

# Analysts or Apologists ?

## THE 'LEFT' MEDIA ON KAMPUCHEA

In the English media coverage of Kampuchea and of its occupation by Vietnam, the traditional anti-communist propaganda and the retrospective justification of the U.S. war in South-east Asia have taken second place. An apparently left-wing view has become the dominant media representation of this issue. Its most systematic exponents are to be found in the pages of the New Statesman, Tribune and Marxism Today - most papers of the left groups, with some idiosyncracies of their own, have echoed these.

A critical look at the left commentators' representation of the events in South-east Asia is called for, not only because of the political position that they seek to establish with respect to the developments there, but also because their coverage defines a certain conception of what today constitutes socialism, anti-imperialism, the right of nations to self-determination, etc. On these broader political questions, an issue that involves Vietnam is likely to play a particularly influential role, for Vietnam, being inseparably linked to the recent history of the left, evokes deep and ready responses.

### PUPPET THEORY

The articles of John Pilger and Anthony Barnett in the New Statesman go out of their way to paint a picture of the current Indochina conflicts in the images of the past in which the left will recognise its old friends and its old enemies. Pilger talks of "the current American war in Indochina" and of "Brzezinski Indochina war". On the Thai border, he reports, operates the Kampuchean Emergency Group. "The men of KEG are attached to the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok and report variously to the State Department, USAID, the CIA and, of course, to Ambassador Morton Abramowitz, a Pentagon China specialist ...". KEG's task "is to oversee the distribution of Western supplies, which are funded largely by the United States and the EEC, including Britain, to the proxies in the latest Indochina war ... namely the Khmer Rouge, proportionately the most thorough mass murderers in modern times, whose demonry included the building of Auschwitz in Asia ..." (1) All the old enemies are here only the "proxy" has changed, but lest we should have any questions about the new arrival, it too is made recognisable from the past, it is a version of the Nazis. It is all so simple - who can fail to spot the Goodies?

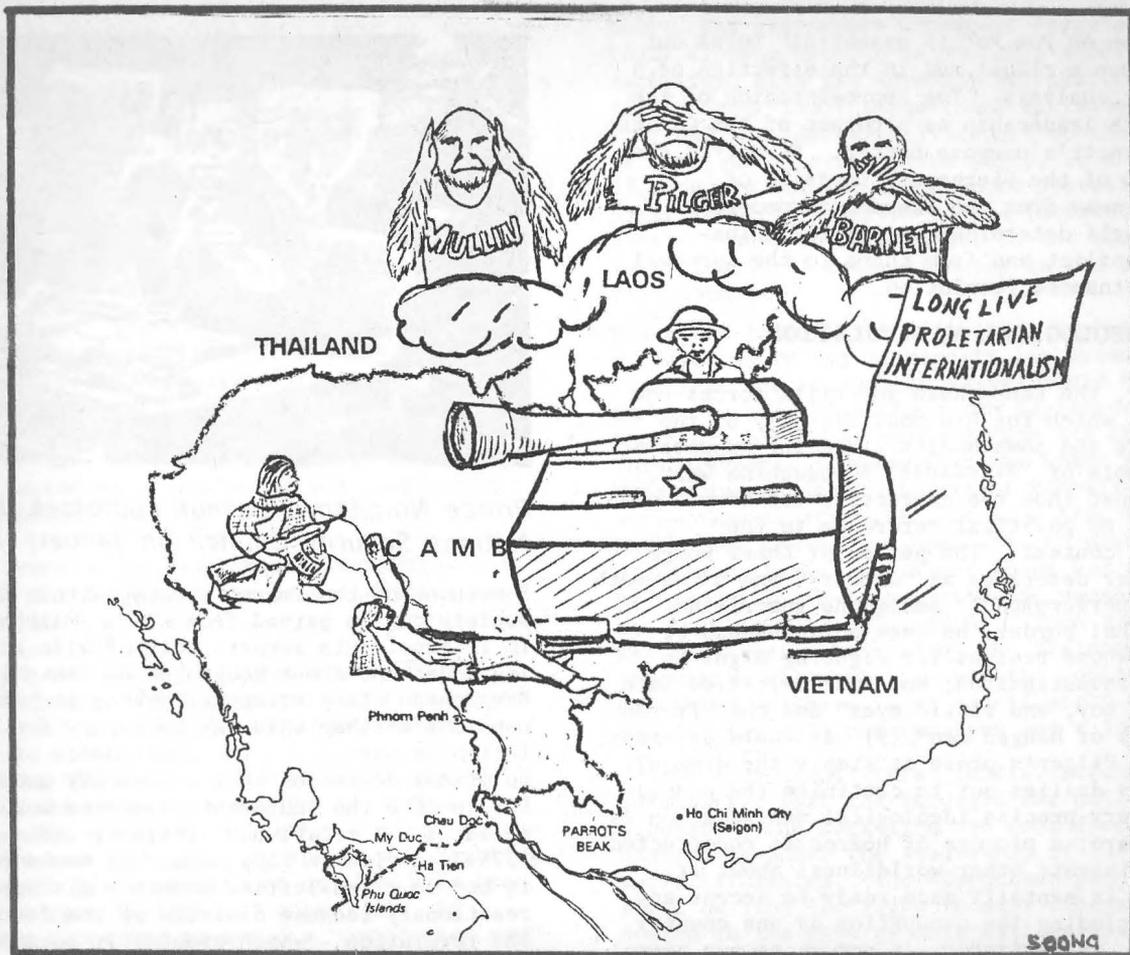
For Barnett, too, the U.S. is behind the present Indochina conflicts. "The United States", he writes in Marxism Today, "evidently played a blatant role in bringing about the present state of hostilities. Beijing only came out openly against Hanoi after Brzezinski visited the Chinese capital in May 1978 and denounced 'regional hegemonism', codework for Vietnam. Hanoi and Beijing were played off against each other by Washington ..." (2) He dismisses the idea that the influence of the Soviet bloc in

the region may now be more significant than that of the U.S. in the following terms: "whilst the overwhelming position of the United States internationally has been broken, it is still easily the most powerful country of the most powerful bloc ... All that has happened since 1975 is that the socialist bloc is now no longer totally the subordinate. The crucial economic index is simple enough. If one compares the total gross domestic products of the COMECON countries with the major capitalist ones, the ratio is 1 to 4, that is, the socialist countries create one-quarter of the wealth the capitalist countries produce, counted in World Bank figures". Economic indices are "simple enough", but it is not economic indices that march into countries. This kind of crude economism explains nothing about the balance of military and political forces in a particular region.

Of course, Barnett too discusses these forces when he comes to interpret the events in Indochina. The reference to the U.S. is merely to identify the hand behind China, in order to establish for the readers of Marxism Today, on the basis of demarcations with which they will feel at once at ease, that China is the real culprit of the current South-east Asia conflicts. "Vietnam", Barnett explains, "represents an original, independent and dynamic form of Communism on the borders of China. This is not to the liking of Beijing". Thus China's objective is "to destabilize Vietnam" and it used Kampuchea to try to achieve that. The Chinese, according to Barnett, put Pol Pot in the leadership position around April 1977. "There was, it seems, a Chinese coup of some sort, out of which Pol Pot emerged as supreme". Pol Pot then attacked Vietnam, which Barnett indicates, in addition to Chinese encouragement, corresponded to the need "to resolve internal tensions".

For the readers of the New Statesman, Barnett slightly moderates the view that Pol Pot was simply a puppet of the Chinese; "some understanding of Pol Pot is essential. For although he is now presented as the stooge of the Chinese, and there is no denying his having fallen into the arms of Chinese advisers, he was and remains a Khmer nationalist". (3) Barnett does not explain on the basis of what evidence he came to the conclusion that the Chinese installed a Pol Pot faction in power but, in case anyone should have any doubts on it, he has Pol Pot not only installed by a Chinese coup but also falling into their arms after they installed him.

Like all the puppet and proxy theories - dear to right-wing political scientists - this is a totally inadequate explanation for Pol Pot's accession to the leadership. Barnett's version has, however, the added disadvantage of flying in the face of the more reliable information existing on this point. This suggests that the Chinese considered the Khmer Rouge leadership under Pol Pot ultra-leftist. (4)



### THE CHINESE DIVERSION

Barnett is seemingly more factual when as evidence of Chinese designs to destabilize Vietnam, he writes: "It [China] claimed as its citizens 'one million several hundred thousand' ethnic Chinese in Vietnam, to use its mathematics. (One of the causes of the present state of war was Hanoi's insistence that the ethnic Chinese were Vietnamese citizens. Whereas Beijing's demands were such that Cholon, the Chinese quarter of Ho-Chi-Minh Ville (Saigon) would have become a virtual extra-territorial concession, its property and commerce directly protected by Beijing, under article 54 of the new Chinese Constitution - which was promulgated, incidentally the same month as Hanoi legislated the nationalization of Cholon commerce.)"(5) Barnett concludes that these are "an astonishing set of demands" and they would indeed be if it was true that such demands were made.

Article 54 of the new Chinese constitution consists of a single sentence; "The state protects the just rights and interests of overseas Chinese and their relatives." The reference to "rights" and "interests" does not in itself suggest an attempt to interfere with the laws - such as those relating to property and commerce - of another country and, as we shall see, the Chinese have not interpreted it that way. Barnett does not quote article 54 but he implies its sinister intentions by saying that it "was promulgated, incidentally, the same month as Hanoi legislated the nationalization of Cholon commerce". The implication is clearly that the Chinese introduced article 54 to hinder Vietnam's nationalization of capitalist trade in the south.

Article 54 - along with the rest of the new constitution - was adopted on 5th March. The

nationalization of capitalist trade in south Vietnam was first announced by the Ho Chi Minh's People's Committee, more than two weeks later, on 23rd March. (6) According to Barnett's interpretation, the Chinese were undermining Vietnamese measures even before they were taken. Such outrageous distortion would be of minor importance if it could be shown that the Chinese were using the overseas Chinese community to undermine Vietnamese laws.

On this issue the Chinese appear to have been remarkably consistent over the years. In 1955, the Chinese government adopted the position, in an agreement with Hanoi, that Chinese nationals living in Vietnam should obey Vietnamese laws and be encouraged to adopt Vietnamese citizenship. The same policy was adopted towards Cambodia. In 1956 "Chou En-lai called upon the 300,000 Cambodians of Chinese descent to observe Cambodian laws and regulations ... and encouraged them to take Cambodian citizenship". (7) This position with respect to the overseas Chinese was reaffirmed at the first session of the Sino-Vietnamese negotiations, in August 1978: "It is very much our hope that more and more Chinese residents in Vietnam will adopt Vietnamese nationality ... In the case of those who have retained their Chinese nationality, we have always enjoined them to abide by Vietnamese laws, respect the custom and habits of the people ..." (8)

After the 'documentation' that Barnett provides to support his contention that the Chinese were out to destabilize Vietnam, it comes as something of a relief that he makes no attempt to elaborate on the "internal tensions in Kampuchea", which he had indicated as the other factor behind the Kampuchean border attacks against Vietnam. His measured concession that "some

information on Pol Pot is essential" turns out to have been a ritual nod in the direction of a scientific analysis. The representation of the Khmer Rouge leadership as a puppet of the Chinese serves Barnett's purpose better. It shifts the discussion of the Vietnamese invasion of Kampuchea away from the Kampuchean people's right to self-determination, to the China-Vietnam conflict and from there to the survival of the Vietnamese revolution.

### IDEOLOGICAL MANIPULATION

For Pilger, the Kampuchean guerrilla forces now fighting - which for him consists only of the Khmer Rouge and some badits - are the puppets of the US, tools of "Brzezinski's Indochina war". In his puppet show the characters are devoid of all social or political reference to the Kampuchean context. The period of Khmer Rouge rule, Pilger describes as "demonry" and a "mammoth Nazi-like perversion". Among the guerrillas near the Thai border, he sees not peasants or students, whose reasons for fighting might be worthy of investigation, but "the calcified face of a small boy, and static eyes" and the "framed silhouettes of hanged men".(9) It would be wrong to dismiss Pilger's prose as simply the demagoguery of the mass dailies out to cretinize the population. A very precise ideological manipulation is involved here; a picture of horror is constructed with a deliberate other-worldliness about it. The reader is mentally made ready to accept any remedy, including the occupation of one country by another, as desirable - a return to our normal world.

For this ideological sleight of hand it is not enough to detail the killings, it is necessary to portray Kampuchea as a political void, to be filled either by the "proxies" of the US or by the Vietnamese. The idea that the Kampuchean masses are also a political force cannot be entertained. The image of the smiling, passive Khmer, fostered by French colonialism, is replaced by that of the traumatized, passive Khmer. Pilger carefully omits any mention of the patriotic forces that have emerged in the face of Vietnamese occupation, the FNLK, led by the former prime minister of Sihanouk, Son Sann, and Moulinaka, led until his death a few weeks ago, by Kong Sileah. There is no room for such details in Pilger's story, where the victim, prey of a demon, can be filched away from death only by the Vietnamese hero. On the identity of the hero he is equally elusive, when he talks of Vietnamese presence in Kampuchea it is of a doctor or teacher, or of soliders who "stroll through the market unarmed".

Barnett, too, ignores the range of political opposition to the Vietnamese occupation but he mentions the most frequently proposed Kampuchean solution to the conflict, the return of Sihanouk, only to quickly dismiss it. "All parties", he writes, "might welcome the legitimacy of Sihanouk, but none wishes to see him regain power. And he seems to have forfeited the claim to such power by his equivocation with regard to Pol Pot."(10) The question of Sihanouk's return is thus reduced to Sihanouk, the individual. In his "equivocation", Barnett can only see Sihanouk's moral culpability, rather than the effect of his manoeuvrings to find a power base among conflicting social and political forces, having in common only the opposition to the Vietnamese occupation.



*Prince Norodom Sihanouk addresses the United Nations Security Council on January 12, 1979,*

Something of the forces working within Kampuchean society can be gained from Chris Mullin's reports in *Tribune*. His reports talk of wide-scale killing under the Khmer Rouge but he links it to the Kampuchean class struggle, making it possible to consider whether this was necessary for the revolution or was the consequence of a political deviation that ultimately undermined it. For despite the judgements hammered out in the media, still relatively little is known of the 1975-79 period in Kampuchea. It would seem that it had an ultra-leftist aspect - ultimately reactionary because divisive of the forces behind the revolution - which eventually became dominant, but it also had a progressive side. There is no other way to explain Shawcross's report that S. Heder, who has to this date carried out the widest and most objective survey of refugee accounts, "believes the majority of people [Kampuchean] had decided that "when it came to feeding the population the Vietnamese were inferior to the Khmer Rouge"'.(11) There is no other way to explain Mullin's report that; "One aid official in Phnom Penh was astonished to hear a non-Communist senior civil servant in the new regime estimate that 50 per cent of Kampuchean aged between 15 and 25 still supported Pol Pot".(12)

By analysing the developments in Kampuchea in terms of class forces, Mullin not surprisingly comes to a different conclusion from Pilger and Barnett as to the way to resolve the present war. "There is only one solution in sight and it is not a terribly happy one; the return of Prince Sihanouk to preside over a non-aligned government in Phnom Penh ... From the Vietnamese point of view, international recognition for Kampuchea would remove the prospect of having large numbers of troops tied down indefinitely on foreign soil and break the deadlock with China. The result would be to release resources desperately needed to develop their own country.

"The disadvantage would be that the Vietnamese would not have in Kampuchea an entirely pliant regime of the sort that they have at the moment. But if as they insist, the Vietnamese have no desire to remain in Kampuchea such a compromise should present no real problem, provided that they could be assured that their own frontier was secure."(13)

Mullin touches here on an issue that is central to the entire Indochina situation today. What made the Vietnamese occupy Kampuchea? But it is a question that he evidently does not want to pursue. In an article on Laos (14) whose

relation with Vietnam could shed light on Hanoi's objectives in Kampuchea, Mullin makes no mention of Vietnamese military presence there or of its political and economic involvement. Barnett and Pilger are of course silent on Laos.

### "LIBERATION" FROM ABOVE

In the articles of the three writers that we have considered, three arguments are used or implied to justify the Vietnamese occupation.

1. The Khmer Rouge border attacks on Vietnam threatened the Vietnamese revolution itself. The fragile class alliance in the South, Barnett claims, would have been put under intolerable strain in "circumstances of protracted war, created by the Kampuchean government".
2. The Democratic Kampuchean government was an agent for Chinese plans to destabilize Vietnam.
3. Due to the scale of violence used by the Khmer Rouge, the Vietnamese invasion served the interests of the Kampuchean people.

For Barnett, the first is the decisive argument justifying the Vietnamese occupation. Quite apart from the question of whether the Kampuchean forces were the aggressors in the border fighting, and Barnett's bland assertions on this have been shown to be open to serious doubts (15) if Vietnam was concerned to avoid a "protracted war" for the sake of the Vietnamese revolution, then its military and political objectives would have been confined to achieving a secure border. But Vietnam's intervention did not stop at an invasion of the border areas, it did not even stop at the overthrow of the Kampuchean government, it pushed on to a full scale occupation of the country, installing a government of its choosing with which it then signed economic and military agreements of "mutual" benefit. Occupying Kampuchea was the least likely way to avoid a protracted war, as subsequent events have shown, and far from defending the gains of the Vietnamese revolution it will mean their abandonment. For the presence of 200,000 troops in Kampuchea involves a militarisation of Vietnamese society and a drain on its human and material resources which preclude the path of national independence and socialism.

The second justification, often, as with Barnett, linked to the first, does not stand up to examination any better than the first, even when it is examined on its own premise, i.e. that the conflict between Kampuchea and Vietnam developed out of the China-Vietnam conflict. If the Chinese were out to destabilize Vietnam they are much more likely to succeed with Vietnam militarily over-extended and economically drained by a war that would inevitably be protracted. There are, however, solid historical grounds for rejecting the very basis of a justification that reduces Kampuchea in its conflict with Vietnam to an extension of the Chinese. The Khmer Rouge gained the leadership of the struggle against the U.S. by its uncompromising pursuit of national independence. The socialism it espoused, with its strong emphasis on self-reliance and independence, embraced that struggle and made the government it brought to power an unlikely candidate for foreign tutelage. It was in fact, this aspect of the Kampuchean revolution which brought it into conflict with its neigh-

bour. The Vietnamese Communist Party's increasingly close adherence to Moscow's model of socialism, with its advocacy of "limited sovereignty" and "the international division of labour", provided the ideological support to the ascendancy of a political orientation which, in a situation of economic crisis, was able to prevail on the party that the solution to the internal contradictions and, in particular, to the shortfalls in agricultural production lay in the unification of Indochina.

The third justification, implied in Pilger's article, as in his TV reports, is based on the view that the Kampuchean masses would have been unable to overthrow their own oppressors and therefore had to be rescued from the Khmer Rouge. This blatantly ignores that the Khmer people have a long history of peasant rebellions and anti-colonial struggle. It is a tradition on which they would have been able to draw on and if, as Pilger claims, the Khmer Rouge had no sympathy or support in the population, an uprising would not have been long in coming. Such eventuality was decisively thwarted by the Vietnamese occupation which has plunged the country into a war to which there is no end in sight. Famine and killing will now continue for a long time.

At the core of all three justifications is the perspective that the struggle for national liberation and socialism can come from above, ushered in under the leadership of the so-called socialist states. The Kampuchean people are not first to find the right to self-determination denied in the name of internationalism and the defence of socialism.

Twenty months after the Vietnamese occupation of Kampuchea the arguments of its apologists appear increasingly hollow. The Vietnamese have made no moves to facilitate their withdrawal by allowing the formation of a government that would have the broad support of the people. Mullin might come to reflect on the "if" in his view that "if as they insist the Vietnamese have no desire to remain in Kampuchea such a compromise should present no real problem ..."

### Paul Kelemen

- (1) New Statesman, 1.8.80
- (2) Marxism Today, August 1979, reproduced in Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars, Oct./Dec. 1979.
- (3) New Statesman, 28.3.80
- (4) Reports of comments to this effect emanating from Chinese diplomats were made repeatedly in Le Monde during 1977 and '78. See also Far Eastern Economic Review 18.4.80, and the critique of the political line of the Democratic Kampuchean government by the Thai C.P. who are known to be close to the Chinese, Le Matin 27.12.79.
- (5) Barnett in Marxism Today article
- (6) BBC summary of World Broadcasts Part 3, 28th March, 1978.
- (7) M. Caldwell and Lek Tan, Cambodia in the Southeast Asian War, Monthly Review Press, 1973, p. 107.
- (8) Peking Review, 18th August, 1978.
- (9) Pilger, op. cit.
- (10) Barnett, op. cit.
- (11) International Herald Tribune, 3.4.80.
- (12) Tribune, 11.4.80.
- (13) ibid.
- (14) Tribune, 1.8.80.
- (15) see Laura Summer's answer to Barnett in Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars, Oct./Dec. 1979.