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Who are the "Enemies of the People"?

By Sarah Federman, Ph.D.

This past week [Genocide Watch](#), hosted a screening of the film *Enemies of the People*.

The film's title emphasizes the filmmakers' journey into the contemporary rural Cambodian countryside to expose and understand more about these people that led the killings during the reign of the Khmer Rouge.

Turning Your Enemy Into Your Father

One of Cambodia's top investigative journalists shares a portion of his ten-year study of and relationship with Pol Pot's number two. Together they ran a regime responsible for the murder of roughly two million people at the end of the 1970s. Those who survived their families were irreparably harmed as well. The nation still quakes in the aftermath as trials continue to persecute these now octogenarians.

The film was haunting on several counts. The film presents journalist Thet Sambath as spending over a decade interviewing Nuon Chea, "Brother Number Two", whose actions he can easily link to the death of most of his family. Yet the film portrays his relationship with Chea as almost familial. Sambath seemed no more uneasy with Chea than any young might be faced with a father with whom he struggled. The documentary shows Sambath leaving his wife and kids for four days every week to spend time with Brother Number Two and his family. Sambath's wife wondered why he spent all his time and much of their money to work on this documentary. The film left me wondering if Sambath was more than investigating Chea, he was turning him into the father he never had. When Chea is picked up by a helicopter to face trial, Sambath expresses his sadness Another "parent lost."



In some Joseph Campbell sense, this dynamic echoes a deeper archetypal journey of the hero. A similar theme emerges in the Star Wars series in which Luke Skywalker's struggles to make sense of Darth Vader as his father.

On planet earth, finding the "enemies of the people" can be so much more complex in the aftermath, especially in communities where some of these people have spent decades reintegrating into the fabric of the culture uncontested. How then to extricate them? Well, more or less like a tooth, it seems. You lift them out with a helicopter and send them to trial. When they are pulled out, the roots and networks of memory linked to them are disturbed. The culture swells and aches when this "rotten tooth" is removed. Old memories are stirred and unacknowledged losses perk up with the hope that perhaps now might be the time all becomes exposed.

Those living in the aftermath seem to have mixed feelings about exposing this horrific past. The pain they've struggled to live with haunts them but some seem to feel it's safer where it is. Bringing it all up may make it worse or even trigger a recurrence of the past.

Is It About Communism?

What also struck me about the film and the Cambodian killings more generally, was the connection to communism. People were slaughtered for "not" supporting communism. I'm no fan of communism in any form (if still unconvinced by history, try Hayek's *Road to Serfdom*); but to blame communism would miss the point here. The Indonesian genocide in 1965, about a decade prior, used allegedly being a communist as the reason for the murder. So, it's damned if you are and damned if you aren't communist when it comes to Southeast Asia in the 1960s-1970s.

I'm not sure why communism is so linked in both atrocities; I suspect it has something to do with the red scare in the United States, containment, and allowing Stalin to enact his will. Alas, this pulls at a thread too thick and connected to explore in this blog.

Until the next one...

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My scholarly and consulting work focuses on the ways in which stories and language frame our view of the world and how we act within it.

Specifically, my doctoral work considered developing narratives related to corporate accountability & the Holocaust. This complemented by a decade-long career as an advertising executive and two-decades working with Bedford St. Martins on their college writing textbooks inform how I understand and study the power of language.

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