

Rejoinder

For a non-violent, non-essentialist Cambodia: a reply to Ryerson Christie

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I want to thank Ryerson Christie for reviewing my book, *Cambodia's Neoliberal Order: Violence, Authoritarianism and the Contestation of Public Space* (Springer, 2010) in the previous issue of *South East Asia Research* (Christie, 2011). I am very pleased to see such attention to my scholarship in the pages of this journal. While Christie does offer some positives in his assessment, and I am happy to receive his more constructive critiques of my work, his reading of how I have used 'culture' in my book seems disingenuous, while his insistence that my argument is one that advocates violence is disturbing. I am deeply troubled by such misrepresentations precisely because I have dedicated my scholarship, activism and life to the principles of both non-violence and non-essentialism, and the dissemination of such a characterization of my work is damaging to my reputation. By effectively cherry-picking quotations from my book and de-contextualizing them from the analysis in which they are framed, Christie has made it appear to those readers who have not read my book that he is correct in his assertions that I advocate both violence and 'the rejection of all things cultural' (Christie, 2011, p 353).

In direct contrast to Christie's (2011, p 351) distortions, there is no 'call to arms' to be found in the text, as my book – like all of my academic work (for example, Springer, 2011a; 2011b) – is informed by a deep commitment to non-violence. For instance, on page 12, while establishing the framework for the arguments that follow, I indicate:

'A second motivation for this research is a concern with devising ways to minimize the scope and potential of violence, while simultaneously empowering those subjected to it. The origins, meaning, and implications of political violence (originating both "from above" and

“from below”) and its relation to observed behavior in Cambodia cannot be known without research (Jenks Clarke 2001). ... As Stanko and Lee (2003: 11) advise, “After all, *violence is preventable. The more we gather knowledge about it, the better off we are to contribute to its minimization in society.*” (Emphasis added.)

My commitment to non-violence is made even more explicit on pages 50 to 52 of my book, where I explain at length my position on violence *vis-à-vis* public space:

‘This is precisely why Warner (2002: 70) maintains, “any distortion or blockage in access to a public [space] can be so grave, leading people to feel powerless and frustrated.” *Violence begets more violence, which counteracts the ultimate goal of a nonviolent society.* The relationship between democracy and violence is a *disquieting nexus* because even under the best circumstances it is morally ambiguous. ... Violence can serve to include the excluded and grant “the right to the city” (Hewitt 1993; Honderich 1980); but at the same time it is also vile, abhorrent, and dehumanizing. *The brutality of violence not only desecrates those who are directly affected by it, but it also tears at the social fabric, subverting the level of trust, interconnectedness, and indeed the “publicness”, necessary for societies to function.* ... If violence is more likely to occur in the context of hierarchical structures (Iadicola and Shupe 2003), then a democracy founded on egalitarian principles and social justice, one that accepts social and economic rights as having equal importance to political rights, offers *a lasting preventive measure against violence.*’ (Emphasis added.)

Christie seems content to *disintegrate* my argument for what appears to be no other purpose than that of quote mining – thus when, on page 151, I explicitly qualify my argument as being against violence, he employs this very tactic to question my sincerity. The analysis in which I actually engage at this point in my book is attempting to come to terms with the dissatisfaction and anger of Cambodians who live through circumstances of extraordinary state-sponsored and structural violence:

‘In contemporary Cambodia, although still somewhat rare, expressions of *violence from below* can be understood as representative of an insurrection against the dogged tyranny of the existing neoliberal

order. The conundrum of this situation is that *while violence is never an option for democracy as it undermines its fundamental character of equality by reconstituting hierarchy through its expression*, it is difficult not to see some emancipatory potential in *violence from below* as it paradoxically marks the first steps toward greater democratic empowerment. *This is not an argument in favor of violence, but a recognition of the frustrations and difficult choices Cambodians face as their experiences of neoliberalization come up against and confound their desire for democracy.*' (Emphasis added.)

My commitment to non-violence is reaffirmed once more in the conclusion to my book on page 157, where, in order to guard against knee-jerk reactions that seem unable to grasp the difference between elucidation on the one hand and legitimization on the other, I argue:

'Nevertheless, the reader should not be misled into believing that I am championing violence in the name of democracy. *Explanation does not equal justification, and indeed the relationship between democracy and violence is morally ambiguous at the best of times.* Thus, the *disquieting nexus* that exists between democracy and violence is always also an *irreconcilable schism* because while violent contestation may procure 'the right to the city', and ultimately the right to the nation, it also comes contemporaneous with an impossible brutality that places societies dangerously close to the edge of the abyss. *Violence begets violence. This simple idiom always remains true, regardless of whether violence was originally manifested in the name of social justice, or as an act of abhorrence.*' (Emphasis added.)

In his review Christie (2011, pp 351–352) makes a similar caricature of my book's engagement with the question of culture when he writes:

'one is left with a sense that Springer is so infuriated by cultural reductionism that he has immediately rejected every piece of analysis that even suggests culture might matter. Unfortunately, this has meant a near complete disregard for the subtleties of numerous authors' arguments about the role of culture in Cambodian politics (Lizée, 1993, 2000; Hughes, 2003; Bit, 1991; and Öjendal, 1996).'

Christie's contentions here are problematic on multiple levels. In fact, I attend to the subtleties of culture at length, as a great deal of my book's

argument is dedicated to this very topic. He seems at least partially to acknowledge this fact, given his expressed frustration that ‘culture’ was not factored into the title of my book. Christie, however, has not attended to the subtleties of my argument, nor has he presented my treatment of culture in a fair way, wrongly giving the impression that I lump Caroline Hughes and Joakin Öjendal – two scholars who have bucked the culturalist trend in Cambodian studies – in with those, like Seanglim Bit, who make explicitly essentialist arguments. So when Christie (2011, pp 351–352) argues, ‘In turning to the various scholars that he paints with the culturalist brush, not a single one could be reasonably said to advance a true cultural relativist position. Nor, for that matter, have any of the authors (to the best of my knowledge) claimed an ahistorical and unchanging Khmer culture’, he is of course correct with respect to Hughes (2003) and Öjendal (1996), and, contrary to his contention, I do not suggest otherwise in my book. Yet in the case of Bit (1991), whose entire thesis pivots around reducing Cambodian culture to being inexorably rooted in violence, a point on which I have taken Bit to task elsewhere (see Springer, 2009), this evidently falls outside of ‘the best of Christie’s knowledge’. But even with regard to Bit (1991), whose work is perhaps the worst example of essentialism in Cambodian studies, I do not define his views as a ‘true cultural relativist position’. Instead, in attending to the range with which scholars have responded to the question of culture, and in being careful not to ‘paint’ with a broad ‘culturalist brush’, I differentiate between *strongly culturalist*, *weakly culturalist* and *non-culturalist* arguments, all of which are considered problematic.

Christie (2011, p 352) further contends that ‘there is a lack of conceptual clarity that runs throughout this text’, and attempts to demonstrate this by complaining that I do not define ‘culture’. A more careful reading would have led him to recognize that, rather than offer my own essentialist account of culture by furnishing my readers with a strict definition of this protean, nebulous and processual concept, I instead, beginning on page 20 and running up to page 27, offer a detailed section entitled ‘Negotiating the boundaries of culture’. In this section I explicitly attend to ideas like ‘no culture speaks with a single voice’ and ‘no culture actually exists in a single definitive account’. Through engaging with the work of James Clifford, Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, three of the world’s foremost thinkers in the field of cultural anthropology, on page 22 I accordingly ask, ‘What are the essential elements and boundaries of culture?’:

‘This query deserves some exploring as all strongly culturalist arguments necessarily have a very limited and rigid understanding of what culture is. Answering Clifford’s question about what constitutes the essential element of culture is no easy task, and it is a subject of debate that continues to seethe in academia. Indeed, there is very little that we can say about culture that is concrete, and the concept itself is best described as amorphous. *Rather than defining culture itself, the primary question of culture should be about what processes rather than essences are involved* (Clifford 1988; Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Gupta and Ferguson (1997: 4) argue, “all associations of place, people, and culture are social and historical creations to be explained, not given as natural facts”, a contention that is also shared by Clifford (1988: 9), who views cultural identity, “not as an archaic survival but as an ongoing process, politically contested and historically unfinished”. Thus, culture and identity are engaged in a continuous and perpetual process of becoming... and “are never given but must be negotiated” (Clifford 1988: 275).’ (Emphasis added.)

In addition to such a non-essentialist interpretation of culture, I likewise seek to attend to how the very amorphousness of the concept has made culture easy prey for the resurgence of arguments that echo ‘scientific’ racism. My concern is for how Cambodian culture has been erroneously characterized as *a priori* violent, where we can read such interpretations as replacing arguments of ‘racial’ inferiority with the ostensibly more digestible idea of ‘cultural’ inferiority, without recognizing that both are equally repugnant and allow for a colonial mindset to be carried forward into the present in teaching the ‘right’ cultural values, while suppressing the supposed ‘wrong’ ones.

My choice to attend to and work through the complexity, nuances and problematics of culture, rather than simply offering a rigid definition, is not me ‘arguing for explanations that ignore culture’, as Christie (2011, p 351) suggests. Instead, it is an appreciation of how carelessly the idea of culture has been deployed in Cambodian studies in arguing for a more reflexive, anti-racist and anti-colonialist understanding. My position is thus not ‘non-culturalist’, as Christie implies, but can be more appropriately regarded as ‘non-essentialist’. Christie’s insistence that I define culture in some sort of codified sense implies a lack of openness to processual, non-essentialist understandings and thus to limitations in his thinking (that is, to ‘define’ culture is to give meaning by describing its precise ‘nature’, which is to *essentialize* as it assumes

there is something 'exact' to be described). Christie's (2011, p 352) apparent inability to comprehend notions of process are reified when he misleadingly suggests that my work is somehow 'structuralist' and yet at the same time becomes frustrated that I refuse to spell out prescribed political solutions. Throughout my academic career I have explicitly rejected any sort of conceptual 'box' with respect to my scholarship, which might perhaps lead others to describe my work as 'post-structural', and even then I would reject any labelling of my thinking. Whereas a structuralist argument would surely be keen to offer policy-based responses, I follow Michel Foucault (1991, p 157): 'I absolutely will not play the part of one who prescribes solutions. I hold that the role of the intellectual today is not that of establishing laws or proposing solutions or prophesying, since by doing that one can only contribute to the functioning of a determinate situation of power that to my mind must be criticized.' Thus, if I were to adopt a position that outlined concrete 'solutions', my role would suddenly recapitulate the arrogance of Cambodian elites, the international donor community and the entire project of neo-liberalism more generally, all of which presume to 'know what's best' for Cambodians, instead of Cambodians thinking, speaking and acting for themselves. In short, this is an authoritarian, colonial inspired attitude, and one that I emphatically refuse.

In summary, Christie's criticisms of my book are superficial and misleading. In light of the explicit evidence I have provided, which comes directly from the pages of my book, I wonder how Christie could have drawn such contradictory and disparaging conclusions about my position on violence and culture.

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