

**ORGANIZING A UTOPIAN STATE OF EXCEPTION:
THE CASE OF THE S-21 EXTERMINATION CAMP, PHNOM PENH**

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ABSTRACT

Organization theory, Clegg (2006) pointed out, has failed to address the role of organizations in some of the crimes of/against humanity. And he went on to suggest that more attention should be given to the case of total institutions. With this paper we respond to Clegg's invitation and study the S-21 extermination camp, in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. We do so engaging with the work of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, with the aim to investigate the organisational patterns that resides behind the camp as "State of Exception". This investigation show us how, especially when born out of utopian projects, organizations can become malign forces for evil, and explore the implications of this case for more general "Kafkaesque organisation", that sometimes reproduce, in more benign forms, many of the practices found at S-21.

Keywords: total institutions, evil organizations, Cambodia, Khmer Rouge, S-21, Kafkaesque organizing, State of Exception, bios, zoe, bare life.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper we focus on the case of S-21, *terra incognita* for organization theory. Our goal is to deal with an organisation dedicated to the production of utopia, with the intention to answer the call for organization researchers to dedicate attention to the study of genocide, a process with terrible consequences for humanity (Clegg, 2006; Goldhagen, 2009). The purpose of this work is to investigate how such organisation was structured, especially from a spatial and relational point of view, in order to excavate the meanings, the Kafkaesque paradoxes and rationalities that were rendering it possible.

S-21, now the Tuol Sleng memorial, has been variously described during and after the Cambodian Khmer Rouge regime as a ministry, office, or prison, but this center was devoted fundamentally to extermination rather than to other functions performed in concentration camps, such as incarceration, reeducation or forced labor. In this site of death, located in the city of Phnom Penh, thousands of people were killed between 1975 and 1979. The number of victims is not clear, despite the minutiae of the administrative work that took place in the camp. Some sources refer to 14,000, others to 17,000, others to 20,000 (see respectively Chandler, 2000; timesonline, 2009; Hawk, 1986).

By taking a close look at the case of S-21, we respond to Clegg's (2006) call for a greater attention to total institutions and use this organizational type to learn about the most negative and extreme consequences of organization. Given the use of bureaucratic means to confuse, intimidate, harm and destroy their members, and the peculiar socio-spatial patterns of this camp, we confront the S-21 relying on Agamben's philosophical work on the State of Exception and the production of bare (or naked) life. Agamben's work (which is barely integrated into organisational studies, see section three) allowed us to unravel the spatial and semantic organisation of this camp, which in the end provided a valuable basis for our argument on organising utopia.

We divide the paper into five sections. In the first, we discuss the contextual conditions of this camp. Our contextualization will mainly focus on two aspects: the utopian vision which the Khmer Rouge had for Cambodian society when they led it between 1975 and 1979, and the importance of a three tier structure of murder (Hawk, 1986) for implementing this vision (at the apex of the topmost tier, was S-21). In the second section we introduce Agamben's theoretical framework, while in the third we confront the S-21 through it. In the fourth

section we move forward, presenting the findings of our qualitative analysis (based on semiotic clustering) and discussing them. The outcomes of this analysis lead then to the following section, where we read the S-21 as a Kafkaesque biopolitical machinery, underlying the role of utopia and biopolitics in the creation of this organization.

2. K FOR KAMBODIA

In the spring of 1975, the Khmer Rouge (Red Khmers, in opposition to the right wing, Khmer Bleu, or Blue Khmers; Saunders, 2008) won a five-year civil war against the US-backed Khmer republic led by the self-proclaimed Marshall Lon Nol, which had been in power since the 1970 *coup d'état* against the People's Socialist Community of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, established in 1955. In their effort to construct a radical Marxist-Leninist state of Democratic Kampuchea, inspired in part by Maoist thinking, the Khmer Rouge initiated a number of deep social changes. The vision of the Khmer Rouge leaders was one of pure socialism, the creation of a society with no traces of feudalism, capitalism or any other exploitative forms of social organization. The vision presented some traits of primitive communism, given the absence of a well-developed class structure and the idea of returning to a form of society in which the forces of production would not generate the surplus necessary to support a non-laboring class (Adler, 2009).

At the core of the Khmer state sat the "Party Center", composed of a very small group of the tiny Cambodian elite that had been educated in Marxism-Leninism in Paris, as well as influenced by the Communist Party of Indochina. ¹

The embrace of Marxism was entirely pragmatic, not theoretical. Cambodians wanted rid of French colonialism that lived with a feudal society almost entirely untransformed; thus, any Khmer revolution would have to be based on the peasantry. The Khmer Rouge sought to emulate Mao's Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution in a "super great leap forward": after gaining command of the state, cities were evacuated, schools closed, factories deserted, monasteries emptied, libraries burnt, money and wages abolished, and the freedom to speak out, organize, meet, and eat privately, were all denied. All life was to be collectivized – even weddings and partner selection. In such a situation in which civil society was virtually denied, the state became everything (Widyono, 2007).

The key node of the state was the Party Center. At the middle of the Party Center was Saloth Sâr (1925-1998), a former schoolteacher who adopted the pseudonym of Pol Pot, the best

known in a sequence of aliases including Pouk, Hay Pol, Grand Uncle, Elder Brother, and First Brother. Pol Pot had attended secondary school in French Colonial Cambodia during the semi-fascist Vichy period and was exposed to Petainist ideology with its stress on the need for a dominant national leader, its bias against cosmopolitan cities, and its fascist cult of violence, some of whose ideas seemed to have influenced him.

Pol Pot has been described as “elusive, a shadowy figure with a smiling face and a quiet manner, whose trajectory to tyranny remains something of a mystery” (Kellerman, 2004). Under his leadership, the Khmer Rouge caused the death of perhaps as many as 1.5 to 2 million people, due to malnutrition, overwork, disease, and extermination. Their vision of utopia implied the elimination, in the first place, of all those class enemies theoretically against the revolution. Later, when the agricultural paradise of abundance showed signs of failure, the interpretation was linear: if the established quotas, three to six times pre-war rice yields (Hawk, 1986), were not being reached, this could only be due to counterrevolutionary activities. At the end of the Khmer Rouge regime, the extermination machine was directed not only to “classical” enemies but also to the peasants in whose name the revolution was justified (Hawk, 1986).

Year Zero was the name of the year that the Khmer Rouge seized power in their calendar: its baseline as a total new beginning meant that the old had to be eliminated and a new society built. Literally, such social construction meant the annihilation of people unfit for the new society. At the most basic level people died because of starvation, exhaustion (from forced marches and forced labor), and disease (modern medicine was reserved for the army and the Khmer Rouge cadres). Secondly, massacres were conducted against groups labeled as enemies of the revolution. Racial, religious or ethnic reasons, as well as economic, social or political ones, were invoked. Extra-judicial mass execution was normal. Thirdly, there was a nation-wide judicially sanctioned extermination system, organized around provincial prisons operated at the local level. As the central extermination center S-21 was the apex of this execution system. Only seven people survived this site. When Vietnamese troops invaded Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge fled Phnom Penh, the final victims of S-21 were killed prior to departure: S-21/Tuol Sleng was a place of horror in a genocidal process. In a sense, this was the heart of darkness of DK. In what follows we wish to concentrate on the organization that made this horror possible, introducing our theoretical framework, mainly based around the work of Giorgio Agamben, and reading the S-21 through it.

3. EXCEPTION AND ORGANISATION

The work of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (born 1942) has been scarcely investigated by organisational scholars. Two of the most explicit attempt to confront with Agamben's thought in organizational theory are Letiche (2006) and Beverungen and Dunne (2007), but their focus on very specific (and relatively minor) sides of Agamben's philosophy (i.e. on melancholy and on Agamben's interpretation of Bartleby, from the notorious Herman Melville's short story) could not be consider a full engagement with his ideas. Other authors have seldom referred to Agamben (Cuhna, Rego and Clegg, 2011; Fleming, 2007; Jackson and Carter, 2010; Rehn and O'Doherty, 2007; Stavrakakis, 2009) but above all only Banerjee (2008), Gray (2008), Murtula (2010) and Tedmanson and Wadiwel (2010), have fully taken into account Agamben's main relevant focus, hence the Sacralization of life, its profanation and the nature of the (concentration) camp as State of Exception (this is particularly through in Murtula and Banerjee's works).

Agamben seems to be, in the end, a relatively new figure in the realm of organizational studies - despite the relevance that this philosopher has had in recent years in disciplines like Political Studies, Sociology and Human Geography (for an introduction, Elliott, 2008, p.342 or Ek, 2006).

Having said this, the relevance of Agamben's thought for this paper is not only to contribute to its engagement with organisational theorists. Rather, the work of this philosopher stimulates some relevant questions in relation to the organisation of places like refugee camps, concentration and exterminations camps, and the biopolitical rationalities that govern many spaces in the contemporary urban. One of this question is posed by Agamben himself, when he writes: "What is a camp? What is its political-juridical structure? *How* could such events have taken place there?" (Agamben, 2000:36, italics added).

The relevance of this question, from an organisational point of view, relies all in the italicised *how*. What Agamben is suggesting us to do, it is to do not interrogate ourselves around the moral and political reasons of the people that have committed atrocious horrors against other human beings. Rather, "it would be more honest [...] to investigate carefully how-that is, thanks to what juridical procedures and political devices human beings could have been so completely deprived of their rights and prerogatives to the point that committing any act toward them would no longer appear as a crime" (Agamben, 2000:40).

In other words, Agamben is asking: through what organisational patterns is the camp possible? It is not our intention to offer an overview of Agamben's thoughts (see instead Mills, 2008; Durantaye, 2009), but to offer a short introduction to two concepts that may help to answer the above questions.

The first is that of Homo Sacer, or sacred man. Homo Sacer is a figure of old Roman law: essentially he/she is a person that is banned from society, could be killed by anybody but may not be sacrificed. In Agamben's words "The sacred man is the one whom the people have judged on account of a crime. It is not permitted to sacrifice this man, yet he who kills him will not be condemned for homicide; in the first tribunitian law [...] This is why it is customary for a bad or impure man to be called sacred." (Agamben, 1998:33). The relevance of this figure, the Homo Sacer, resides in the fact that the law no longer apply to him/her (because everybody could kill him/her) but at the same time he/she still is under the law: because it is the law itself that defines what a Homo Sacer is, and what people can do with it.

The core of Agamben's thought around the Homo Sacer reside in the distinction between the *bios* (the political value of someone) and the *zoe* (his/her "bare" or "naked" life). Roughly speaking, the role of law from the very beginning has been to divide *bios* and *zoe*, in order to control and concentrate on the former by means of the latter (an idea which Agamben derives from Aristotle's distinction between *zen/eu zen*, and which counter pose Agamben to Foucault, who sees the rise of biopolitics – hence of this particular form of control – only in the modern era). To say it with other words, what Agamben is proposing is that law and politics are related to the political status of someone (*bios*) rather than to the bare life (*zoe*) of individuals: for instance, law cares about the citizenship status of someone, rather than his or her weight. However, in order to thoroughly achieve the control of *bios*, laws must control *zoe* too. The Homo Sacer is the perfect exemplification of this biopolitical mechanism. The homo is defined as Sacred (hence his/her *bios* is identified in a particular way) through the exclusion of his/her *zoe* from the realm of the law itself (as it can be killed). The law in the end controls the Homo Sacer thanks to the exclusion of his/her body (*zoe*) from the law itself: this is what Agamben calls inclusion by means of its exclusion (Agamben, 1998).

This paradoxical biopolitical machinery that relies beyond the Homo Sacer examples, hence the inclusion of this homo in the political realm by means of its exclusion, becomes clearer when we confront with the second relevant Agamben's concept: the State of Exception. Relying on Carl Schmitt notion of sovereignty, Agamben argues that the sovereign is the only one that can suspend the law (creating an exception to the law) while remaining within the

law itself (since the law is represented by the sovereign). In this sense “The exception does not subtract itself from the rule; rather, the rule, suspending itself, gives rise to the exception. The particular ‘force’ of law consists in this capacity of law to maintain itself in relation to an exteriority” (Diken and Lausten, 2006:447).

The camp (concentration or extermination camp) are the most clear form of State of Exception as they “appear as the legal form of what cannot have legal form” (Agamben, 2005:1; Agamben, 1999). In the extermination camp the law is suspended, but the camp itself is hold within the law precisely by means of its exclusion: everything is possible in there because the law is suspended by the sovereign, which in the end (as party, leader or whatever) *is* the law itself.

Showing this biopolitical technique, Agamben shows us the meaning of the camp in relation to the *hominine sacri* that populate it. Banning the *zoe* of individual from the society, (hence controlling it in a particular space, the camp), the authors of the State of Exception are able to control the individual’s *bios* too. And they can do whatever they want, because an exception is created, and within it everything is theoretically and practically possible.

4. THE S-21 AS STATE OF EXCEPTION

The S-21 can arguably be understood as a State of Exception. In its perimeters the bare life of individual was controlled, and their political values stripped away and hence controlled too. As Agamben pointed out writing on Jews and Gypsies presence in Nazis’ camps, “when their rights are no longer the rights of the citizen, that is when human beings are truly sacred, in the sense that this term used to have in the Roman law of the archaic period: doomed to death” (Agamben, 2000:20).

Kang Khek Ieu (also knew as “Duch”) was the person who oversaw the interrogation and cudgeling to death of some 17,000 Cambodian in the S-21 camp. Interviewed by an English journalist, he declared: “I and everyone else who worked in that place knew that anyone who entered had to be psychologically demolished, eliminated by steady work, given no way out. No answer could avoid death. Nobody who came to us had any chance of saving himself” (Pellizzari, 2008).

“That place”, the camp as spatial *loci*, is hence the first thing that need to be investigated (Fig.1). People were forcibly brought into it, nobody was let free to go out, and its spatial

structure was the medium through which the “sacralisation” of the cambodians imprisoned took place.

The camp was spatially organised to physically control the inmates: “The classrooms were transformed into cells with the windows solidly barred. All the cells in the basement and on the first floor of the four buildings had been turned into small individual compartments 2 meters long and 1 meter wide. In each cell there were 18 such compartments” (De Nike, Quigley and Robinson, 2000:372).

Fig.1; Exterior of S-21 prison, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, early January 1979



Source: <http://www.tuolsleng.com/history.php>

In this spatial *loci*, rules and routines were implemented (Fig. 2). The camp-as-State-of-Exception enacted then the control of the political (and moral) value of the prisoner through the control of their physical routine: “Every morning, around 4:30, they had to take off their underwear to be searched by one group. After the search, there was a half hour of gymnastic exercise, but of course with one foot attached. [...] While in bed, if someone wanted to change position, he had to obtain permission from a guard” (Ibid:374).

The most important part of these rules was *torture*. The following quotes (taken from the documentary “S-21: The Khmer Rouge killing machine” by Rithy Panh) are the words of a former S-21’s torturer. The first shows own vital was the connection between the bare life of the tortured individual and its (mostly fictive) political value:

“Before torture, it is necessary to examine its health. Never proceed in hassle. If he dies, we lose the document” (Panh, 2003, 00:36:12,840 --> 00:36:24,312)

The second reinforce this vision:

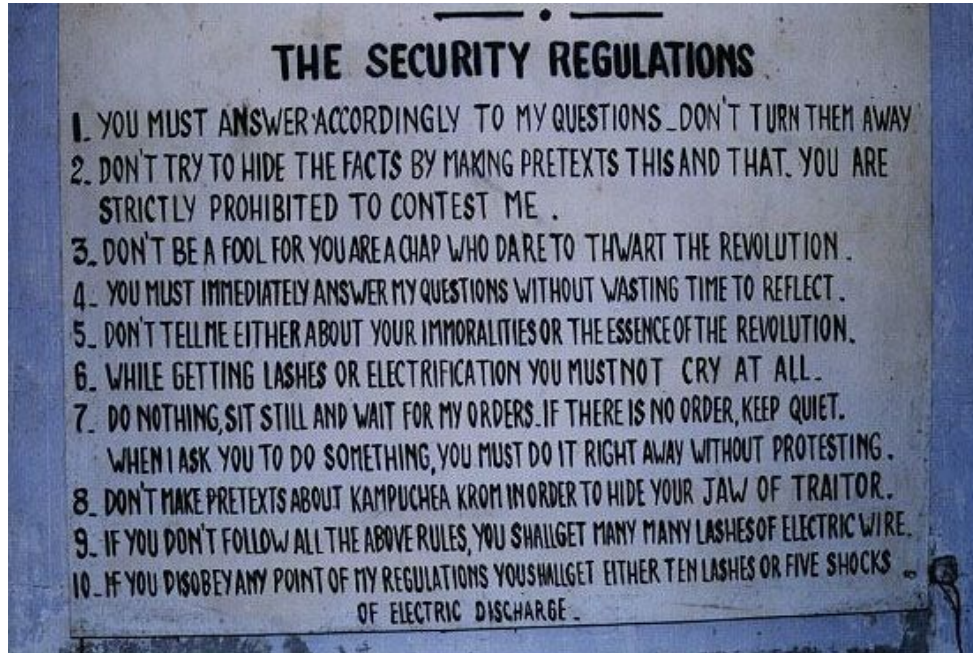
“Torture was something cold and cruel. I din’t think. I was arrogant. I had power over the enemy. I never thought of his life. I saw him as an animal” (Panh, 2003, 00:37:40,040 --> 00:37:59,514).

In the end this last one is a sort of admission of the biopolitical power at work in S-21:

“Each man has his own memory, each his own history. The aim was to brake down their entire memory and make an act of treason out of it” (Panh, 2003, 01:08:07,160 --> 01:08:26,51)

Torture was indeed the aberrant tools used to achieve the control of *bios* (true or fake information on betrayers, conspiracies, or other political activities) through the annihilation of *zoe*.

Fig. 2; “Security” regulations of the camp



Source: <http://www.edwebproject.org/sideshow/khmeryears/s21.html>

At its maximum power, the exception created in the S-21 camp changed the values of things like life and death, achieving hence the complete control over the *Hommine Sacri* present in

there (which could be killed by anyone, without punishment). Death was just a normal companion for the inmates, whom lost any *bios*. As the painter Vann Nath's, one of the few remnants of the S-21 who recently passed away, once said: "We ate our meals next to dead bodies, and we didn't care because we were like animals" (BBC, 2009) (Fig. 3).

In this sense the S-21 "took away the individual's own death, proving that henceforth nothing belonged to him and he belonged to no one. His death merely set a seal on the fact that he had never existed" (Arendt, 1951:451).

Fig. 3; Vann Nath's "Mother and Child of the Genocide" One of the last paintings from his genocide period. (ca. 1980).



Source: <http://pythiapress.com/wartales/vann-nath.html>

From what we have just present it seems clear that "the state of exception that allows for the exercise of sovereign power [...] finds its most potent expression when it becomes spatialized" (Minca, 2005:409). The S-21, with its spatial structures and rules, was hence a killing machine working as a State of Exception: controlling bios through bodies, and eliminating both. Having said this, it seems to us that something is still missing. The real challenge is, indeed, not only to understand S-21's organisational structure as State of

Exception, but to question *how* the S-21 came into being: through what kind of organisational patterns this exceptional machine took place?

5. PARADOXES AS ORGANISATIONAL MACHINES

In order to investigate the nature of the S-21 as State of Exception, we decided to confront some of the available material about the life in the camp. As our data source, we used David Chandler's book on S-21, *Voices from S-21: Terror and history in Pol Pot's secret prison*. We chose this book for several reasons. First, it is a major work totally dedicated to the case of S-21. It is a detailed investigation, heavily researched and resulting from interviews with participants of various sorts, and extensive archival work in Tuol Sleng. Second, this author, David Chandler, is a major Cambodia expert, "the doyen of Western historians of Cambodia" (Short, 2004, p.290). Third, major authors on Cambodia's DK regime and Cambodian authors on S-21 cite this book (e.g., Philip Short [2004]; Alexander Laban Hinton [2005], Meng-Try and Sorya [2001]). These reasons give us confidence that this is credible source to study S-21. Other authors (e.g. Weick, 1993) have also used books as data sources, a choice that seems appropriate when direct access is not possible, which for obvious reasons is the case, and the extremity of the case renders it valuable for analysis even if based on secondary data sources.

To this book we applied the semiotic clustering analysis (Feldman, 1995). Semiotic clustering has been described as a simple but powerful technique that allows researchers to uncover successive layers of meaning, from surface signs to an underlying structure (Manning, 1987; Clark et al., 2010). In this clustering, data are usually organized into a table with three columns. The first column refers to direct textual evidence. It includes the main ways in which informants have approached the concept of interest. The second column, connotative meanings identifies a pattern underlying the denotative meanings and builds new meaning through some type of thematic association. There is not a "right" way of filling in this column, since meanings are dependent upon interpretation and emerge from data. The last column involves an interpretation effort similar to the transposition of data from the first to the second column, synthesizing data in a deep structure. This deep structure should be viewed as plausible. This is ultimately, however, a personal interpretation (Manning and Cullum-Swan, 1994). Our interpretations should be viewed as plausible but they may diverge from others (Van Maanen, 1988). This final column thus includes the root causes and suggests a deep structure underlying the data. ²

Figure 1 presents the data structure, depicting in the right side the three dimensions that resulted from the analysis ³. These dimensions are understood here as paradoxes.

The sensemaking paradox, as we interpreted it, refers to the politics of understanding. It aimed to answer the question “How shall one interpret the world?”

The Manichean world paradox refers to the diffusion of ideology: how the world should be. It contains messages about ideals and divides society in the pure and the diseased.

The agency paradox refers to the logics of identity: who am I as an individual in this new world: a free citizen or a captive subject? The separation we make is therefore a necessary simplification. Our readers are invited to acknowledge the interactions and the overlaps between themes.

Figure 1 about here

Table 1 provides representative illustrations of data from which second-order themes emerged. In parentheses we indicate the page number of each quote in Chandler’s book.

Table 1 about here

5.1 Paradox of sensemaking

An overarching dimension emerging from the data is captured in what we described as the paradox of sensemaking. Sensemaking attempts feature saliently, although by other names, in Chandler’s discussion. We describe the organization as paradoxical in terms of sensemaking because two antagonistic forces are at play: sensegiving efforts by *Ângkar* (the Khmer Rouge organisation) coupled with attempts to block sensemaking in practice. An intoxicating ideology tries to influence the way people construct meaning about the regime in general and about the role of S-21 in the context of DK. The tension is paradoxical in the sense that more sensegiving was disrupted with more senseblocking. In other words, collective sense was given and taken by the same organization. Sensegiving was actually disrupted when individual attempts at sensemaking were neutralized by the local rules.

(a). Sensegiving: Sensegiving refers to the process by which some agent aims to influence the way people define reality (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). In the case of S-21 in general and DK in particular, indications were clear: only one-way of seeing (the official line) was acceptable. All other ways were not only illegitimate but also very dangerous. An intoxicating ideology was spread, which offered a totalizing view of the world as it should be.

Forced retrospective confirmation was used to validate ideology and interpretations based in it. Prisoner's biographies were altered to the point that they fitted the needs of the *Ângkar*: "the interrogators (...) further said that anyone I could think of who had been arrested in any sector or zone I should say that they were all my connections" (p.85).

(b). Senseblocking: In parallel with the effort towards sensegiving emanating from the Party center, there was a permanent local effort to block individual sensemaking, hence our labeling of this process as senseblocking. We identified several forms to prevent people from making sense of what was happening around them. First, secrecy was viewed as a necessary instrument for victory. In addition to secrecy, rules and positions shifted unexpectedly. DK was a very unstable world in which no one could have confidence in his or her personal safety. Because communication was difficult and could be viewed as lightness, making sense of events was made even more difficult. As a result, everything one could do was stop trying to make sense. As one guard said "I made myself concentrate on work, work and again work" (p. 138). Or even more clearly, in DK "to survive you had to do three things: ... know nothing, hear nothing, see nothing" (Kiernan, 2008, p.170).

5.2 The Manichean world paradox

A second overarching dimension emerging from our interpretations was the paradox of the Manichean world. The world of DK was obsessed with the opposites of purity and disease. We call it a paradox because purity was created in the very same way as disease: they were both "manufactured", and purity could easily turn into disease (although not the other way around). The paradox revealed itself in the following form: to affirm its purity, the regime surrounded itself by the impure. The system needed the impure to affirm its purity – and it managed to create them.

(c). Purity: As in other utopian regimes, DK leaders saw their country as a paragon of virtue. In fact, the new DK would be an example to the entire world: purity turned real. In this case, purity was built around categories: the new people, the bourgeois, were the impure, and base people, the agrarian class, were depicted as the pure. To have a place in this utopia, individuals should have had "clean" narratives. Clean narratives were those that showed a genuine revolutionary mindset, devoid of associations with the many enemies of the revolution. Biographies were rewritten depending on the interests of the state: some were "polished" for the better (e.g., the description of Pol Pot as a worker in a rubber plantation

rather than a scholar), others for worse (e.g., an extraordinary number of prisoners at S-21 were presented as members of the CIA and/or the KGB). The Manichean world of DK prized stoicism above else and killed its citizens as a work in progress to achieve a utopia of pure equality.

(d). Disease: The numerous enemies threatened the survival of the regime. Traitors could be everywhere, including inside the Party center. Enemies were described as “diseased” and inhuman, for only the “diseased” could be against the pure beauty of the Kampuchean revolution. The problem for the regime was that sickness was transmitted virally, which meant, in practice, that traitors were necessarily associated through networks: one traitor, literally, must lead to another. Prisoners at S-21 were therefore forced to accuse the other “diseased” elements in their “string”. People whose bourgeois habits had corrupted their minds would compose these strings. S-21 was central to the process of extirpation of the disease from Cambodian society, a noble mission, according to *Ângkar*.

5.3 Paradox of agency

The third paradox that we extracted from the data we labeled as the paradox of agency. The reference is to the guards only, because the prisoners were basically captive subjects: “Their [the prisoners’] weak point is that they are in our hands” (p.85). The guards, in turn, oscillated between perceptions of omnipotence and a sense of powerlessness that can be explained in part by the speed of change in DK power circuitry as described before. The paradox of agency lies in the fact that for the guards their empowerment to interrogate and kill meant more visibility and required extra-care. In this sense, the more empowered the less autonomous one was: behavior needed to be carefully scripted no matter who one was, but especially so for people with responsibility in places such as S-21. Omnipotence and powerlessness were only two sides of the same coin.

(e). Omnipotence: Feelings of omnipotence are reflected in the fact that guards were said to be sometimes out of control, exercising “excessive violence” (p.138). As far as we can interpret it, this lack of control resulted from several factors. First, from the demography of the guards and the nature of the place: “Isolated, bonded, terrified, yet empowered, these young men soon became horrific weapons” (p.138). Second, from the cruelty of S-21 and its sadistic environment: “Torturing prisoners might be a bonus for S-21 workers after a confession had been obtained” (p.135). Third, from the need of guards to please their superiors: “The pleasures they derived from cruelty, in some cases, enhanced their

satisfaction from surviving at the prison and gaining and holding their superiors' approval" (p.138).

The latter dimension highlights two crucial aspects of S-21. First, role narcissism, a dimension identified by Hinton (2005). Role narcissism helps to explain the reason why guards sometimes engaged in acts of violence that were unjustified even by the extreme standards of S-21, leading the chiefs to issue a clarification on how to use violence appropriately. Second, total dedication was required. Refusing to obey was evidence of treason. As social psychology has shown, people can adhere to assigned roles with an unexpected sense of engagement (Milgram 1974). The combination at S-21 appeared literally lethal: refusing engagement was not an option.

(f). Powerlessness: At the same time, however, guards were aware that underneath this appearance of omnipotence they could easily become powerless in a world where obedience should go unquestioned (Cunha, Rego and Clegg, 2010) and leadership by terror reigned, a combination that is common in totalitarian states (Kets de Vries, 2004). From the data, we extracted three reasons as to how this happened. First, *Ângkar* required total submission. Even when guards exercised their acts of violence, they were aware that they lived under the vigilance of an organization that could easily label them as enemies. Killing an important prisoner before a "proper" confession was extracted was potentially a sign of treason. A minor mistake could be viewed as treason, such that workers and guards were well aware of their positions in this organization: "[We] just kept smiling but [we] were tense inside" (p. 87). Perception of one's vulnerability to the system resulted in a generalized sense of psychological insecurity. Mistakes were heavily punished, often with death, and every deviation from the rule of *Ângkar* was a mistake. As we have discussed, rules changed swiftly and without warning, which means that vulnerability was permanent. S-21 and its occupants were therefore under the ever-vigilant eye of the *Ângkar*, and the rage of the *Ângkar* showed no mercy. To live in the paradoxical world of S-21 was a daily exercise in which one had to act displaying utopian fervor in careful performances staged within the confines of accepted behavior in a highly paranoid system.

6. THE ORGANISATION OF S-21 AS STATE OF EXCEPTION: A KAFKIAN UTOPIA

The State of Exception is par excellence a paradox. As Agamben stated: “One ought to reflect on the paradoxical status of the camp as space of exception: the camp is a piece of territory that is placed outside the normal juridical order; for all that, however, it is not simply an external space” (Agamben, 2000:39). However, it is only seeking within its internal and external topological structure (hence in its relational composition - Belcher, Martin and Secor, 2008) that we can say something on *how* that Exception take place.

The paradox of sensemaking, the Manichean world paradox and the paradox of agency are probably just three of the possible many paradoxes that were taking place in the S-21 extermination camp. What is interesting about them is, however, that they give us precious insight on the deeper organisational structure of the S-21 itself. If its spatial organisation, its rules and routines may be seen as organisational layout, the source of the Exception that in the end allowed the S-21 to become a terrifying machine of death, is within the paradoxes that were sustaining it.

The paradox of giving sense by forbidding it; the search of purity through the extirpation of diseases; and the guard’s omnipotence reached through their complete annihilation... are all example of Sacralisations, of holding power on something, banishing it from the internal and re-capturing it from the external. The S-21 was a machine for the production and then for the extermination of *hominine sacri*, and it was organised through series of (conscious and unconscious) paradoxes. The organisational structure of the S-21 worked through paradoxes because *the camp*, by definition, is a paradox itself: this was the Exceptional core of the Khmer rouge killing machine.

6.1 Kafka and organisation

The camp as paradox is conceptually hard to penetrate. It is a place hard to access, inside which inscrutable technocrats conduct incomprehensible activities (e.g., Scott, 1987, p.5). In this sense, as Agamben pointed out, the camp could be seen as a Kafkian organisation: “Inasmuch as the inhabitant of the camp has been severed from the political community and has been reduced to naked life [...] he or she is an absolutely private person. And yet there is not one single instant in which he or she might be able to find shelter in the realm of the private, and it is precisely this indiscernibility that constitutes the specific anguish of the camp. [...] Kafka was the first to describe with precision this particular type of site, with which since then we have become perfectly familiar” (Agamben, 2000:121, 122)

The Kafkaian metaphor is not a mere intellectual exercise. On the contrary, it allows us to re-read and open up the complexity of the S-21 as (a utopia) State of Exception. Moreover, the usefulness of this metaphor is to convey the meanings and rationalities of the S-21 (i.e. The paradoxes and the subsequent production of sacred man) in a less philosophical, but still relevant, fashion.

Kafka provides an implicit handbook for organized tyranny in his literary work. It is not bureaucracy that initiates the terror, but inexplicable and unknown forces. The problem in his fiction is that once the bureaucratic apparatus has been alerted, its procedures form a trap based on a premise of guilt that corrodes the soul of the person inserted into the bureaucratic procedures. Such a person begins to think that (s)he must be guilty of something. In fact many people became caught up in the process through the desperate attempts of others to tell their interrogators what they thought that they wanted to hear. In this way, serial denunciation of “strings of traitors” could be created – a process that is quite normal in Kafkaesque organizations. Consider the very start of *The Trial* (Kafka, 1999a): “Someone must have been telling lies about Joseph K., (for without having done anything wrong, he was arrested one fine morning)”. That Kafka provided a dreadful prefiguring of futures yet to come is a commonplace observation. Collins (1974), for example, pointed out the Kafkaesque nature of the Nazi extermination process. We see S-21 as another expression of this type of organization – prefigured in fiction but exceeded in reality.

Another Kafkaesque dimension is the need to strictly follow the rules that one did not understand. This is, of course, common to most bureaucracies: subordinates are expected to obey, not to understand (Jacques, 1996; Clegg et al., 2006). The paradoxes outlined before are, in this sense, truly Kafkaian. For instance sensemaking is even more unlikely when unquestioning obedience can be complemented with a frequent change of rules – as K., the protagonist in *The Castle*, noted himself: each time he tries to understand what is expected from him as Land Surveyor, new rules have been established (Kafka, 1999b). The same occurs in the case of the penal colony described in another of Kafka’s story (Kafka, 1919; see also Rhodes and Kornberger, 2009), where “no one knows what the law is in the Colony; least of all “the condemned”, even “as they inflict torture on him” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, p.43).

6.2 The (bio)politics of organising Utopia

S-21 was a “Kafkaesque bureaucracy”. More precisely, it was a utopian bureaucracy, and possibly an extreme version of Kafka’s nightmare. These kind of exceptional bureaucracies engage their members with paradoxes that they cannot tackle. They urge them to follow an ideological rulebook but in their everyday lives mount obstacles against sensemaking; they split the world into categories but move people between categories; they empower their members but *dis*-empower them if the empowerment does not work to their benefit. The Kafkaesque organization of S-21 was thus a result of utopia as expressed in the Manichean vision of purity, which created a world of loyalists and enemies, and the paranoia it bred. Regular Kafkaesque bureaucracies may share with S-21 a desire for purity: the purity of rationality and the need to protect this purity from attack and imperfection.

According to whichever of the official symbolic orders of utopia was sought, if there is a problem with society it was seen to be because the system has not been fully purified, that political legislation has not properly ordered social space into either market or plan. Utopian projects not achieved are evidence of contamination by less than wholehearted support and of the need for further purification so that the utopia might be better realized. Or as Parker (2002, p.2) writes, utopias represent bids premised on “statements of alternative organization, attempts to put forward plans which remedy the perceived shortcomings of a particular present age”.

According to ten Bos (2002), creating utopia is first and foremost serious, scientific, deeply rational work. It is devoted to the creation of a better world in which all the evil and misery of the contemporary world vanishes and is replaced by peace, harmony and happiness. In doing so, it subordinates the individual to the collective good, whether of market or plan; it is a-historic and de-contextualizes human beings; it is total and controls individuals in detail, and violence and power are unavoidable to keep everything under control and ward off foreign influences. In the process, utopia unleashes layers of paradox that overwhelm those subjected to its dream. In short: the desired better world is pursued through a total control that leads to places such as S-21.

Utopian projects *necessarily* breed paranoia. Utopian political thought is committed to the total reconstruction of social, political, and economic forms outside of established or embedded cultural formations – which describes the project of the Khmer Rouge as perfectly it does the Jacobins: the similarities are, of course, many. The translation of utopian flights of fancy into hyper-realistic plans for social and political change always produces camps of puritans and deviants. Puritans guard the belief in utopia ferociously, the depth of their

commitment leading to paranoia about subversives, backsliders and deviants. Indeed, deviance becomes necessary for the purity of the utopian vision to be maintained; in order to generate the social and political energy necessary to effect revolutionary change there must be flaws to be rectified, rottenness to be cured by excision, deviants to be smashed. Thus, utopia breeds paranoia and deviance equally. It creates the paradoxes that it will later address.

This creation of paradoxes is pursued, both consciously and unconsciously, through forms of biopolitical power. The S21 is not, in this sense, only a governmentality technique, hence a way by which the Kmer achieved the “right disposition of things” (Foucault, 2000:208) for their crazy political utopia. Rather, the paradoxes through which the Khemer were organizing their utopia were biopolitical act for at least two reasons. First, because they keep control of the *bios*, retrieving, or inventing, the “aleatory events that occur within a population that exists over a period of time” (Foucault, 2000: 246). And secondly, because they were sustained by a “logic of formation which takes hold when power takes species life as its referent object, and the securing of species life becomes the vocation of a novel and emerging set of discursive formation of power/knowledge” (Dillon, 2008:267). This was, in the end, Khmer’s utopian organisation in the camp: a systematic organization to reform deviance and a paradoxical construction of polarities, with the aim to deleting inmates *bios* controlling and exterminating inmates’ *zoe* too.

7. CONCLUSION

The Kafkaesque organization is one that is so self-absorbed with its own utopian desires, that it creates the biopolitical mechanisms and the counter-mechanisms necessary to keep it “pure”. This paper showed *how* S-21 was one of such organisation, a true State of Exception organised through series of paradoxes. First, it needed to protect utopia from other visions of the world. It did so by combining sensegiving from the top with senseblocking to prevent alternative sensemaking possibilities. Second, it created mechanisms that protect edits utopian vision by instantly turning friends into foes in a process that maintains the stocks of the pure and the impure. Third, it empowered and disempowered at will, in a curious but not necessarily rare interpretation of empowerment. Conviction and passion are the tools leaders need to create these strange organizations.

W. B. Yeats (1920) might have said that the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity; we would want to change this formula. The worst is represented by

the fusion of all conviction and passionate intensity with an organizational biopolitical apparatus dedicated to processing paranoia and delivering its judgments. It is this that produces a total institution as a moral apparatus dedicated to social cleansing of whatever “deviance” is at issue. S-21 is an exemplar of the Kafkaesque extreme total institution. It confronts its members with puzzles they are not allowed to tackle, with riddles with no solution, with political games of life and death with ever-shifting rules.

Confront people with paradoxes wrapped in paradoxes, and they will feel like K. Missionary zeal inflamed by a clear vision, legitimizing myths, leadership cocoons and a culture of competition/aggression that breeds paranoia characterizes not only recent Asian history but rather more contemporaneous and Western histories, including some recent histories of confinement and torture shaped by the institutions that we sometimes call Kafkaesque (or at which we sometimes refers as “State of Exception”, e.g. Guantanamo Bay, Agamben, 2005). Mythical utopias, organized around the rationality of some political ideology, whether the purity of democracy’s freedoms, revolution’s radical novelty, or the total planning of the state, show no mercy in the face of attempts to subvert their purity: utopias as paradoxical projects engage people in tensions that cannot be constructively tackled. Kafka tells us as much – as Joseph K. discovered one fine morning.

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Figure 1. Data structure

First order concepts

Second order themes

Overarching dimensions

- A totalizing ideology presents the world as it should be.
- The ideology directs interpretations of the world.
- Retrospective confirmation validates ideology and interpretation.
- Secrecy prevails as instrumental for victory.
- Rules and positions shift unexpectedly.
- Barriers to communication are widespread.

- Bourgeois habits corrupt
- Categories organize the social world around new and base people.
- Individuals must hold clean narratives.
- Stoicism as virtue.

- Sickness is transmitted virally.
- Traitors associated in networks.
- Bourgeois habits as corruption of the mind.

- Guards out of control.
- Role narcissism.
- Total dedication.

- Ângkar requires total submission.
- Swift changes in power circuits.
- A sense of psychological insecurity.
- Generalized fear

a. Sensegiving

b. Senseblocking

c. Purity

d. Disease

e. Omnipotence

f. Powerlessness

Paradox of sensemaking

Paradox of the Manichean world

The agency paradox

First order concepts

Second order themes

Overarching dimensions

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- Generalized fear

- a. Sensegiving
- b. Senseblocking
 - c. Purity
 - d. Disease
 - e. Omnipotence
 - f. Powerlessness

Paradox of sensemaking

Paradox of the Manichean world

The agency paradox

2nd order themes

Representative 1st order evidence

a. Sensegiving

- “One hand is for production, the other for beating the enemy” (41)
- “The enemies can’t grasp our intentions” (80)
- “The war could be won easily if every Khmer combatant killed thirty Vietnamese” (71)
- “It is a small matter to beat someone to death, but it is very important to conduct revolution, to uproot resistance, to preserve redness” (138)
- The guards’ mission: “protecting the revolution” (153)

b. Senseblocking

- “You never know if you are correct” [a guard] 27
- “We were all spying on each another” (87)
- “People were insecure psychologically. People feared being wrongly unconsciously” (87)
- “If the higher-ups keep modifying things back and forth suddenly like this, those lower down will be unable to keep up” (85)
- “I made myself concentrate on work, work and again work” (138)
- “Cutting prisoners off from any sense of community or self-respect” (121)
- “They were urged to use torture and propaganda in ‘proper’ proportions that were not made clear” (86)
- “You never know if you are ‘correct’” (27)

- “Only through secrecy can we be masters of the situation and win victory over the enemy who cannot find out who is who” (16)

c. “Purity”

- “Life stories must be good and must conform to our requirements” [Pol Pot](91)
- “A good biography that included a good class background and praiseworthy biographies could lead to Party membership, better work assignments, and enhanced personal security” (90)
- “Interrogators at S-21 had been taught that the Party’s ‘enemies’ were to be ‘smashed’ in ‘storming attacks’. They had also been taught that they were the regime’s ‘life breath’” (129)
- “We all carry vestiges of our old-class character, deep-rooted for generations” (44)
- “Their raw energy, so attractive in its revolutionary potential” (34)

d. “Disease”

- “There is sickness in the party” (44)
- “Once infected, anyone could infect others” (44?)
- [The enemies as] “‘Germs’ (*merok*)” (44)
- “Prisoners were taken “away to the West”- in Khmer mythology, the direction of death” (140)

e. Omnipotence

- “A place many times worse than hell” (114)
- “[The cadres] blame everything on others They say everything depends on the concrete situation, but they’re the ones who conclude what the concrete situation is an even sometimes create the concrete situation. I thought. ‘Today it’s their turn. I don’t know what will happen tomorrow’” (87)
- “Isolated, bonded, terrified, yet empowered, these young men soon became horrific weapons” (138)
- “The pleasures they derived from cruelty, in some cases, enhanced their satisfaction from surviving at the prison and gaining and holding their superiors’ approval” (138)
- “Torturing prisoners might be a bonus for S-21 workers after a confession had been obtained” (135)

- “So much administrative leeway, so much testosterone, and so much combat experience” (129)

f. Powerlessness

- “The Organization knows what is good and what is evil” (58)
- “The Organization has clear views about stubborn people” (58)
- “We live like animals in a cage” (95)
- “The Organization orders us around like cows or buffaloes” (95)
- “We live under the leadership of others. You need permission to do this, you need permission to do that” (95)
- “Their [the prisoners’] weak point is that they are in our hands” (85)
- “I was losing some of the people who were working with me. One day we were working together and then they were taken away. And they were killed. I felt anxious.”
- “My life is completely dependent on the Party” (65)

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¹ The influence of French Marxism on the Khmer Rouge is often mentioned as decisive, although Short (2004) gives short shrift to this idea. Pol Pot was simply too minor a figure and too un-intellectual to be much involved in the labyrinthine politics of the French left (see Badiou, 2008). Anyway, most of what occurred in French Marxist circles, such as those the Cambodian nationalists moved in, would best be thought of as dogma rather than theory (Majumdar, 1998), despite pretensions. Short sees the ideological influences as far more local and home grown.

² To analyze the data, we read the book twice, the first time without any coding attempts, the second for coding purposes. After that, we often returned to the book to check for evidence and meaning. We tried to limit codes to descriptions of S-21 as an organization rather than about other contents of the book, such as chronologies, biographies, political contextualizations and so forth. Our intention was to study the nature of this organization, described as Kafkaesque. As such, all the elements that were not descriptive of the organization were not considered.

We coded a total of 76 initial entries that were reduced to 20 first-order codes. These codes provide direct descriptions of S-21 as an organization. They offer relevant information leading us to extract second-order themes from constant comparison (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), an attempt to make sense of the data at a higher level of theoretical abstraction. The attempt to extract theoretical meaning from comparing codes and aggregating them at a higher level resulted in six second-order themes related in three opposing pairs: sensegiving and senseblocking, purity and disease, omnipotence and powerlessness. These pairs were already a result of the comparison between categories and the text, and of interpretation, with successive readings of the first-order codes making these tensions apparent.

In the third stage, we related the tensions emerging from the data into three paradoxes. The first, the sensemaking paradox, collapses two themes: sensegiving and senseblocking. The second, the Manichean world paradox, articulates the tension between a world where purity and disease were viewed as opposing but shifting categories. The third puts in tension the interplay between omnipotence and powerlessness. These three dimensions constitute overarching concepts that provide a theoretically deeper analysis of organizing forces at play

in S-21. Semiotic clustering reduces a very complex organization to a number of deep structural characteristics that help to increase abstraction and to gain analytical sophistication.

³ These were derived from second-order themes, which in turn resulted from the first-order concepts that were directly taken from the source. For the sake of theoretical elegance, we assumed that overlaps could be rendered acceptable through the clarification of the meaning of the final categories.