

Roberta Lynch

Blacking out the mind: Cambodia and the American left



When you were a little kid did you ever believe that if there was something you didn't want to see, you could get rid of it by simply closing your eyes? As if by taking no notice you could deny its existence. A lot of us did.

Now we're supposedly all grown up and we don't do things like that any more. We can look reality in the eye without flinching. Well, lately I'm not so sure. In talking with people on the left—many of them veterans of the anti-war movement—and in reading progressive publications, I have the sense that there is a kind of collective evasion underway—an attempt to make something disappear simply by refusing to see it.

I am talking about our attitude toward Cambodia. For many of those whose political education was the Indochina war of the past decade, Cambodia is not some obscure spot on the world map. It was Nixon's decision to invade Cambodia in 1970 that propelled tens of thousands of people into activism and that caused hundreds of thousands more to come face to face with their government's inhumane policies. Cambodia, we thought, was etched in our consciousness.

When the war ended and an avowedly left government came to power there, we fervently hoped that this small, underdeveloped and seriously damaged country could begin to rebuild based on a new social order that would be the antithesis of the horror and destruction of the war.

We identified Cambodia with Vietnam—whose history, culture and political arrangements we knew a good deal more about—and expected both countries to develop along similar lines.

Then gradually the stories began to leak

out—the "forced" evacuation of Phnom Penh, "mass" executions, the "break-up" of families. All of them printed in "reliable" sources like the *New York Times*, all of them sensationalized, and nearly all of them based on accounts from refugees—since almost no foreigners were allowed into the country.

Most of us greeted these initial reports with skepticism. We knew from direct experience—around China and Vietnam, for example—the willingness of the American press to print one-sided or even distorted reports to serve its own ideological ends. And we knew as well that some kind of drastic and dramatic measures were probably necessary in the short run to cope with the terrible legacy of starvation and destruction left by the war. We were quick to point these facts out in defense of the Cambodians.

But as time wore on and the reports continued unabated—growing more detailed and more disturbing—an uneasy silence began to descend over our ranks.

In part it was a sensible silence. We have believed, "Without investigation, no right to speak." And there had been little or nothing in the way of reliable first-hand information on the current developments in Cambodia.

Yet even this lack of information requires some comment. Why have the Cambodians been unwilling to explain their actions or permit even sympathetic observers into their country as the Vietnamese have done?

When the border dispute erupted between Cambodia and Vietnam it came as a shock even to many of those who followed developments in Indochina. The spectacle of these still-young and strug-

gling socialist nations devoting their limited resources not to fighting off an imperialist aggressor, but to fighting each other was painful to see—and difficult to fathom. Even as the accusations from each side came to light, the real facts remained obscure. And many of us here began to close our eyes as well as our mouths. If you didn't know what to say about something, perhaps it was easier not to see it as well.

But there is a price paid for this collective blackout—and I believe that it is too high. It is the undermining of our political consistency. We cannot argue forcefully against the denial of human rights in capitalist countries such as Brazil and remain blind to what may be significant violations in a socialist country.

And perhaps more importantly, it is the undermining of our political credibility. The violation of human rights in a socialist country has special meaning for the left in America because it reflects on our efforts here. The charges against Cambodia arouse people's worst fears about "collectivism": that it will destroy the entire social fabric, pull apart families, entail forced labor, and so on.

Many of us on the left share a vision of socialism that brings not only economic and social justice, but greater democracy and personal freedom. Such a vision is in sharp contrast to the spectre of "collectivism." But people in this country will judge our commitment to these goals not just on the basis of our program, but on the vigor of our defense of them.

I am not suggesting that we should simply accept as true all of the accusations printed in the American press. I have no doubt that any number of them are mis-

representations or inaccuracies. Nor do I doubt that some of the policies being pursued in Cambodia today may be necessary and humane—if extreme—given the circumstances in which that nation finds itself.

However, I am arguing that the American left cannot expect to relate to the American people on the basis of a blanket dismissal of the press as "biased" or "capitalist-dominated." Enough doubt has been created in everyone's mind—including many of ours—about the actions of the Cambodian government that our response must be based on specific and documented facts.

Such evidence is difficult to obtain because of the self-imposed wall around the country. However, one of the first reliable reports has recently been published by Yugoslavian observers. It is not in the form of accusations or charges, but it certainly does not lay to rest the concerns for human rights.

The left here and elsewhere in the world should call on the Cambodians to permit further observation. If such investigation reveals necessary and justifiable actions, we should seek to explain and interpret them as such. But if it reveals the kind of violations not just of human rights, but of the human spirit that have been charged, then we should be clear and forthright in our criticisms.

We have a responsibility to open our eyes—a responsibility to the principles for which we stand and to the movement that we seek to build.

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Richard L. Sklar

CIA sabotages democracy to fight Russians

John Stockwell soldiered for the CIA. He had been a CIA station chief in central Africa and officer in charge of operations in a Vietnamese province before his appointment, in July 1975, to direct the Angola Task Force. His book, *In Search of Enemies: A CIA Story*, is a despairing account of the American debacle in Angola. It should be read by those who wonder what we are now doing in Zaire.

The African liberation movement in Angola was made up of three principal organizations, each with its own foreign relations. In 1973 China funnelled military support to a floundering northern group, the National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA), and its local patron, the government of Zaire. The Soviet Union supported a rival group, the

Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), with little enthusiasm until October 1974, when the Kremlin decided to compete effectively with the Chinese in Angola. The U.S., friendly to the colonialist regime in Lisbon until its overthrow in 1974, had also been paying the FNLA leader a personal retainer of \$10,000 per year since 1970. Meanwhile, a third Angolan group, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), had little outside support, apart from intermittent help from Zambia.

Stockwell was elated by his appointment: "a GS 14 in a GS 16 job." But he was troubled from the beginning. On his first day at work he was told by a superior that Secretary of State Henry Kissin-

ger had decided not to seek a negotiated settlement in Angola, preferring instead to challenge the Soviets wherever possible for global reasons that had nothing to do with Angola. What is more, he was informed that the quaintly named "40 Committee," a subcommittee of the National Security Council, responsible for covert operations and chaired by Kissinger, did not expect to accomplish anything positive. The sole objective was to prevent a "cheap" and "easy" victory for the Soviet-backed MPLA.

To that end, the 40 Committee and the President secretly spent \$31.7 million, about one-tenth of what the Soviets are reported to have paid for their MPLA-Cuban victory. But for the persistent efforts of Senators Clark and Tunney, American involvement would have been escalated, as Kissinger appears to have wished, to the point of "an open-ended confrontation with the Soviet Union" (Clark). Tunney's amendment to the 1976 Defense Appropriations Bill expressly prohibited the use of defense funds in Angola.

Stockwell reveals that in deference to Portugal, the CIA did not even gather information from within Angola between the late 1950s and 1975. Ignorance may partially account for the various inept strategic decisions taken by those who were responsible for the covert operation in Angola. For example, students of the liberation movement have wondered why the MPLA and UNITA, which have complementary and probably reconcilable ideological inclinations, were unable to reach a mutually satisfactory agreement. Stockwell discloses that UNITA did attempt to open negotiations with the MPLA in September 1975. This initiative was blocked by the CIA. "We wanted no 'soft' allies in our war against the MPLA." Instead of constructive efforts to

end the conflict, the CIA planted a garden of "news" stories in African and other newspapers that were designed to exaggerate the magnitude of Soviet military intervention.

Tragically, UNITA, an impressively led movement, thought to enjoy the largest popular following, accepted South African military assistance, as did the FNLA. South Africa's entry into the war led, in turn, to the introduction of Cuban regular forces, over and above the existing contingent of 1,000 battle-hardened Cuban advisers. Stockwell himself "saw no evidence that the U.S. formally encouraged" South Africa to enter the war. But he documents the existence of a cozy relationship between the CIA and its South African counterpart, the Bureau of State Security. As in colonial Angola, the CIA does not appear to develop its own sources of information within South Africa.

What results did American policy produce in Angola? Arguably these: (1) A minority government dependent upon Cubans for its survival. (2) An embittered and apparently unbridgeable division between the contending Angolan movements. (3) A continuing toll of Angolan life and treasure.

Today we witness a new American operation in central Africa: a massive supply of military support, including the introduction of foreign troops, to preserve the Mobutu dictatorship in Zaire. The President's National Security Adviser confers with the Chinese government in Peking, and the Chinese Foreign Minister then shows up in Kinshasa to denounce Soviet aggression against Zaire. Who is following whom, to what end, at what cost and to whom?

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By Stanley Aronowitz

**CAPTAINS OF CONSCIOUSNESS:
Advertising and the Social Roots of
Consumer Culture**By Stewart Ewen
McGraw-Hill, New York, 1976 (paper-
back 1977, \$3.95)

This book is about the industrialization of consumption after the first world war. Stewart Ewen's point is that the advent of mass production, signified most dramatically by the introduction of the automobile assembly line, generated a crisis for capitalism that could only be solved by the manufacture of consumers as well as goods.

If Fordism and Taylorism created a "mass" production worker, advertising was the main instrument creating a mass consumer. Workers had to be "habituated" to buying as the main form of leisure, as a kind of central cultural activity just as they were being habituated by industrial psychology in the 1920s to repetitive detailed labor on the job.

Captains of Consciousness treats this process historically. It traces the development of the ideology of consumption to its manifestations in changing family relations, especially their transformation from a unit of production to a unit of consumption.

Ewen shows how the most intimate relations of personal life were penetrated by consumerism. He shows the role of parents changing to make youth the ideal to which all the family's resources had to be subordinated. For Ewen, advertising then, was much more than a means to sell products. Its task was nothing less than selling capitalism both by persuasion and by the industrialization of the institutions of daily life.

In a felicitous phrase, he characterizes consumerist ideology as a "partial totality" in which the very processes of thinking are bound up to the moral duty of habitual consumption. Consumerist ideology generates a whole new world of facts assembled from cultural things produced by the combination of industry and media.

Ewen's study shows that we can no longer confine social criticism or political struggle to "economic" issues at the point of production or to public issues in the legislative arena. The cultural world created by advertising and mass media renders a consciousness increasingly unable to think or act its way out of repressive modes of living. The rise of advertising was linked to the need of the new capitalism to destroy elements of working class culture, lodged in the family and workers' organizations, that resisted the domination of capital. Ewen's rich historical description shows that important sectors of the corporate capitalist class, particularly those in retailing and marketing as well as corporate intellectuals, were well aware that upon the success of the project depended the ability of the system to withstand its internal crises.

Ewen's departure from liberal critics of mass culture such as Vance Packard consists in his refusal to ascribe the degradation of labor and consciousness in the 20th century to "eccentricities" of the

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on assembly lines

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Fordism created mass production,
advertising mass culture as the
"heart of a heartless world."

economic order. Rather he insists that the phenomenon of consumer culture must be understood as "systemic," literally the other side of the mass production of goods. As production became more and more oppressive, consumption seemed

the only escape from the boredom and routinization of the assembly line.

The irony is that mass consumption offers little solace. Instead, it results in the piling of junk in the household and a vast consumer debt. Most important, it

tends to close out the universe of critical thought. Mass culture becomes the "heart of the heartless world" replacing religion. But, it is an illusory sanctuary that merely intensifies the oppressiveness of everyday life because it makes the trip to the factory a two-way street: the home is no longer a clear alternative to the alienated workplace; it is too fully integrated into the market.

Like several other important books that have documented the degradation of work in our epoch (notably Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* and David Noble's *America by Design*), *Captains of Consciousness* stresses the inexorable character of the process by telling the story from the point of view of the corporations that perpetrated it. While this is a necessary aspect of the understanding of the nature of repression in modern life, it is inadequate and misleading if taken by itself. In his last chapter, Ewen indicates that the road was not smooth for those who wished to eliminate all resistance to the corporate order, especially in the 1960s. But the impression left by the book is the overwhelming power of the cultural apparatus. There is virtually no discussion of the contradictions within it that may open the space for social opposition.

I am not asking that a book do everything. However, if the analysis remains at a level of abstraction where it cannot take into account concrete struggles that defy the process of degradation, slow it down and even prevent its success in some instances, the lesson tends to be that virtually nothing can stop closing out the chance for fundamental social change.

The historical basis of this pessimism lies, I suspect, in the failure of the left in western capitalist countries to fulfill hopes of emancipation.

As Ewen notes, the most articulate expression of this vision of total domination is contained in the work of the Frankfurt School Marxists who have bequeathed a legacy of rich analytic perspectives from which to understand the failure of American socialism as involving something more than "revisionism." At the same time they have offered a framework in which hope is found only at the margins of the social structure, if at all.

I am reminded of the small, but significant intellectual movement that, in the 1960s initiated the demand for "history from the bottom up." Ewen's work is certainly sympathetic to this tendency because he has offered a social history rather than remaining within the confines of ruling class chronicles. He has tried to develop an approach that goes to the underside of our lives, rather than remaining at the level of political and economic structures. One hopes that the sequel to this excellent volume will deal with the ways in which artists and workers try to combat the massification of their labor and how this cultural struggle may congeal into a powerful opposition in the years ahead.

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