: a group of left-wing students in Paris encounter what passes at the time for Marxism; they later join the Communist Party, return to their home country, go underground after some attempts at political reforms, come to power through a guerilla army, and then set up a regime of terror. All city-dwellers are driven out of town to the country, first money then private property is abolished; the population is obliged duty to dress uniformly and to build up ‘people’s communes’ to live, work and eat in common. Bourgeois common sense has always pictured communism like this, hence the outrage is great and there is little interest in finding out why the Khmer Rouge did what they did.

2. To avoid any misunderstanding: there is no doubt about the fact that the Communist Party of Kampuchea killed millions of people through shootings and mass executions with pick axe and baton, through torture and the famines they brought about. It is clear as well that the Khmer Rouge forcibly imposed life in communes which has nothing to do with a ‘free association of free producers’, but closely resembles a work camp with uniform clothing, malnutrition, and everyone spying on and coercing everyone else. It is just about the opposite of what you would want for your own future.

3. Therefore it is of more than academic interest to explain why the Khmer Rouge established such a regime. To do this, it is necessary to examine factually the conditions under which Pol Pot and his henchmen acted, what their aims and means, their self-understanding and fears were, who their real or imaginary opponents and allies were. A few problems arise with this. The Khmer Rouge only left a few written documents; much of the available information only exists in the memory of refugees or comes from radio reports wiretapped and translated by the US secret service, and from a few documents translated from Khmer into French, sometimes from French into English, and in the worst cases into German afterwards. They were translated by avowed opponents of the Khmer Rouge, who mostly had completely wrong theories about the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK), and who read and translated the documents from this standpoint. The Vietnamese and Chinese archives are not accessible either; allies and opponents remain taciturn – and they certainly know why. In subsequent court proceedings Khmer Rouge cadres have simply lied ("all were Vietnamese agents"), and their testimony is probably influenced by their interest in acquittal or lenient sentencing. This fundamental and critical assessment of sources means some caution is needed with regard to the exact wording, and that biased readings as well as mistakes and inaccuracies in the translations must be taken into consideration as possible origins of contradictions.

4. For a better understanding of the Khmer Rouge's 1975 victory, a short synopsis of Cambodian history may be helpful. After the Second World War Marxist-Leninist guerilla troops inflicted crushing defeats on the French colonial power. Together with Vietnam and Laos, Cambodia – under a king installed by the French – became independent. King Sihanouk determined Cambodian politics from 1953 to 1970, including a brief period when he renounced the throne. His politics were referred to as 'Buddhist Socialism', and this link between the idea of some kind of communal economy and a religious ideal based on abstinence and frugality already hints at its character: this 'people's socialism'2 had nothing to do with the people's well-being or even partial fulfilment of their needs. More than 90 per cent of the population worked in agriculture, which, aside from a tribute portion reserved for the king was focused on subsistence. Living conditions were meagre, with bad harvests frequently leading to famine. Artificial fertilizers hardly existed, technical devices were rarely applied. Industrial production was mainly pushed by foreign aid and was oriented towards exports; foreign trade was marginal and under state control, the banks were completely in the hands of the state. Foreign policy was oriented towards friendly relations with France, Japan, the USSR and China and sought to profit from the Cold War and the Sino-Soviet disputes, in order to achieve as much independence as possible by remaining neutral. The Sihanouk regime even tried to keep out of the Vietnam War, but it did tolerate that the communist Vietcong crossed Cambodian territory to supply their comrades in South Vietnam.

5. The Khmer Rouge cadres often were students who had been sent to university in Paris by the Sihanouk regime in the 1950s and who came into contact with the Communist Party there – not quite the regime's intention. Just like the few remaining cadres of the Communist Party of Indochina, these students were above all fervent patriots, but quite dissatisfied with their nation's social, economic and political conditions and dependencies. They differed from ordinary patriots in that they had come into contact with 'Marxism'. For most of them, this meant that history was the history of class struggles, that the capitalists – evil! – must objectively meet their end, and the workers – good! – would take over the whole thing sooner or later through the Communist Party. The subsequent Khmer Rouge – and many other intellectuals from recently or soon-to-be independent countries – do not seem to have learned more from Marx's work than the hint that classes and class struggles existed in their countries as well. But even with this not particularly deep insight they could have gotten somewhere – for example they could have assumed, following Rosa Luxemburg, that nationalism was only "an expression of the aspiring indigenous bourgeoisie aiming at their own exploitation of the country for their own profit"[2] Instead, the young dissatisfied nationalists did not even calm themselves down with Lenin's thesis that every anti-imperialism was objectively and ultimately progressive because it weakened the system as a whole.[3] In exact opposition to Lenin's instrumental assessment (ideology of national liberation is good for socialism), they discovered in socialism the fulfilment of all the true patriots' hopes, and set out to find out whether their home country's social classes might be useful for the nation's prosperity, or if those classes would rather do business with evil capitalist states. As radical idealists of their national state, they were ready at any time to regard every 'true patriot' as their ally; hence it is no surprise that at the beginning of the 60s three communists briefly became royal ministers. This might have worked out, not just because the Khmer Rouge took pride in the old Khmer Culture of Angkor Wat in a manner quite alien to class struggle, but also because they agreed with the Sihanouk regime that foreign countries were exploiting Cambodia, and that a great deal of national independence would be good. Everything bad and evil in Cambodia's history had come from outside, and even neighbouring Vietnam and Thailand had tried to enslave the great Khmer people in the distant past[4] . Nonetheless the alliance did not work out. Those who discover different class interests within the people's national unity, or even suspect that the underclasses have some reason to oppose the insults delivered from above, are suspect in the eyes of the true patriot, appearing not as 'patriots' at all but as 'insurgents'. Consequently the Cambodian communists were persecuted in the early and mid-1960s, with their cadres and alleged followers tortured and murdered. The CPK had to withdraw to the very poor mountain regions far from Pnomh Penh. They could not set their hopes on help from their Soviet, Chinese or Vietnamese comrades, all of whom were quite grateful to Sihanouk for not stabbing their backs in the Vietnam War and did not want to offend him by supporting a communist guerilla group against him. This strengthened the CPK's conviction that nothing good could be expected from foreign countries, no matter whether they were capitalist or socialist. The people recruited by the CPK in this region were usually desperate, angry and undernourished, and generally had nothing much to lose.[5]

6. When the US decided to bombard Cambodian territory as well – one of the Nixon administration's many secret operations – the Sihanouk regime broke off all relations with the US and intensified the persecution of the Khmer Rouge, who were becoming increasingly popular after long years of irrelevance. Some right-wing military men who were worried about a communist takeover did not regard the regime strategy as coherent, and staged a coup d'état in 1970, while the King was on a state visit to the USSR. All of a sudden, Cambodia had become a republic under the leadership of General Lon Nol. This 'republican' regime collaborated closely with the US, allowing the bombardment of Cambodian territory and even asking for military help in fighting the communist guerillas. The guerillas' support and success grew with the increasing ruthlessness of the war against the population and the large number of deaths caused by US bombing (between 200,000 and 700,000: the number can no longer be verified[6] In this situation King Sihanouk was persuaded by China to take over the leadership of 'Democratic Kampuchea', with the Khmer Rouge as its main pillar. The equally corrupt, inefficient and brutal regime of Lon Nol had no chance against this strange coalition, especially as the US decided in the mid-1970s that it no longer needed to demonstrate its power in Indochina, leading it to abandon the South Vietnamese and Cambodian regimes. In Vietnam this led to the victory of the Communist Party. In Cambodia the victorious Khmer Rouge paraded into Pnomh Penh on April 18, 1975.

7. The first official act of the new rulers – initially calling themselves 'Angkar' (meaning something like 'organisation') – was to announce to all inhabitants via loudspeaker that they had 48 hours to clear Pnomh Penh. The capital's population had grown from 600.000 to two million during the war.[7] , ncluding many refugees, injured and maimed people. Now the new rulers told the inhabitants that bombardment by the US Air Force was imminent, and that the evacuation would only last a week[8] From kindergarten to intensive care unit, all townspeople

– in other towns it was about the same – had to set off on foot and were distributed to the rural communities. Insofar, that is, as they survived the marches lasting days or weeks, during which they had little food and were exposed to beatings, rapes and executions. Pol Pot claimed in 1978 that there had been no clear plan: the evacuation of the towns had arisen from the situation. This is unlikely, because the whole operation was meticulously prepared, at least with regard to the eviction of the population, and the Khmer Rouge had proceeded similarly in towns they had previously conquered. Pol Pot has cited the economic necessities of feeding the population and using it in production as a reason for the eviction. But according to what is known today, this was a pretext.[9] The second aspect he mentions is the danger of a revolt inspired by US imperialism.[10] Ieng Sary, one of the Khmer Rouge's leading representatives, said the towns had been a danger to the revolutionary troops' fighting strength because of money, alcohol and prostitution.[11] A further gloomy picture of the whole operation is drawn by discussion minutes from the time before the takeover, if these are authentic. "The question of urban and rural population as opposites does not exist, because all towns are of foreign origin, inhabited by foreigners [...] so the townspeople have emerged from the miscegenation with these foreigners; they are not of pure Khmer origin and can therefore be eliminated without any political or psychological difficulties."[12] Whether or not the source is real – this matches the Khmer Rouge's actual approach.

8. The brutal relocation of the urban population by the Khmer Rouge is often interpreted as an attempt to build 'peasant communism'[13] 'an agrarian communist utopia'[14] or 'stone-age communism'[15] or as the obsessive romantic illusion of 'turning back the clock to something pure and authentic'[16] . The often-quoted slogan "If we have rice, we can have everything"[17] seems to mean exactly this: a narrow-minded limitation to agricultural production, and most of all to the product the Cambodian population's life depended on (and still does), resulting in the strategy of emptying the towns and relocating everybody to the rural areas.

9. But was it really the reactionary utopia of a peasant 'communism'? It may help to hear the rest of the quotation: "If we have rice, we have everything; our people can eat their fill and we can export it for hard currency. [...] The more we export, the better we can afford to buy equipment, machines, and other instruments necessary for building our industry [...] and for rapidly changing our agriculture."[18] This leaves us with 'stone age communism' in search of foreign exchange. And did it really sound like a peasant state when Pol Pot explained in 1977: "We take agriculture as the basic factor and use the fruits of agriculture systematically to build industry [...]. We also intend to transform the backward agricultural Cambodia rapidly into an industrialized Cambodia by firmly adhering to the fundamental principles of independence, sovereignty and self-reliance"[19]

10. The ten-year plan introduced in 1976 speaks exactly the same language. The CPK assumed that Cambodia could not hope for disinterested help from anywhere (and it was right there, for a change), that it had no natural resources and that its industry was no good. But it did have a successful party and a hard-working population, so that it should be able to improve rice cultivation considerably. And being proud nationalists, they focused on the good aspects. The party decided to build up socialism by intensifying and extending rice cultivation in order to buy industrial facilities with the returns from exports. It was planned to reach a yield of three tonnes of rice per hectare by installing irrigation plants throughout the country. It was supposed to be the task of the whole population to build these irrigation plants and to cultivate rice. Anyone who did not want to participate or was unable to do so did not belong to the Cambodian people. In 'Democratic Kampuchea', this was usually a death sentence.

11. Let's talk about rice. Rice is no aquatic plant. But many varieties of rice grow better (also in regard to pests and weeds) if the fields are flooded. Rice can be grown in dry, mountainous regions as well, but this method is clearly less productive. The yields of many varieties can be enhanced by repeatedly flooding and draining the fields[20] An elaborate system of canals, dams, water inflow and drainage is necessary to do so. The productivity of rice cultivation in Cambodia was relatively low in 1975: in 1970 – before the carpet bombing and the extension of the civil war – the average yield was one tonne per hectare; by comparison, the average was 7.6 tonnes per hectare in Australia and 3.3 tonnes per hectare in the USSR[21]he four-year plan of the second half of 1976 envisaged a yield of three tonnes per hectare on normal rice fields, six to seven tonnes on some particularly fertile fields[22]

12. The plan to treble agricultural yields within four years in a country destroyed by war might be called 'bold' – and with regard to a planned economy, 'bold' means 'probably will not happen' – but the method can only be called 'foolish'. It might be doubted that it is a good idea to let nurses, teachers, pharmacists and taxi drivers dig mud and sow rice, although in times of need obtaining help from untrained people for urgent tasks can be a reasonable strategy. It is downright wretched and inhumane, however, to drive people out of their homes, segregate them according to gender and force them to work under murderous conditions. In addition, it was extremely counterproductive. What should we call those who, on top of all this, feed their workforce nothing but watery rice soup – or worse, rice glume soup – sometimes only once a day, while simultaneously fighting the private cultivation of spinach, cabbage and tomatoes in order to 'combat capitalist tendencies', while cadres and soldiers are provided with considerable rations[23] , and while "thousands of tonnes of rice" are exported in order "to accumulate capital for national defence and reconstruction" (Pol Pot 1977)[24] what should we call them? Assholes? Shit-bags? Villains? What they certainly can be called is nationalists.[25]

13. Because they did not stop at reducing everything in the world to the question of 'Khmer or non-Khmer' as defined by the Khmer Rouge, which in itself had the bitter consequence that everyone they did not like was deprived of citizenship and thus placed in perpetual danger of death. Additionally, whether out of patriotic pride or fear of foreign interference, they managed to throw all foreign aid organizations out of the country, despite a growing food shortage and a medical state of emergency. They proudly congratulated themselves on how they did everything differently from the Vietnamese, Chinese, North Korean or Soviet Communists, and thus they thought it beneath them to ask the state-socialist countries for help, even where it was simply a question of the survival of the people who had suddenly ended up under their rule. As the history of capitalist nation states proves, you do not need to have studied Stalin in depth in order to treat people so brutally and carelessly as mere material for state plans: all that is needed is the simple idea that the nation is more important than the individual. Thus the Khmer Rouge were nationalists first and foremost.

14. And they were also idiots. A system of dams and canals requires at least some knowledge of how such canals are to be dug, how dams are made to last, and how to ensure that the water flows only – and we mean only – when it is intended to flow, to name just a few. It would also be a good idea if the canals were not so deep that the water had to be pumped laboriously onto the fields, and it might also help if the dams were able to survive heavy rain, for example. You guessed it: the majority of the new or rebuilt irrigation systems were a complete failure, in part ineffective and in part pointless. Some broke under the first rain, burying rice fields and sometimes also villages under mudslides[26] After three years of massive failures, which caused rice production to decline drastically in certain areas, some of the irrigation systems eventually worked, thanks more likely to trial and error – and the productivity of undernourished, exhausted, traumatised and desperate people forced to work under conditions entirely unlike anything they knew – than to systematic theoretical thinking. But even this 'success' was nowhere near what the Khmer Rouge had planned for.

15. Khieu Samphan, the head of state of 'Democratic Kampuchea' from 1977, apparently declared: "Those who think politically, who have understood the regime, can do everything, technology comes later … we do not need engineers in order to plant rice or corn or to rear pigs"27 This Maoistically-inspired thought is first and foremost utter stupidity: Leaving aside what the Khmer Rouge meant with "politically" exactly, it surely helps to have intelligent political thoughts when developing, testing and applying technology, because it is a political aim one wants to realise using technology.28 But technology itself is also by no means properly understood this way. And it's especially important, when dealing with something in such direct involvement with nature as agriculture, to have proper knowledge about nature and how and with what consequences it is influenced by man.

16. And just to avoid any misunderstanding: of course it is good and correct to realise that existing circumstances can be changed and that often the people who suffer from such circumstances lack the imagination to think of alternatives. However, it's doubtful whether you really need courage to dream in order to gain the strength for a fight: thus far our dreams have helped neither to organise our summer camps nor to design our website. But it is important to recognise the need for action against resignation to the given world, and to understand that some necessary changes and improvements will demand collective force. That means having to persuade some people, because even those who criticise something can be blinded by the power of existing relations. This is roughly the reasonable essence of anarchist sayings such as "be realistic, attempt the impossible". When anarchists and Maoists insist that politically they want something that does not currently exist, and that without the will to change nothing will change, they are initially right with this fairly banal insight. And they come across as much more likeable than the Stalinists who every time they fuck something up have the good excuse that it was 'historically necessary' in this and no other way. You could even argue for the Maoists and the CPK that without a certain stubborn attachment to their own political programme, regardless of the concrete chances of its realisation, they would have never been in a position to change anything. But this argument against a dull and affirmative realism – against a perspective which cannot imagine anything different because it does not want to do so – is completely different from an idealism that declares reality to be negligible and replaces analysis with some more or less encouraging slogans, more suited to a church meeting (belief moves mountains) than to the construction of a real, beautiful planned economy. The development of productive forces is no child's game; a plan without a safety net is bullshit, and utopian thinking does indeed lead to catastrophe if it fails to address the conditions of realisation. And that is what happened, in addition to the directly intended brutalities, in 'Democratic Kampuchea'.

17. here must have been reasons for these obvious problems with 'socialist development', and the Khmer Rouge were quick to start looking for them. It could not be the party, of course – they had the right line – and the Khmer people, whose good characteristics a Cambodian patriot could not call into question, were also excluded from guilt. Thus traitors and saboteurs were clearly active just about everywhere. As a matter of principle, suspicion was directed against the Vietnamese and Chinese minorities who in the old society had mostly been artisans and merchants29 , and also against the Muslim minority, who in the eyes of the CPK did not belong to the traditional Khmer rice-farming people because of their belief and their trade (fishing). City dwellers were of course suspected to have been privileged under the old regime or even to have fled from Khmer Rouge troops. Generally, the Khmer Rouge distinguished between the 'old people' who had survived under their reign for a while and were thus more trustworthy, and the 'new people' who had only recently ended up under their control. And ultimately some saboteurs and traitors must have hidden within the CPK, as otherwise they could not have proceeded with their disgraceful work without Angkar noticing them. Initially, the Khmer Rouge mostly killed adherents of the old regime, soldiers of the Lon Nol troops, urban intellectuals and then people who had returned from exile, wrongly assuming that the war was over and that they could help to develop Democratic Kampuchea. But the Khmer Rouge soon started also to torture and kill people from their own ranks and to suspect everyone of being a spy.[30] The terror was extended to the countryside – a terror against everyone who did not fulfil the required workload, who stole from the harvest or from food remnants out of hunger, or who dared secretly to slaughter an animal.The sick, the old, the weak, the injured, the handicapped etc. were, as useless eaters, at best left to their own devices and thus often subject to death from starvation, or they were simply killed. Those who joked about Angkar, criticised a measure or showed themselves to be 'enemies' of the regime in some other way rarely survived. But even if someone's plough broke down, or if their buffalo didn't obey or if they dared to have sexual relations without permission, they faced public humiliation at best, often more rigid forms of punishment and sometimes even death. It is estimated that Cambodia had about 7.4 million inhabitants in 1975. In 1979 there were about 5.8 million.[31]

18. After various border violations by Kampuchea's army and a fierce reciprocal propaganda war, Vietnamese troops marched into Cambodia at the end of 1978 and in less than three weeks managed to drive out the Khmer Rouge. After that Pol Pot and his comrades (still internationally recognised as the 'legitimate government' of Cambodia) ruled over refugee camps in Thailand and some hard-to-reach camps in the border regions of Cambodia. There the Khmer Rouge's terror continued. The largest part of Cambodia was now under Vietnamese control, and here the 'People's Republic of Cambodia' was founded. Now the Khmer Rouge were fighting a guerilla war against Vietnamese troops and against the new Cambodian army. The USA and European countries supported the Khmer Rouge in its fight against an ally of the USSR.

19. How can the terror and mass murder be explained? The contradiction between the atrocities and the supposed gentle and friendly national character of the Cambodians is often emphasised. Behind this particular racist-idiotic national caricature, various kitchen psychologists discover another 'reason': the dark side of the Khmer 'national soul'. Even sworn anti-communists, for whom Hegel and Marx are to be held directly responsible for the Killing Fields, will not do without national character as an explanatory pattern: in the case of Camobdia it is the "tradition of cruelty which slumbers behind the Buddha's gentle face". The supposed explanation lies in the beautiful Khmer word kum, as best defined by a 'native': "a Cambodian word for a particular Cambodian revenge mentality – more specifically, an ongoing grudge which eventually leads to an act of revenge whose damage is far greater than the original injury [...] it is an infection that spreads in our (national soul)".[32] We see. In the light of this infection of the national soul, it seems strange that former adherents and enemies of the Khmer Rouge work together in the highest ranks of the new Cambodian kingdom. Perhaps the kum is taking a little break? Even assuming that such socially anchored and accepted mentalities were widespread across the country, the question of the origin of the undeniably real grudge remains.

20. Among other reasons, the Khmer Rouge's reign of terror was presumably so brutal because the political-economic conflict between poor peasants and the urban middle classes – a leftover from colonial politics, administered latterly by the respective local elites – was fought out violently. (The same kind of conflict has led to all sorts of bloody carnage in Thailand recently.) This conflict was waged because the Khmer Rouge placed themselves at the head of a peasant guerilla campaign in a destabilised country and were able to win in a power vacuum created by imperialism. Thus one side was utterly inferior and for once it was the side that had previously always been slightly more successful at pushing its interests. And the conflict was waged so bloodily because the hate against the city people proved to be quite a good ideology for mobilising around the strategy of concentration on agriculture above all in the building of an independent Kampuchea. On top of that it fit the fascist[33] ‘cleansing fantasies’ of these red-lacquered Khmer nationalists.

21. So what kind of people were these Khmer Rouge then? Of course it would be easiest to portray them as insane criminals, whose theory was a “morbid conglomerate of utopian ideas …which were not at all based on the insights of Marxist theories”[34] ; this at least is how those in the GDR rejected any relation between Marxist-Leninism and the Khmer Rouge. But that is clearly insufficient. It is often said that the Khmer Rouge were ‘ultra-Maoists[35], cultivating a ‘radical Maoism[36] , with politics inspired by the ‘Great Leap Forward’ and the cultural revolution[37] . That’s not supportable: the Great Leap Forward was meant to build communism in three years, whereas the 4-year-plan of the Khmer Rouge was meant to produce an export surplus for buying weapons and industrial plant. Bombing ‘headquarters’ regularly in order to terrify the party’s own bureaucracy was not Angkar’s thing.The Khmer Rouge even explicitly rejected the Maoist theory of an initially necessary pact with the national bourgeoisie: “There is no national bourgeoisie in Cambodia, all bourgeois are foreigners."[38] . The close alliance with China, which was already well on its way to a ‘socialist market economy’ at the time of the Khmer Rouge, was not so much based on what little ideological ground they shared but mostly on their common enemy: the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, which was well-known to be an ally of the USSR. The Khmer Rouge also took on little in terms of ideology from its other ally North Korea. They neither had a sun-like leader (the Cambodians only found out in 1977 that Pol Pot was their big guy, some claim it was even later than that), nor did they fall for the idiotic North Korean idea of developing an independent state ideology (Juche) whose main content is that the people’s unity is better than class struggle. That was how North Korea ‘further developed’ Marxism-Leninism ‘dialectically’. No doubt the Khmer Rouge were proud of starting on a daring path to building socialism, a path which was previously unknown and untried and was genuinely Kampuchean. But in many ways, despite all their Khmer national pride, they were very orthodox Marxists-Leninists.

22. But did Pol Pot not attempt “up to the last consequence” to “introduce communism immediately and completely without the long transition period proper to the tenets of orthodox Marxism-Leninism”?[39] Did the Khmer Rouge want to “build …a communist society after the revolution and simply skip the socialism stage”[40] an approach which would raise some questions? Was it a matter of ‘war communism’?[41] And did the Khmer Rouge promise to build a ‘thriving communist future’ with their 4-year-plan?[42] Even if Angkar never officially invoked Marxism-Leninism[43] their theoretical documents show them as especially thickheaded-nationalist and paranoid Marxists-Leninists. The documents talk of “socialism”, not communism, all the way through[44] , and the policies were about agricultural surplus and foreign currency income – however nuts the strategy to achieve this might have been and however unreal the other assumptions were (e.g. a constant rice price on the world market).

23. Incidentally, this should not lead us to the converse fallacy that the Khmer Rouge’s reign had been some kind of ‘state capitalism’. The Khmer Rouge did indeed relate to the world market with their aims and would have loved to transform Cambodia into an agricultural supplier for international capitalism. But they never got that far. And unlike in the USSR they did not even try to turn wage, price and profit into factors of planning. Instead of trying to plan in terms of money, which would not have meant bad capitalism but a badly planned economy, it was rice that had to be delivered in Kampuchea. A ‘domestic market’, whether of a capitalist or state socialist kind, did not exist; the money of ‘democratic Kampuchea’, which had already been printed, was not introduced as currency.

24. For a long time the left refused to believe that ‘democratic Kampuchea’ was ruled by such an evil regime. There were reasons for this: “falsifications and intentional lies, subsequently proved to be false, made it hard to believe the few sources available.” For example a French doctor’s report from April 30, 1975 on various atrocities that definitely did not take place, supposed that witness reports supplied in exchange for dollars at the Thai border by people who had not been in Cambodia at the time in question, staged photographs produced by the Thai secret police to influence elections, or the most famous photograph, which circulated worldwide with the caption “A Khmer Rouge shops with a pistol on the day of liberation”: in fact he was asking looters to stop immediately.45 With this in mind, the attitude of the West European and North American Left may have been unpleasant but it was not incomprehensible. Given the complete closing-off of Kampuchea, the only available information came from opponents of the Khmer Rouge, and for the most part it was not exactly reliable. All this is alarming, but one minority definitely to be disregarded is the element of the Left that continued to hold onto the Khmer Rouge until much later. Of course, one thing most morally outraged anti-communists prefer to suppress is that after the expulsion by the Vietnamese Army it was the free West that financed the Khmer Rouge murder gangs and gave them military support, allowing them to continue their slaughter in the border regions edging on Thailand. “You can’t be squeamish about auxiliary forces”. The West in its fight against the USSR and Vietnam took the words of old-school conservative Franz-Josef Strauss truly to heart, and even the Khmer Rouge, after their fall, were welcome.

- 1. The Khmer Rouge replaced the name ‘Cambodia’ with ‘Kampuchea’ after they came to power. The reason was probably that the word ‘Cambodia’ was seen as a colonial term. Today the country is called ‘Cambodia’ again, therefore we are using this name, and call it ‘Kampuchea’ only when referring to the time between 1975 and 1979.
- 2. Luxemburg: Fragment. In: Rosa Luxemburg Gesammelte Werke 4, p.369, our translation
- 3. “The bourgeois nationalism of any oppressed nation has a general democratic content that is directed against oppression, and it is this content that we unconditionally support.” Lenin: The Right of Nations to Self-Determination, Chapter 4.
- 4. The Khmer nationalists were not bothered by the implied identification of some old polities with the newly emerging nation states. And why should they be! For them, their Kampuchean people was the successor of the great Khmer people, so there was a biological or cultural relation.
- 5. Of course, in itself having nothing left to loose is never the reason to subscribe to a political position. It is still a particular content that makes sense to its followers.
- 6. Sontheimer: Kambodscha, p.22.
- 7. Sontheimer: Kambodscha, p.31.
- 8. See the corresponding slogans in Locard: Pol Pot’s Little Red Book.
- 9. Twinig: Economy, p.115.
- 10. Schmidt: Leben, p.173.
- 11. Sontheimer: Kampodscha, p.31.

- 12. Schmidt: Leben, p.174. Allegedly this was a result of discussion within the group around Pol Pot before the takeover, but no source is given.
- 13. http://www.history.co.uk/encyclopedia/pol-pot.html 31.12.2010 16:00
- 14. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pol_Pot 31.12.2010 16:00
- 15. http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20100531164828AAUcTay 31.12.2010, 16:00
- 16. Twining: Economy, p.125.
- 17. Margolin: Kabodscha, p.693; the slogan also appears as "Whoever has rice has everything", "Whoever has rice has absolutely everything" (Locard: Pol Pot's Little Red Book, p.238).
- 18. Jackson: Ideology, p.60.
- 19. Twining: Economy, p.110. No source is given.
- 20. Brockhaus 1970, Reis
- 21. Brockhaus 1970,Reis, Kambodscha
- 22. "The Party's Four Year Plan to Build Socialism in all Fields" In: Chandler, Pol Pot plans the future, p.5. Probably the qualifying remarks that they had not registered all available land were supposed to make the CPK's optimism seem reasonable.
- 23. Twining: Economy, p. 116.
- 24. Twining: Economy, p. 148.
- 25. "If there was a key phrase used in lectures given the people from 1975 until the collapse of Democratic Kampuchea , it was 'national independence"'.Twining: Economy, p.116.
- 26. Margolin: Kambodscha, p.667. See also Twining, Economy, p. 130.
- 27. Qtd. in Margolin: Kambodscha, p.694.
- 28. Why is this so? A smart political approach would for instance make sure that dangerous or unpleasant labour is mechanised as quickly as possible. But it would also try to support the development of machines of a kind which are not only productive but also do not ruin workers and do not have stupid side effects for the surroundings (be it noise, poison, whatever). In technological trials such side effects would for example be a focus of attention; in the use of technology they would be a focus for improvement, if they still existed.
- 29. This is in no way unusual. Many pre-capitalist societies passed the areas outside agriculture and the apparatus of traditional rule on to groups which for some reason or other had no place in traditional society, often immigrants or followers of different religions. Because the sphere of trade played a destructive role for traditional production when capitalist development first started, these groups were often held responsible for the nastiness of capitalist modernisation (and colonial politics). Add a colonial power which knows how to use differences more or less smartly in order to set different groups of colonised peoples against one another, and no-one should be surprised by the series of full-on pogroms against these minorities that accompanied some 'national liberations'.
- 30. Sontheimer: Kambodscha, p.34

- 31. Twining: Economy, p. 150. Other numbers closer to 3 million victims were probably Vietnamese propaganda.
- 32. Quoted in Sontheimer: Kambodscha, p.65/66
- 33. The word ‘fascist’ is not meant to imply ‘totalitarianism’ here. There are several essential differences between state socialist and fascist regimes, abstracting from which is simply bullshit that no longer explains anything. It must be admitted nonetheless that the Chinese, North Korean and Kampuchean variations of state socialism, because of the local radical nationalism, share similarities with typical fascist developments in bourgeois nation states, while barely any ideas of an emancipatory change of society can be discovered. One of the slogans in Kampuchean mass meetings was apparently: “We have to exterminate and remove from society everyone who imagine themselves to be ill.” (Quoted in Locard: Pol Pot’s Little Red Book).
- 34. Thürk: Reis, p.10
- 35. Süddeutsche Zeitung, 26/7/2010
- 36. http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/kambodscha-und-die-roten-khmer-tage-terror-1.488469-10 , 22/7/2010
- 37. Twining: Economy, p. 111.
- 38. Schmidt: Leben, p.174
- 39. Margolin: Kambodscha, p.643
- 40. Sontheimer: Kambodscha, p. 87
- 41. Margolin: Kambodscha, p. 692
- 42. http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rote_Khmer, 22/7/2010
- 43. Margolin: Kambodscha, p.692
- 44. There are also different words for both these terms in the Khmer language, implying that this is not a translation problem.
- 45. Schmidt: Leben, p.156/157