

## Book Review

### Man or Monster? On the Banality of Evil

*Man or Monster? The Trial of a Khmer Rouge Torturer* by Alexander Laban Hinton, Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2016.

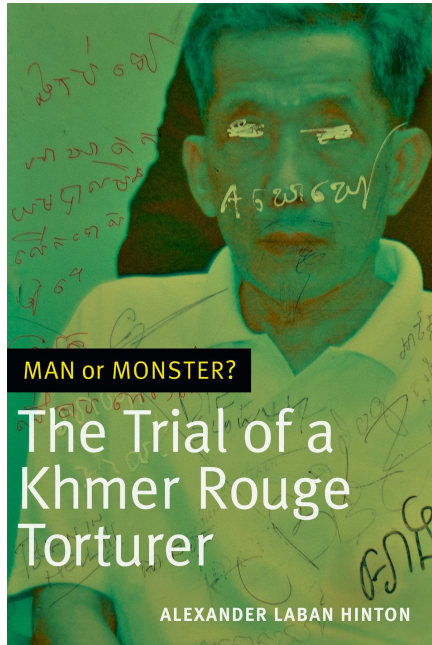
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*Man or Monster* unravels through the trial of Kaing Guek Eav (aka Duch). Duch became the chairman of S-21 (otherwise *Tuol Sleng*), the dreaded prison and security system of Cambodia's Khmer Rouge regime. He was said to have officiated or led most of the tortures from 1975 to 1979. The international legal apparatus, the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), arrested him in 2007 on breaches of the 1949 Geneva convention, as well as gross human rights abuse. He was eventually found guilty of torture, and in most cases also of execution, of over 12,000 prisoners.

Alexander Laban Hinton's style uncannily mirrors the subject matter; the course of events, as well as the characteristic fall outs and issues. In his characteristic *hybridity* of and in text, he introduces first person narratives, field notes, prison artefacts and survivors' accounts - especially following the significant gap in time when the *Tuol Sleng* became converted into a museum. The hybridity in text and the heaviness of the trial-material does place the reader into a liminal zone where the reader risks becoming a participant. The book is divided into parts that frame the trajectory of the story, e.g., 'Confession' and 'Reconstruction'. The dominant spaces into which the narrative is divided are – the museum, the biography of Duch, the trial rooms, and that which separates narratives of confession and of reconstruction.

The narrative around which *Tuol Sleng* is imagined is significant. Unlike the holocaust museums of global north, this one is a predominantly a conceptualisation of the PRK (People's Republic of Kampuchea) regime that followed and enhanced their socio-



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political legitimacy vis-à-vis the fascist precedent. As brutal as the regime of Pol Pot or the trials of Duch were, the author also highlights that museums like this one are institutional representations of past that inevitably erase some of the contingent contexts as well as international actors. The artefacts are nuanced; like dead prisoners, bashed in faces, Van Nath's paintings on gory events like bayonetting of children, photographs like that of a woman with a baby when she was admitted (Chan Kim Srun), the furniture or the cover photo of Duch himself; all invoke divergent states of mind. Duch, whose image was selected as the cover of the book, with scribbles across the face, and writings on the side, himself inaugurates the uncanny of this book.

The overarching temporal frames of narrative are the photographs in which children welcome the Democratic Kampuchea in 1975 following the long civil war. The narrative weaves on through the 'protagonists' like Pol Pot, Nuon Chea, Son Sen and the Duch himself. Hinton points at the absence of accounts on the war as such, especially the upheavals involved in the currents of Vietnam War as well as the heavy US bombings in the region. He goes on to highlight the continued support Khmer received from western powers and the marginalisation of the PRK in the United Nations forum. Like with the portrayal of characters (with photographs displayed) such as that of Him Huy, the fact that many were pulled into savage acts, as Duch himself claimed in trials, becomes evident. The museum is effectively used as a space that problematizes the disparate visual vignettes and the deletions involved.

The idea of erasure, obfuscations and backgrounds involved in narratives as well as complex recollections thus become dominant motifs throughout the book. Hannah Arendt's fundamental thesis that ghastly acts are not often perpetrated by the odd, the insane, or psychopaths, but rather by normal human beings, gains ground when the deletions of the contexts are taken into account. Savagery becomes banal when it operates in the normality of the everyday, and when it gains spontaneity aided by a system in place and a bureaucratic order that works things out. Beyond Pol Pot and the Duch, it is the ordinary people's participation, witnessing, neutralities, and taken for granted-ness that normalise evil. The banality of evil gets lost in the vignettes highlighted in the museum.

The biography of Duch also becomes an interesting addition. Born in Kompong Thom, he began his career as a teacher, with good academic background and a past of meticulous work. This was in Cambodia where teachers are highly regarded as people immersed in learning and knowledge. The idea of classroom for interrogations, torture and execution, at his later role, looks at first like a great reversal of the roles often associated with spaces. When Duch and his men fled Phnom Penh, they left a huge array of different documents. The school then became a museum – from school to torture rooms to museums. Here, Hinton's thesis of banality of evil, as it proceeded in Cambodia, gains credibility. As the guards and witnesses report, the meticulous academic and hard-working teacher, operationalised pedagogy in scrupulous and diligent record-keeping, experimentation in torture methods and political education sessions. All this while memorising French poetry, and having a wife and four children. During the trial's first phase, he acknowledged the severity of his crimes and publicly apologised before the court.

The trial as such, becomes the heart of this book. To Judge Lavernge's query during the trial, Kaing Guek Eav says that the name Duch itself was a common one, given during the political clashes in the 60s, he liked it, but it did not mean anything in particular; this further emphasises the uncanny, which along with erasure, and banality becomes an important motif.

The complex problem of delivering legal solutions post trauma (exterminations, genocides), is further complicated by the ambiguous and contradictory roles adopted by the Duch; man, teacher, lawyer, judge, defendant, victim, perpetrator, repentant, and then monster; according to Hinton. Drawing certain parallels, such as with the Nuremberg military tribunals, attention is drawn to the shortfalls of jurisprudence that seeks 'to classify horrific events through an abstract formulation that trims away complexity, detail and ambiguity' (p. 291); legal process itself becomes an erasure, as did the museum. Here 'the decision of "guilt and non-guilt" pushes aside all shades of grey' (p. 292). There were other tangential issues like allegations of political scandal, constitution of the legal apparatus, different systems of legalities (civil, common), summed up in some of the significant journalistic reports that Hinton points at.

Hinton pursues the method of ethno-drama, from the gory tour of the notorious Tuol Sleng, now a museum, by the students, separated by a gap, informed by the characteristically redacted museum, through the witnesses and recollections, into the trial chambers. The Duch, the victims, the prosecutors have the 'backdrop' of the artefacts, the recollections, and of course the hybrid courtroom.

The book keeps reminding the reader of the banality of evil, by pointing exactly at the unattended details that pass off as natural, everyday, or structural. The focus on the top five Khmer Rouge officials including the Duch, or the bare 'event' of persecutions (severe and unsettling enough as they are) or even a regime as such, erases many other processes. Duch himself, at first, apologises, but says in the beginning that he was only a part of a long chain of command and thus not an active agent in all the savageries.

Hinton's work definitely brings a new enriching perspective, through a unique and experimental ethnography, to a corpus of literature that addresses similar topics. David Chandler's book *Voices from S-21*, puts forward the 'culture of obedience' idea and pools together Nazi, Indonesian, Argentinian, and well as the more recent Balkan or Rwandan episodes of tragedies and exterminations (Chandler 2000). Chandler inquires into how regimes of obedience take effect by essentially othering the victims, prior to a programme of violence. Othering may also be understood as an outcome of a whole range of deletions in understanding. Raul Hilberg's concept of the 'bystander' captures as well the situation through the difficulties in defining the role of the perpetrators, victims and the supposed bystanders at the time of Nazi atrocities (Hilberg 1993). When, individuals, authorities, bureaus and offices are understood as a whole, 'bystanders' become problematic. So does Erin Baines' depiction of the Ugandan war criminal, Dominic Ongwen (Baines 2000). His brutal episodes, starting as a child soldier, could be reduced to the bare events. But here, in the context of a brutal rebel order catered to by war economics, Ongwen is split between the identities of a victim and a perpetrator. John Pilger's classic documentary, *The Silent Death of Cambodia* (1979) as well as Chomsky and Herman's 'Distortions at Fourth Hand' (Chomsky and Herman 1977), were also provocations into the redacted. The latter refers to the Nuremberg trials that

resonate in Hinton's book. The trials were inevitably for crime and were invariably post-facto. But the literature becomes timely in the face of the contemporaneous discourses of utopian globalisms and worldclassness from elsewhere (India, Sri Lanka). Here the banalities of developmentalism normalise and overshadow some of the worst genocides like in the state of Gujarat (2002) in India, by turning them into stand-alone events with no context (save the debates on how many were killed or how).

Perhaps it is apt to end with a quote of a passage from *Man of Monster*: 'If "conviction" refers to the proving of legal guilt, it also means a firmly held belief or opinion. Both of these senses are related to the term's etymological connection to the word "convince" which is derived from the Latin *convincere*, or to "wholly" (con-) "conquer" (vincere). Along these lines, "conviction" may refer to a strong investment in an articulation that is asserted to the exclusion of alternatives, which are "conquered" by the conviction at hand' (p. 293). This sums up the difficulty of producing this hybrid book on such a human life.

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