

## **Margaret Slocomb, *An Economic History of Cambodia in the Twentieth Century.***

**Singapore: NUS Press, 2010; published with support from the Nicholas Tarling Fund. Pp. xxi, 345; maps, photos, tables, chart, notes, bib., index.**

**Reviewed by John V. Dennis.**

Like the night-time candle flame that can be hazardous to inquisitive moths, the Cambodia of Pol Pot attracted its share of Marxist researchers, with varying results. During a visit to Pol Pot's Cambodia in 1978, British academic and Pol Pot apologist Malcolm Caldwell was murdered in a government guest-house, reportedly not long after a private meeting with Pol Pot and also after making the comment, "I've seen the past and it works." Two researchers at Cornell University, George Hildebrand and Gareth Porter, wrote a short monograph justifying Pol Pot's rapid evacuation of Phnom Penh in April 1975 (1). The book was widely perceived to be an egregious apology for a brutal death march to the countryside that had put at risk as many as three million people. The academic careers of both authors—neither of whom had ever been to Cambodia—were more or less over within a year of their book's publication. Two early supporters of the Pol Pot regime, Stephen Heder and Ben Kiernan, both went on to become unrelenting investigators and critics of that regime.

During my stint as a Peace Corps volunteer in Thailand in 1975-1978, my own sympathies for Pol Pot's revolution were severely battered over the course of the three-year period during which I read gruesome refugee accounts in the Thai press, as people fled from what was formally known as Democratic Kampuchea (DK). I also learned that, for Thai rice farmers at least, owning and managing one's own land was critical to motivating farmer productivity. The *coup de grâce* for whatever remained of any far-left inclinations came when, in the early 1980s, I recognized in a photo display at the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide in Phnom Penh a pre-execution photo of Hing Sokkum. In the photo

Hing had a sad hunted expression that contrasted with that of the vibrant Marxist academic with whom I had once dined in New York City. (Photos of other such prisoners may be viewed at [www.tuolsleng.com](http://www.tuolsleng.com).)

Australian historian Margaret Slocomb is a conscientious Marxist scholar who has now produced three monographs and various articles on Cambodian history (2). She is also a development worker who began working in Cambodia in 1988, when Pol Pot's forces were still fighting against the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) regime that had—with the considerable assistance of the Vietnamese army—ousted the DK regime. A student of historian Michael Vickery, Slocomb belongs to a younger generation than the candle-burned Cambodia-watchers mentioned above. As her first few years in Cambodia were spent working in a state that was subject to roughly a decade of armed attacks and international embargo, it is not surprising that she would sympathize with the beleaguered if not particularly competent PRK regime. In her 2003 monograph *The People's Republic of Kampuchea 1979-1989*, she uses an explicit Gramscian framework. By way of comparison, Evan Gottesman's *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge: Inside the Politics of Nation Building* (3) offers a more perceptive and balanced view of the PRK regime. Gottesman, for example, has separate chapters on "The Vietnamese," "The Chinese", and human rights, whereas Slocomb (perhaps because she sees herself as a "friend of Cambodia") appears to down-play ethnic tensions and human rights abuses.

In her most recent work, *An Economic History of Cambodia in the Twentieth Century*, Slocomb's tone is more that of a liberal development worker fretting over the absence of good governance in contemporary Cambodia. This review of that book focuses on three over-lapping questions. First, do Slocomb's Marxist and economic perspectives inform or detract from her historical narrative? Second, does Slocomb explain why Cambodia has not prospered, in contrast to other countries in the Southeast Asian region such as Thailand and Vietnam? And, third, is the DK regime given adequate and balanced attention within the 150-year period that she covers?

## **Marxist and Economic Perspectives**

As both development worker in and second-generation Marxist researcher on Cambodia, Slocomb is likely to have enjoyed better *entrée* to government sources than many other scholars. She may in fact be the first non-Cambodian researcher to have gained access to official documents of the Council of Ministers and the Council of State of the PRK. However, her Marxist orientation and her development work may have lessened her ability to be impartial. Clearly, she was seeing matters through rose-colored lenses when she wrote in her 2003 monograph:

In 1975, Cambodian peasants participated in the revolution for their own personal benefit, just as the peasants of France, Russia, China, and other revolutionary states before them had done... (4)

Similarly, in her article on “Chikreng Rebellion: Coup and its Aftermath in Democratic Kampuchea,” Slocomb seems to ask a naïve question, “if it was their revolution, why and against whom did [Cambodian peasants] rebel?” (5)

Whatever Marxist analysis appears in *An Economic History of Cambodia* is sufficiently low-key to suggest that Slocomb may be moving along that pathway paraphrased in the old adage, “a person has no heart if he is not a Marxist at 20, and no brain if he is still a Marxist at 30.” Be that as it may, Slocomb’s analysis nonetheless seems to be mindful of that central Marxist premise that a society is not ready for successful communist revolution until a capitalist economy has industrialized and developed both a proletariat and sufficient internal contradictions to prime it for social revolution. On the last page of the book’s chapter on “The Colonial Economy, 1863-1953,” for example, Slocomb writes:

There was ... no industrialization of the local economy and, by corollary, there existed no industrial proletariat. Because agriculture hardly moved beyond the subsistence level, there was no surplus agricultural workforce even to supply labour for the rubber plantations ...

By the end of the Protectorate ... we cannot speak even of incipient capitalism in Cambodia. (p. 72)

Likewise, at the end of her chapter on “Post-Independence Economic Change, 1953-69,” Slocomb writes, “Cambodia had active markets but it did not have a market economy. The term ‘pre-capitalist’ is commonly used to describe the sort of economy that persisted in Cambodia ...” (p.126)

Thankfully, Slocomb does not attribute the failure of the Khmer Rouge regime to the insufficient development of capitalism in the preceding periods. However, she does write:

The structure of the collective that had developed during the period of people’s war served as the model for reconstruction as, in one giant leap after 17 April 1975, the Cambodian revolution passed from the phase of national revolution directly into that of democratic or social revolution.

The radical policies of Pol Pot, the revolutionary leader of Democratic Kampuchea, might have eventually achieved their aims of mastery and self-reliance, perhaps along the lines of North Korea. (p.177)

Slocomb goes on to describe the DK revolution as derailed by “hysterical xenophobia” and “[d]eep factional rifts within the Communist Party” (p. 177). Rather than inform the reader that DK represented a phase of “democratic or

social revolution” (p. 177), terms that appear to be virtually devoid of meaning in this context, why not simply state that—in the modern era at least—regimes that commit genocide usually fail? According to Slocomb the “Cambodian revolution” formally ended in 1989, though “market liberalization” had begun in 1985.

The putative focus on “economics” rather than “politics” in *An Economic History of Cambodia* could be an adaptive strategy that allows the book to skirt the political minefield that one enters while writing about the Pol Pot regime and about Cambodian politics more generally. Slocomb performs a Herculean task in her book, sifting through and categorizing data from a diverse array of sources on Cambodian history and economics. She is not an economist, however, and she does not write like one. Missing from *An Economic History of Cambodia* are analyses of time series data (admittedly difficult to assemble for Cambodia), comparisons with other economies in the region, and graphs. The book includes 56 tables but only one graph.

While Slocomb’s grounding in Marxism may ostensibly enable her to understand the proclaimed ideology of Sihanouk’s post-colonial regime and those of the DK and PRK, the historical inability of Marxists to understand peasant societies would appear to pose a significant constraint. Slocomb’s use of secondary sources appears to be more than slightly skewed toward pro-revolutionary sources. This and the virtual absence of interviews conducted with key informants and farmers are worrisome. In some 700 footnotes Slocomb cites an immense literature while reporting on a century and a half of Cambodian history. One gets the sense that Slocomb—unlike Jean Delvert and more recent researchers who have worked in Cambodia—has not spent much time in Khmer villages learning about their people’s experiences under the Khmer Rouge or studying what motivates and enables Khmer peasants to be more productive.

Slocomb appears to have been more comfortable working in government archives and relying on the 122 “monographs, reports and journal articles” (p.

332) cited in the book. In relatively few of her 700 footnotes does Slocomb cite more than one source to substantiate a particular point, and no assistance is acknowledged for the translation of many Khmer-language primary documents. Slocomb never indicates whether she is a fluent reader and speaker of the Cambodian language (6).

### **Why has Cambodia not prospered in comparison to some other countries in the region?**

Slocomb shines while mining a wealth of historic detail from a diverse array of documents. But her historical narrative is descriptive and insufficiently analytic. She informs readers, for example, that slavery was abolished in Cambodia in 1884 and *corvée* labor in 1937. Unlike George Condominas, however, she does not seek to trace whether the institution of slavery left rifts and dysfunctions within Khmer society that subsequently damaged social cohesion.

Nor does *The Economic History of Cambodia* bench-mark the Cambodian economy against other economies in the region. Had it done so, its author would have had to grapple with the conundrum that while in the early 1950s Burma, Thailand and Cambodia all had rice-based agricultural economies of roughly equal size and while the capital cities of all three were on a par with or even more developed than the city of Singapore, the subsequent development trajectories of Singapore, Thailand, Myanmar, and Cambodia were dramatically different. These divergent development trajectories are not well explained by Slocomb's attribution of Cambodia's lack of economic development to a scarcity of natural resources and to its being a society of small-scale rice farmers permeated by a lack of trust among families.

A few minutes at the United Nations Development Program's Web-site ([www.hdi.undp.org](http://www.hdi.undp.org)) make clear that in 2010 Singapore had a life expectancy of 80.7 years compared to 69.3, 62.7, and 62.2 years for Thailand, Myanmar, and Cambodia, respectively. Out of 169 countries, UNDP data for 2010 rank the

four countries for overall human development 27<sup>th</sup>, 92<sup>nd</sup>, 132<sup>nd</sup>, and 124<sup>th</sup>, respectively. On a normalized ranking score, Thailand is about 50% higher than Cambodia, and Singapore is more than twice as high. And yet Singapore has virtually no natural resources except the land on which the city-state is built. Even most drinking water is imported from neighboring Malaysia. And Thailand, with a natural resources base and a social structure similar to Cambodia's, has developed into the world's premier exporter of rice and cassava. Neither the "scarcity of natural resources" nor an initial condition as a country of small rice farmers appears to have any particular explanatory power when Cambodia is viewed in the regional context.

Like a number of other NGO workers in Cambodia, Slocomb sees lack of trust as a social flaw that has tended to curtail the country's economic and social development. The concluding chapter of *An Economic History of Cambodia* quotes the American political philosopher Francis Fukuyama, a man who happens to regard liberal democracy as the end-point of human history:

Societies that have very strong families but relatively weak bonds of trust among people unrelated to one another will tend to be dominated by small, family-owned and managed businesses. (p. 297)

Slocomb concludes *An Economic History of Cambodia* by noting that Fukuyama's description of trust within strong families applies best to the Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia and that, by contrast, the ethnic Khmer entrepreneurs who have emerged in Cambodia during some two decades of economic liberalization tend to rely on political patronage. "The patronage system," she writes, "forges trust in a low-trust society" (p. 298). Having eschewed regional comparisons, however, Slocomb does not appear to recognize that Thai and Cambodian social structure are similar. Her argument about the lack of trust thus carries her to no well-grounded conclusions.

Arguably, it has been the ethic of strong Chinese families in Singapore more than any other single factor that has pushed that multi-ethnic country to its 2010 HDI ranking of 27<sup>th</sup> globally. In Thailand, there has been much intermarriage between Chinese business families and members of the Thai elite over the past sixty-some years. Chinese surnames fell out of use in the 1960s. Over several generations, ethnic Chinese merged into the body politic and urban Thai society. This ethnic synergy may help to account for Thailand's pre-eminence in global rice and cassava markets and relative lack of social conflict compared to neighboring Cambodia. While it is true that, as new immigrants to Southeast Asia, Chinese families may have been clannish and limited to "small family companies," a lack of trust *per se* does not appear to have been a significant constraint to economic development in either Singapore or Thailand.

Over the past hundred years, Cambodian political leaders may have repeatedly used xenophobic anti-Vietnamese and anti-Chinese rhetoric as a political tool. Driven from the top, xenophobia does seem to have levied an oft-charged and enervating toll on the development of Chinese, Vietnamese, and Cham business classes within the country. Cambodia's entrepreneurial human capital and related business systems may have been decimated time and again, the DK era being the most dramatic example. Nonetheless, it does not necessarily follow that Cambodia's economic development has been stymied by a "lack of trust" inherent in the culture. More germane to the lack of robust agricultural development in Cambodia has been a history of poorly developed infrastructure as well as the absence of rural credit markets, of efficient land tenure and market systems, of an effective agricultural research and extension system, and of a strong entrepreneurial class and foreign investment climate.



## **Are the four years of the DK regime given adequate attention within the 150-year period covered in the book?**

Whether in Nazi Germany, in Rwanda in 1994, or in Cambodia in the mid-1970s, mass killings of unarmed civilians are national and indeed international “train wrecks” of such epic proportions as to demand explicit, no-holds-barred analysis. William Shirer’s *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany* (7) is an example of a history focused solely on the problematic period in question. Alexander Laban Hinton’s 2005 monograph, *Why Did They Kill: Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide* (8), delves into the Pol Pot period from an anthropological perspective with discussions of genocidal priming and activation. But the first page of Slocomb’s chapter on “The Revolutionary Economy, 1975-89” appears to offer an understatement of the Khmer Rouge holocaust:

[T]he regime of Democratic Kampuchea (DK), remains a highly contentious field of study because there are no reliable, verifiable statistics... [T]he population deficit at the end of that period bears out survivors’ claims that vast numbers of people died of overwork, maltreatment and starvation, apart, that is, from the thousands of the regime’s own supporters who were executed for political motives.  
(p.175)

There are two problems with this passage. First, it is probably more accurate to note the meticulous records kept at the Tuol Sleng prison in Phnom Penh, subsequent forensic evidence at mass grave sites, and before and after census data. These data made it possible for a researcher like Ben Kiernan to reliably estimate in, for example, his 2008 book *Genocide and Resistance in Southeast Asia* (9), that the 1975-79 death toll ranged between 1.671 and 1.871 million people. He also concluded that about 36 percent of the Cham population (about 87,000 people) were killed or died, while the Khmer ethnic majority suffered an 18.7% death rate during the DK regime.

Second, Slocomb's second sentence quoted above fails to mention the execution of so-called "new people" by the Khmer Rouge regime. This seems an extraordinary omission, but one that is worryingly consistent with Slocomb's citation of the work of several Pol Pot apologists. These writers include Hildebrand and Porter, Laura Summers, and Noam Chomsky. She also fails to cite critics of the DK regime such as former *New York Times* journalist Sydney Schanberg, François Ponchaud, and Alexander Hinton, not to mention the searingly personal accounts by Khmer survivors such as Pin Yathay, Chanrithy Him, and Luong Ung.

While preparing a second edition of *An Economic History of Cambodia*, Slocomb would be well advised to annotate her bibliography and to provide multiple references within those notes that cite sources on points of fact (10). Her chapter on "The Revolutionary Economy" might be more effective if divided into two chapters, one on the DK regime and one on the PRK regime. Such a division would allow Slocomb to focus more concertedly on the horrific death toll during the DK regime. As it stands, Slocomb's coverage of the "Revolutionary Economy" conveys the sense that any discussion of the victims of genocide in Cambodia has been safely relegated to the political sphere and is therefore not germane to the thrust of the book. And yet the willful murder of the educated "new people" (who included expellees from the cities who spoke a foreign language, or who were not ethnically Khmer, or who had worked for a former government, or who had graduated from high school, or who wore eyeglasses, or who simply lacked direct family ties to a peasant family) needs at least an accounting, if a careful understanding of the failure to achieve the same rapid economic growth that has characterized other countries in the region is to be reached. Vietnam suffered at least as much from the Indochina War as Cambodia and yet is now the world's second largest exporter of rice.

Similarly, while Slocomb characterizes the PRK as "generally a benevolent regime" (11), she never asks whether ten lackluster years of adhering to cash-poor Soviet economic orthodoxy might readily have been

trumped by a regime that was more market-oriented and friendly to foreign investment.

Margaret Slocomb is to be commended for tackling the very daunting task of describing economic change and political upheaval in five successive periods of Cambodian history, beginning with the 90 years of French Colonial rule that started in 1863. *An Economic History of Cambodia in the Twentieth Century* provides a wealth of historic detail, though its narrative approach works best for the period of French colonial rule. It describes a French colonial infrastructure that was consistently understaffed and under-resourced but that was nonetheless premised on the assumption that Khmers needed to become more French. After quickly discovering that the Mekong would not be an access route to China, French imperialists persevered in a power-sharing arrangement with King Norodom I (r. 1860-1904) in the belief that Cambodia could provide valuable resources such as rubber to France and that management of Annam and Cochin China to the east would be facilitated by control of Khmer territories.

Colonial investment was largely limited to road-building and to French settlers who oversaw the creation of rubber plantations. Colonial law did not allow Chinese to own land; it thus put a significant check on the one group that might have the most incentive and ability to invest. And, as Slocomb writes, "It is fair to say that the French ignored industry, preferring to concentrate all their efforts on agriculture, locked as they were into a stagist approach to development" (p. 63). For the most part, industrial capacity was limited to producing goods for local consumption, in enterprises "such as rice mills and distilleries," and these tended to be owned by Chinese rather than Khmers.

One of the greatest deficiencies of the French colonial system was its inability to establish an effective national system of primary and secondary education. In 1945, for example, there were no institutions of higher

education in Cambodia, only three secondary schools with a total of 680 students, and three technical schools with a further 280 students.

“[I]ndigenous students wishing to pursue higher education had to travel to Hanoi, Saigon, or Paris” (p.50) To the extent that French colonialism allowed Cambodia to languish as an agricultural backwater, this lack of investment and creation of employment opportunities may have precipitated the subsequent radicalism of the 1970s.

In the chapter on “Post-Independence Economic Change, 1953-69,” Slocomb describes the *Sangkum Reastr Niyum* (Popular Socialist Community), a movement dedicated to agrarian socialist development and hewing to a neutral foreign policy, of first King and then Prince Norodom Sihanouk. This period saw the enunciation of relatively progressive policies, but it brought disappointing results with respect to rural livelihoods. The relatively few Khmers educated in France became aware of the persistent disparities then characteristic of Cambodia. Some—including Pol Pot, Khieu Samphan, Hu Nim, and Hou Youn—joined the *maquis* and launched a revolutionary process that eventually sought to root out all Western influence from Khmer society.

The chapter on the five-year Lon Nol regime (1970-75) gets more than twice the number of pages of text per year as any other period treated in *An Economic History of Cambodia*. This over-emphasis appears to be an artifact of the relative wealth of documents describing both the civil war in Cambodia and American economic and military aid during the Lon Nol period.

Writing Cambodian history is a relatively thankless task. Slocomb’s latest volume is an admirable effort that many with an interest in Asian history will want to read.

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1. George C. Hildebrand and Gareth Porter, *Cambodia : Starvation and Revolution* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1976).
2. Margaret Slocomb, *Colons and Coolies: The Development of Cambodia's Rubber Plantations* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2007) and *The People's Republic of Kampuchea, 1979-1989: The Revolution after Pol Pot* (Chiang Mai : Silkworm Books, 2003).
3. Evan R. Gottesman, *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge: Inside the Politics of Nation Building* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003).
4. Slocomb, *People's Republic of Kampuchea*, p. 255.
5. Margaret Slocomb, "Chikreng Rebellion: Coup and its Aftermath in Democratic Kampuchea," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland* XVI (2006): 59-72.
6. Slocomb mentions no one by name in the book's acknowledgements section (p. xvii), but she does express "particular gratitude to the director and her staff at the State Archives in Phnom Penh ..."
7. William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1960).
8. Alexander Laban Hinton, *Why Did They Kill? Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005).
9. Ben Kiernan, *Genocide and Resistance in Southeast Asia: Documentation, Denial, and Justice in Cambodia and East Timor* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2008), p. 271.
10. Annotations for, for example, the monograph by George Hildebrand and Gareth Porter, *Cambodia: Starvation and Revolution* (which Slocomb cites seven times), might mention that the book is now widely discredited as an apologia for Pol Pot's rapid evacuation of Phnom Penh within days of the Khmer Rouge seizure of the capital. Its authors argued unrealistically that the abrupt evacuation of at least three of Phnom Penh's four hospitals "was actually to save lives and give the best possible care to the sick and the wounded" (p. 50). It contains many citations to DK radio broadcasts. Sydney Schanberg, the veteran *New York Times* war correspondent who was in Phnom Penh when it fell to the Khmer Rouge, wrote in a 9 May 1975 article that "people who represent the old ways and those considered weak and unfit would be expendable and would be weeded out." Hildebrand and Porter dismissed Schanberg's characterization of the evacuation of Phnom Penh, arguing instead that it was humanitarian in nature.
11. Slocomb, *The People's Republic of Kampuchea*, p. 260.