

# Robert Manne Responds

**D**URING the period of the Pol Pot regime Noam Chomsky, in collaboration with Edward Herman, published an extended review article concerning Cambodia in *The Nation* (June 25 1977); a long letter to the editor of *The Christian Science Monitor*, published in *The Journal of Contemporary Asia* (1977); and prepared for publication a one hundred and sixty page chapter in *The Political Economy of Human Rights*, (2 vols., 1979). In these three pieces (the last of which went to press as the Vietnamese armies were occupying Cambodia) Chomsky argued that there existed in the West a comprehensive conspiracy of the mass media to blacken the reputation of the Pol Pot regime by allegations concerning massive crimes committed against the Khmer people in order (a) to provide retrospective justification for American imperialist aggression in Indo-China and (b) as part of a renewed ideological warfare, to raise in the public mind bogus doubts about the likely consequences of Communist regimes' threatening in the future to take power in Third World countries.

The argument Chomsky developed in these three pieces was not unusual. Basically the same position was argued by prominent American anti-war activists such as Gareth Porter and George Hildebrand, by academics with an interest in Cambodian affairs such as Malcolm Caldwell and Laura Summers and, in Australia, by Michael Vickery and Ben Kiernan.

After the Vietnamese invasion most of the authors who had offered defences of the Pol Pot regime between 1975 and 1978 changed their tune. "New evidence" had emerged, they now argued, which showed that even the most extreme anti-Pol-Pot claims of the American apologists had in fact been true. The former supporters of Pol Pot now settled down to their new political task of defending the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia; of mounting the case against Pol Pot; and — following a key work by William Shawcross — of blaming Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon for

the Communist seizure of power in Cambodia and for the bloody ruthlessness of Communist policies there.

It was at this point that Noam Chomsky parted company with his former allies. Instead of admitting that he, like Gareth Porter and Ben Kiernan, had been mistaken in his estimation of the Pol Pot regime, Chomsky set about the thankless task of arguing that there existed a new kind of conspiracy — a conspiracy to blacken the reputation of Noam Chomsky, who, it was now revealed, had always been an opponent of Khmer Rouge crimes. As far as I know almost everything Chomsky has written on Cambodia since early 1979 has been concerned with defending himself against those determined to misrepresent his Cambodian writing. In this effort Chomsky has crossed swords not only with liberal anti-Communists like Leo Labeledz and Dennis Duncanson, but also with people like Father François Ponchaud, the author of the most respected early work of revolutionary Cambodia; with Jean Lacouture, a French leftist and admiring biographer of Ho Chi Minh, and with William Shawcross, the author of the anti-American history of the Cambodian civil war, *Sideshow*.

Whatever divides the major contributors to the debate on contemporary Cambodia one thing, it would seem, unites them — the desire to malign Noam Chomsky. Thus Dennis Duncanson is accused of "falshoods and undocumented slanders" concerning Chomsky's Cambodian views; Father Ponchaud of "fakery" and "petty deceit"; Jean Lacouture of "presenting grossly false versions of Chomsky's views, invariably without the slightest effort at documentation". And so on. Even a former political ally, Ben Kiernan, who found it expedient to distance himself from the Cambodian views of Chomsky, appears now determined to harm the reputation of Noam Chomsky. Here is Kiernan in the *New Statesman* of May 2 1980

... there is a left-wing argument — still held, apparently, by Noam Chomsky — which suggests that, although Pol Pot made numerous brutal

errors, the conception of something especially outlandish about this regime is a chimera bred-up by the Western (and Vietnamese) news media.

Since early 1979 — as part of his self-defence in the face of such criticism — Chomsky has become involved in an attempt to rewrite the history of his attitude to Cambodia. This attempt can be most economically demonstrated by a comparison of what Chomsky now claims to have been his views on Cambodia (see for example in the above piece in *Quadrant*) with what he actually wrote in *The Nation* of June 1977. In reality the article was concerned with casting doubt on the reliability and honesty of authors like Ponchaud and Barron and Paul who alleged major crimes against humanity in Pol Pot's Cambodia. It was equally concerned to show that such works (and in particular popularizations of them) were propagated by the American media for ulterior political purposes of the kind outlined earlier. Finally it was argued that the American media systematically ignored the far more impressive works of scholarship favourable to revolutionary Cambodia, as for example the pro-Pol Pot *Cambodia: Starvation and Revolution*, by George Hildebrand and Gareth Porter.

Since 1979 Noam Chomsky, in mounting his defence, has time and again reprinted three sentences from his *Nation* article in order to prove that those who accuse him of being grossly wrong in his assessment of Pol Pot are blackguards and liars and that, as he now puts it, he had never deviated from condemnation of Khmer Rouge crimes. Did he not, Chomsky now argues, point out in *The Nation* that Ponchaud's work was "serious and worth reading"? Did he not argue that although of course "care and caution were necessary", "refugee reports must be considered seriously"? And did not he and Herman admit that "we do not know where the truth lies amidst these sharply conflicting assessments"?

These quotations seem impressive enough if read in isolation; somewhat less impressive if one restores each to its context. Ponchaud's work may be "serious and worth reading" but largely it would appear because of its alleged anti-Sihanouk, anti-American and pro-Khmer Rouge passages. Here is the full passage from which Chomsky's remark is taken.

Ponchaud's book is serious and worth reading, as distinct from much of the commentary it has elicited. He gives a grisly account of what refugees have reported to him about the barbarity of their treatment at the hands of the Khmer Rouge. He also reminds us of some relevant history. For example, in this "peaceful land", peasants were massacred, their lands stolen and villages destroyed, by police and army in 1966, many then joining the *maquis* out of "their hatred for a government exercising such injustices and sowing death." He reports the enormous destruction and murder resulting directly from the American

attack on Cambodia, the starvation and epidemics as the population was driven from their countryside by American military terror and the U.S.-incited civil war, leaving Cambodia with "an economy completely devastated by the war". He points out that "from the time of Sihanouk, then Lon Nol, the soldiers of the government army had already employed, with regard to their Khmer Rouge 'enemies', bloodthirsty methods in no way different from those of Democratic Cambodia" [the Khmer Rouge]. He also gives a rather positive account of Khmer Rouge programs of social and economic development, while deploring much brutal practice in working for egalitarian goals and national independence.

Later in his article, however, Chomsky tells the reader that Ponchaud's work displays an "anti-Communist bias", that he "plays fast and loose with quotes and numbers", that in the rare cases where his references can be checked "the results are not impressive" and that where "an independent check is possible, Ponchaud's account seems at best careless . . ." By the time of writing *The Political Economy of Human Rights* Chomsky's judgment had become even harsher. For here the reader is told not only that Ponchaud engages in petty deceits but also that his

conclusions, it is by now clear, *cannot be taken very seriously* because he is simply too careless and untrustworthy. It is hardly in doubt that work of this calibre would be dismissed out of hand if it were critical of the United States.

(PEHR, vol. 2, p. 44, my emphasis)

Now let us look at the context of Chomsky's claim that he has consistently maintained that refugee reports must be considered seriously. "Highly qualified specialists who have studied the full range of evidence available", he argued in *The Nation*, have made

repeated discoveries that massacre reports were false. They also testify to the extreme unreliability of refugee reports, and the need to treat them with great caution . . . Refugees are frightened and defenceless, at the mercy of alien forces. They naturally tend to report what they believe their interlocutors wish to hear. While their reports must be considered seriously, care and caution are necessary. Specifically, refugees questioned by westerners or Thais have a vested interest in reporting atrocities on the part of Cambodian revolutionaries . . .

In the light of this it is not surprising that in 1977 Chomsky regarded a letter to the editor of *The Economist* of an Englishman (W. J. Sampson) who had left Cambodia prior to the fall of Phnom Penh as "the most authoritative report [concerning conditions in Cambodia] so far available". This letter claimed that the only killings in Cambodia had been the execution of prominent politicians and the "lynching of hated bomber pilots". It apparently outweighed, in Chomsky's mind, in "authority" the countless stories of massacres told

to Ponchaud by the hundreds of refugees he interviewed. It would appear that for Chomsky "serious consideration" of refugee reports meant nothing other than the considered dismissal of their stories, except of course when refugee testimony could be pressed into service as part of the defence of the Pol Pot regime.

Moreover, clearly Chomsky was beside himself with rage when Ponchaud paraphrased his writings on the question of refugee testimony thus:

[Chomsky and Porter] accuse me of being insufficiently critical in my approach to the refugees' accounts. For them, refugees are not a valid source, for they tend to blacken the regime they have fled in order to justify their exile and make people feel sorry for them . . . After an investigation of this kind, 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."

(F. Ponchaud, *Cambodia Year Zero*, London, pp.13 and 15)

Indeed on the basis of this mild and utterly reasonable rendition of Chomsky's views, one of Chomsky's Australian followers, Dr Gavan McCormack, suggested in the Marxist journal *Arena* that Chomsky should take legal action, presumably to silence Ponchaud. (*Arena*, No. 53, p. 55)

Observe, finally, the context of Chomsky's concluding agnosticism in his *Nation* article, which has played a major role in Chomsky's self-defence and attempt to rewrite the history of his attitude to revolutionary Cambodia.

We do not pretend to know where the truth lies amidst these sharply conflicting assessments; rather, we again want to emphasize some crucial points. What filters through to the American public is a seriously distorted version of the evidence available, emphasizing alleged Khmer Rouge atrocities and down, laying or ignoring the crucial U.S. role, direct and indirect, in the torment that Cambodia has suffered. Evidence that focuses on the American role, like the Hildebrand and Porter volume, is ignored, not on the basis of truthfulness or scholarship but because the message is unpalatable.

It is a fair generalization that the larger the number of deaths attributed to the Khmer Rouge, and the more the U.S. role is set aside, the larger the audience that will be reached. The Barron-Paul volume is a third-rate propaganda tract, but its exclusive focus on Communist terror assures it a huge audience. Ponchaud's far more substantial work has an anti-Communist bias and message, but it has attained stardom only via the extreme anti-Khmer Rouge distortion added to it in the article in *The New York Review of Books*.

Having read these passages might I suggest that readers now turn back to see how, in his article above, Chomsky presents his past record on the question of Cambodia and the crimes of Pol Pot.

I turn now briefly to consideration of the anti-Chomsky fabrications which I am supposed to have invented in my *Quadrant* article of October 1979. (Chomsky's views here are to be found in his footnote 4.)

1. As I have had occasion to write before in an exchange in the letter pages of *Quadrant*, I attributed to Noam Chomsky the view that the U.S. media shared with Nixon, Kissinger and the military machine "sole responsibility" for "the present (1977) suffering of the Cambodian people" because Chomsky wrote in his article in *The Nation* that "people are dying as a direct result of the policies that they supported and indeed concealed"; because in his letter of 1977 published in *The Journal of Contemporary Asia* he argued that the U.S. is the "source" of, and bears "basic responsibility" for, "the current suffering in Cambodia"; and because in neither his *Nation* article nor in his letter in the *JCA* does he place any responsibility for mass murder on the ruling clique or cadres of the Cambodian Communist Party.



2. When I wrote my piece I was unaware that W. J. Sampson claimed to have been misrepresented by Shawcross in the article from which I quoted. Had I known this I would not have used the evidence of this interview in the way I did. Nevertheless my main point concerned the ludicrousness of Chomsky's claim that Sampson's letter to the editor of *The Economist* was the most authoritative source available on conditions in post-revolutionary Cambodia. (See above.)

3. If Chomsky's views on how refugee evidence is to be handled were merely, as he claims, a paraphrase of the views of Ponchaud it is extremely difficult to see what prompted Ponchaud's remarks in the preface to the English edition of his

work (which are quoted above in this article). The fact that they are not remotely the same is clear from the passages of Chomsky's *Nation* article, also quoted above. Ponchaud to his credit came to his conclusions concerning Cambodia on the basis of long and patient interviews with Khmer refugees. Chomsky's influence was to discredit works on Cambodia based on interviews with refugees, and to favour works on Cambodia whose major source on post-revolutionary Cambodia was Radio Phnom Penh!

4. Chomsky's article in *The Nation* was entitled "Distortions at Fourth Hand". As I wrote in my article under discussion here, Chomsky's article and his letter in the *JCA* both suggested that (and here I am quoting from my original article)

the 'myth' of the mass killings in Cambodia rested in fact on an unbroken line of distortion which began with the Khmer refugees and was transmitted through Ponchaud, Lacouture and the American press until it reached the broad American public.

This is a completely fair and accurate paraphrase of Chomsky's argument. In so arguing, that is to say in assimilating the work of Ponchaud and Lacouture as the second and third links in a Cambodian disinformation chain, the effect of Chomsky's writings — particularly on those on the left who had read neither Ponchaud's book nor Lacouture's review but who were aware, in garbled form, of Chomsky's "exposure" of their "errors" — was to tarnish and discredit both Lacouture's review of Ponchaud and Ponchaud's book itself. This at least was my experience in argument with the left concerning Cambodia in 1977 and 1978; and this was what I meant when I wrote that Chomsky had managed to discredit Ponchaud's book on the basis of Lacouture's careless review of it.

5. As with so much else Chomsky is quite dishonest in how he now chooses to render what he once had to say about whether the scale of the deaths in revolutionary Cambodia made any analogy with Nazi Germany or with post-liberation France the more appropriate. Lacouture in his review of Ponchaud had suggested the analogy with Nazi Germany. Chomsky answered his general point thus

If, indeed, postwar Cambodia is, as he believes, similar to Nazi Germany, then his comment is perhaps just, though we may add that he has produced no evidence to support this judgment. But if postwar Cambodia is more similar to France after liberation, where many thousands of people were massacred within a few months under far less rigorous conditions than those left by the American war, then perhaps a rather different judgment is in order. *That the latter conclusion may be more nearly correct is suggested by the analyses mentioned earlier.*

[My emphasis]

What had these earlier "expert analyses" of

those whom Chomsky calls "highly qualified specialists" maintained? They had maintained, says Chomsky, that "executions have numbered at most in the thousands, that these were localized in areas of limited Khmer Rouge influence and unusual peasant discontent, where brutal revenge killings were aggravated by the threat of starvation resulting from the American destruction and killing".

No one could possibly have read Chomsky in 1977 without coming to the conclusion that he believed the analogy between revolutionary Cambodia and post-liberation France was, on the basis of expert evidence, more appropriate than the analogy between revolutionary Cambodia and Nazi Germany or Stalinist Russia favoured by those who were right about Pol Pot. Nor can the passages I have quoted leave any room for doubt that Chomsky was trying to suggest, through his references to expert opinion that the killings in Cambodia were small in scale ("expert" opinion thought at most "in the thousands"), spontaneous (localized and in areas of limited Khmer Rouge control), and justified (revenge killings of peasants who had suffered grievously at the hands of the Americans).

For Chomsky now to go on to suggest that I was wrong to speak of the killing of 30,000 to 40,000 French collaborators (i.e. fewer than one tenth of one per cent of the French population as a whole) as "small in scale" in an article which criticised his analogy between post-liberation France and Pol Pot's Cambodia shows to what childish logical tricks Chomsky has sunk in his attempt to rewrite his Cambodian past. Whatever the reason for his past errors on Cambodia, his present fury seems to be based on little more than the consequences of his inability to utter three little words: "I was wrong".

---

## The Long March

As if ravines were not enough  
(and scree slopes, surly tribes  
and the flat, dead snow) we endured  
the next three decades under flags;  
and in the increasingly carpeted rooms  
the streams of reminiscence ran with wine.

Recalled postures were struck on walls,  
the century's pox, the spilt drops  
of possible truths. We could not part  
the real from the writ, the operatic gesture  
from the ulcerated foot on the fifth mountain  
beyond the third river, on the ninety-second page.

*John Griffin*