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HOMELESSNESS IN CAMBODIA
The Terror of Gentrification

Simon Springer

> Those bums and beggars no longer live [in] anarchy along the streets, which affects our capital's beauty – Sok Sambath, Daun Penh District Governor.
>
> *(quoted in Naren 2005a)*

Introduction

Cambodia's flirtation with free market ideas in the wake of the United Nations mission of the early 1990s has, since the early 2000s, been transformed into an unhealthy and often tragic obsession, marred by aid dependency and authoritarianism (Ear 2013; Lim 2013). The penetration of neoliberalism into Cambodian society is a stunning example of how the politics of regional competition for investment and tourist dollars can lead to a profound disempowerment of the urban poor (Shatkin 1998; Springer 2015). Urban governance in Phnom Penh has promoted a new kind of city, where forced evictions are common (Brickell 2014b; Springer 2013), land swap deals are frequent (Simone 2008) and numerous megaprojects inject huge flows of capital (Paling 2012; Percival and Waley 2012), which often seems to result in the enrichment of well-connected power brokers rather than the filling of public coffers (Springer 2011). Public space in Phnom Penh has, over the course of the last 15 years, been reimagined as an ordered and sanitized domain for the performance and spectacle of capitalism, where the administration of such a vision often takes on a profoundly violent character (Springer 2010). Like other major cities across Southeast Asia, gentrification is swallowing large parts of Phnom Penh leaving little room—both metaphorically and materially—for the growing number of residents who find themselves victimized by poverty, inequality, dispossession, and homelessness (Bristol 2007; Bunnell *et al.* 2012). While much has been written about impoverishment in Cambodia, very little attention has been afforded to the plight of the country's homeless people and the trauma and terror they experience as part of their lived reality. The few recent studies that do exist treat homelessness as a backdrop rather than the primary focus of their inquiry (see McCrostie 2008; Medvedev 2010).

The far-reaching promotion and adoption of free market economics has produced conditions of globalized urban entrepreneurialism, where Phnom Penh represents a particular example of this wider process (Fauveaud 2014; Springer 2009). The (re)production of cultural spectacles, enterprise zones, waterfront developments, and privatized forms of local governance all reflect the powerful disciplining effects of inter-urban competition as cities aggressively engage in

mutually destructive place-marketing policies. In this chapter, I examine the dilemmas homeless people in Phnom Penh face as a consequence of their enmeshment in a new logic of urban governance being promoted by city officials and municipal planners. I set out to offer a glimpse of how the larger configuration of contemporary capitalism directly affects some of Phnom Penh's most vulnerable people. I begin by considering how gentrification has been articulated in the context of Phnom Penh, which local authorities have framed as a process of "beautification." The ongoing pattern of violence utilized by municipal authorities against homeless peoples as a part of this beautifying process is considered. Specifically, I focus my attention on the exclusionary tendencies that have arisen as part of a new municipal order that actively targets the homeless as unwelcome participants in public space. The result is an ongoing process of round-up and exile at the hands of the police, who enforce a strict urban aesthetic that does not include the poor. Out of sight, out of mind. In the following section I trace how city officials have more recently begun promoting the criminalization of the urban homeless and poor through arbitrary arrests and illegal detention, holding them in "re-education" or "rehabilitation" centers. I demonstrate that such centers are not at all what they seem, where the use of euphemism attempts to mask the systemic abuse and internment of marginalized peoples who are unwanted on the streets of the capital city as they are deemed to present a negative image for Phnom Penh. Interviews with homeless people over several years reveal a horrifying narrative of torture, rape, beatings, starvation, and forced labor at the hands of guards and police. A chance encounter with an American-Cambodian returnee on the inside of one of these detention centers reconfirmed the depths of depravity that is taking place.

Beautification and exile

Gentrification in Phnom Penh has been discursively euphemized as "beautification," where the presumed intention is to transform the aesthetic of the city from an "undeveloped," anachronistic space of chaos into a "developed," modern site that is well ordered for facilitating the inflow of investment capital and tourist revenue (Nam 2011; Springer 2010). Yet like many countries in Southeast Asia, Cambodia has witnessed intensive urbanization over the last several decades, which has resulted in increasing numbers of homeless peoples in the streets of its capital city, Phnom Penh (Khemro and Payne 2004; Parsons *et al.* 2014). Such a development can be read as one of the numerous undesired effects of neoliberal economics, where its connection to authoritarianism and securitization are evident in the Cambodian government's practice of routinely rounding up and exiling homeless people from the capital and detaining them in what authorities refer to as "re-education" or "rehabilitation'" centers (Botumroath 2004; Naren and Pyne 2004). Although these practices have been both strongly denied and openly embraced by Phnom Penh municipal authorities at various times (*Cambodia Daily* 2009; Naren and Blomberg 2014a), my ongoing research with the city's homeless population paints a picture of ongoing systematic terror. Beginning in 2007 and carrying forward to research visits in 2010 and 2013, I have conducted extensive interviews with over 100 homeless Cambodians, where virtually all participants have confirmed that they have been harassed and victimized by police. Many of my interviewees have also complained of being arbitrarily arrested, illegally detained, and viciously beaten by police for loitering in public spaces, demonstrating an ongoing pattern of abuse that is anything but "beautiful."

Gentrification is an expression of urban entrepreneurialism, often proceeding in a top-down fashion that simply furthers a neoliberal agenda (Lees *et al.* 2008). Like all gentrifying processes, beautification is effected in the name of aesthetics and profit, where political activity is sanitized and reduced to the performance of a commodified spectacle of accumulative practices and place

marketing (Mitchell 2003). Beautifying processes are meant to encourage a particular view of place that celebrates not democracy, political representation, and community spirit, but rather the "virtues" of capitalism (Harms 2012; Jou *et al.* 2014). The result is not a dynamic and vibrant space where people from all backgrounds can intermingle, but rather a sterile urban environment where consumerism becomes fetish, wealth becomes sacrosanct, and life becomes empty. The overarching goal of beautification is to reorient city space along market lines in an effort to facilitate consumption and enhance economic growth (Lees 2012). Rather than concern for the general wellbeing and happiness of the community, the beautification of Phnom Penh is essentially a sales pitch to tourists and prospective investors. While a desire to beautify city space in itself is not necessarily problematic (Miller 2009), it is the way in which beautification has been implemented in Phnom Penh that should make us skeptical, and in particular the exclusionary logic that has informed it. From the perspective of Cambodian authorities, the beautification of the capital city isn't just about implementing new design elements and a modified architectural vision. It also includes the forced eviction of so-called "squatter" settlements and the removal of the poor and the homeless from public space (Connell and Connell 2014; Naren and Blomberg 2014b; Watson 2009). While beautification may be an easy sell to tourists and the property-holding class in Cambodia, it has a dark underside that rides roughshod over the concerns of the poor by failing to regard "underclass" residents as rightful claimants to public considerations.

This trampling of marginalized people comes through a negation of their ownership claims to long-held possessions because they lack the "proper" documentation that confers legitimacy on property (Springer 2013). Such dispossession is enriching local tycoons, who are easily able to acquire the land in question through the complicity of the Cambodian courts and only subsequently offer it for lease or sale to private foreign companies (Amnesty International 2008). The drive for profits outweighs any concern for human wellbeing, as at least 10,000 families have been evicted from Phnom Penh over the last decade, often through the use of profound violence backed by military force (*Phnom Penh Post* 2008). This ongoing destructive campaign of forced eviction that is gripping Phnom Penh has been couched in the rhetoric of beautification (Mgbako *et al.* 2010; Springer 2010). In making way for various development projects, including casinos, embassies, and hotels, many of the evicted families are denied resettlement or compensation for the loss of their homes (Chinnery 2009; LICADHO 2009), effectively rendering them homeless. Similar processes are occurring in the countryside, where landlessness is rife as Cambodians are forced off their land to make way for land concessions and large-scale plantations (Biddulph 2000; Diepart and Dupuis 2014). This has driven a distinct pattern of urbanization, where it is predominantly those who are most vulnerable and disempowered who are making their way to the capital city in search of income and a better life (Pilgrim *et al.* 2012; LICADHO 2009). Problematically this migration usually involves individuals who were formerly engaged in subsistence-based agriculture and therefore don't possess the proper identity documents that are required for paid employment in Cambodia:

> I'm not a beggar, but when people tell me not to beg I don't know what to do because I have no money. I have no identity card so I can't get a job and no one can guarantee for me so it is very difficult. I'm ashamed of myself. I feel hopeless. One day I dream I will have a better life than this, but for now I'm just hopeless.
>
> *(Interview, Homeless Recycler, Male, Age 21, 27 May 2010, Riverfront, Phnom Penh)*

Newly single mothers are also a major category of migrants, as domestic violence and divorce are frequently cited as a reason for leaving the provinces (Brickell 2014a; Derks 2008).

Beginning in the early 2000s the gentrification of Phnom Penh began to take the form of police round-ups and the exile of homeless people (Woodsom 2002; Naren and Pyne 2004). Continuing to this day, police squads regularly patrol Cambodia's capital city, terrorizing the homeless by forcing them out of public spaces and into large trucks, where they have been routinely shipped out to the countryside and told to never return:

> The first thing that I am afraid of is the police. I have been living on the street for a long time already and I know a lot of people too, but I am still afraid of the police because sometimes the police catch us and send people who live on the street to the province, and then we have to walk back to the city.
>
> *(Interview, Homeless Recycler, Male, Age 30, July 16, 2013, Democracy Square, Phnom Penh)*

Those homeless individuals who are captured are not sent back to their home provinces for reintegration or to those communities where relatives may reside. Instead, they are simply dumped off in random locations deemed to be far enough away to prevent return to Phnom Penh. Over the past eight years of researching this phenomenon I have talked to many people who have indicated that they have been personally victimized by this process. Having no opportunities to make a living in the sites where they are abandoned, homeless Cambodians inevitably make their way back to the capital city, sometimes walking hundreds of kilometers:

> I was dropped in Kampong Chhnang Province at around 6:00 p.m. and I walked all the way back to Phnom Penh. I arrived here at around 4:30 a.m. I walked all night. The truck that catches the people and sends them to the provinces, the truck says "Daun Penh Commune." It's a blue truck with the written letters: Daun Penh Commune. . . . I wanted to go back to my hometown, but Kampong Chhnang is not my hometown. I don't know anyone in Kampong Chhnang Province, that's why I have to walk back to the city.
>
> *(Interview, Homeless Recycler, Female, Age 24, 30 July 2013, National Museum, Phnom Penh)*

At least in Phnom Penh homeless people know that they can collect recycling or beg for money and the choice between eking out a living while subjected to police harassment or starving to death in the provinces where no means for a livelihood exists is an easy one to make. Yet the homeless are nonetheless terrified of the police, and I've witnessed their terror firsthand.

On a sunny day in May 2010 I was interviewing a woman in a central Phnom Penh park. Her six-month old baby slept quietly on her lap as we spoke:

> My problem is that I'm not allowed to sleep here at night so now I stay behind the Royal Palace. I worry for my baby and my safety, and once I have enough money, I will look for a place to stay. I worry about the trucks that come from the center to catch the people who stay here.
>
> *(Interview, Homeless, Female, Age 25, May 10, 2010, Democracy Square, Phnom Penh)*

The relative calm of that moment was shattered by a cruel irony. Other homeless people who lived in the park started shouting that a police round-up truck was approaching. Lookouts sat in the trees to keep watch, and after notifying their friends that a siege of their community was imminent, they too jumped down to flee from the park as fast as they could. I reassured the

woman that I was interviewing to be calm and not to worry. I would tell the police that she was with me, a visible outsider, and as a result the police would not bother her. She knew better. Tucking her baby up under her arm like a football, she sprinted across the field in horror to escape the police team who descended on their encampment. Clearly annoyed that they had been foiled, the members of the police squad proceeded to gather together what few belongings these people had. What happened next utterly enraged me. I literally could not believe what I was witnessing. The pile of blankets, pillows, sleeping mats, and clothing that belonged to a group of people that had so few material comforts was doused in lighter fluid and promptly lit on fire. It was 2:30 p.m. in the afternoon. I was standing in the center of one of Phnom Penh's most heavily used public spaces, and yet this atrocity unfolded before my eyes like a well-worn routine. I've never been so angry in my entire life, but I somehow managed to calm myself enough to ask the officer in charge for an interview. He agreed and simply insisted that the people were deserving of this horrendous treatment:

> They destroy the discipline of the city. These [people] are all drug addicts and at the nighttime, they steal from other people. I want them to live in Prey Speu but they always try to escape from the [detention] center . . . if we can't catch the people, we will burn their things or put them in the garbage trucks. I always tell them not to leave their things in the park, but they never listen.
>
> *(Interview, Chamkarmon Commune Police Patrol Group Leader, Male, Age 37, May 10, 2010, Democracy Square, Phnom Penh)*

Internment and repatriation

The game of cat and mouse, exile and return, between police and the homeless began in the early 2000s and went on for several years. Around 2005, things took a dramatic turn for the worse. Perhaps realizing that hunger screams louder than fear, where episodes of forced exile were just that, temporary episodes, Cambodian authorities adopted a new strategy. Arbitrary arrest and illegal detention in what are euphemistically referred to as "re-education" or "rehabilitation" centers became the new game in town (Naren 2005b). If there was some sentiment of social responsibility behind such a move, it wasn't evident in the experiences of the homeless. I repeatedly heard testimonies describing near-starvation conditions, forced labor, regular beatings by guards, torture, and dire living conditions in these detention centers where as many as 100 people were crammed into a single room with no beds, no mosquito nets and, worst of all, no toilet facilities. Some interviewees even suggested that murders had taken place within the walls of Prey Speu, a claim that is given significant weight in light of a recently acknowledged death of a homeless man at this center in late November 2014 (Human Rights Watch 2014; Sony and Peter 2014a). Victims of this draconian urban governance strategy told me they were kept under lock and key for 23 hours a day, living in filth and only let out to eat and relieve themselves on one occasion. People complained of human excrement overflowing from the single bucket they were provided and having to sleep next to piles of defecation and pools of urine:

> They never beat me because I have small children. But they beat the people that try to escape. They lock us up. We are let out for lunch and for bathing at 11 o'clock and that's it. The conditions are bad, we sleep where we defecate and urinate . . . in a bucket and everyone goes to the same bucket. And in the morning, one of the men who live in the room takes the bucket out. We couldn't even get out of the room, I went crazy in the room like a monkey in a cage. You know when the monkey goes crazy in the

> cage because they're locked in for five months? My children cried and wanted to get out of the room and I asked the guards, but they would not allow the children to go outside to play. Even if the children were crying. That place is worse than jail.
>
> *(Interview, Homeless Recycler, Female, Age 24, May 17, 2010, Old Market Park, Phnom Penh)*

Even more concerning are stories of detainees being gang raped by guards (Human Rights Watch 2010).

After some convincing, my research assistant Sotheara and I were able to obtain permission from the Ministry of Social Affairs, Veteran and Youth Rehabilitation to visit one of these facilities, known colloquially as "Prey Speu." The catch was that we were required to wait four hours before going to the center, where the reason, although not stated, was clearly so that they could prepare the facility prior to our arrival. When we arrived at Prey Speu the manager of the detention center gave us a tour of the eastern side of the facility and things generally seemed okay. People had mosquito nets, hammocks, and even a TV to watch. In no way did this resemble what was being conveyed to me by the homeless people I had spoken to in central Phnom Penh. The reason for this discrepancy, I would soon find out, is because what I was being shown at Prey Speu is a façade that is regularly employed when journalists or human rights workers ask to visit the center. Interviews with residents of the community that surrounds the detention center confirmed my suspicion. Although not eager or proud to admit it, villagers are paid to pose as homeless people detained in the center whenever "important" visitors call in (Interviews, May 26, 2010, Sre Chum Ruve Village, Chom Chao Commune, Phnom Penh). During my visit, the manager of Prey Speu kept a close watch on everyone I spoke with and nobody within the center was willing to tell me the truth. But what happened next can only be described as astonishing.

Not satisfied with seeing only the eastern side of the center, and knowing that there was something going on over on the western side, despite assurances from the manager to the contrary, I decided to walk over and find out for myself. At this point the manager, who had been denying that the western building was being used, got on his walkie-talkie and was frantically telling the person on the other end to open the doors. As I got closer, the doors to two large rooms swung open and people started pouring out, most of them making a beeline for the central lagoon to relieve themselves from the heat. I started taking pictures, which the manager had previously had no problem with, but was now insisting that I stop. I didn't listen to his request, but when I arrived at the western building I heard someone ask in plain English: "Hey young gentleman, can I ask you a question?" I was dumbfounded and hearing this question spoken to me in a thick American accent seemed so out of place that I dismissed it. But then he spoke again: "What kind of agency do you work for? Or are you personally just here taking pictures?" I looked around, but was surrounded by Cambodians. The manager of the center didn't speak English, so who could have possibly said this? Then a small man who told me his name was "Cobra" stepped forward. The first thing I noticed about him was that he was missing one arm. This isn't so unusual in contemporary Cambodia, which has one of the highest numbers of landmine victims in the world (Cardozo *et al.* 2012), and unexploded ordinances from the Vietnam War continue to take their toll on the Cambodian population (Haas 2013). While seeing missing limbs, particularly among the homeless, is a relatively mundane occurrence, it is nonetheless notable, as it speaks to the tapestry of trauma that has been woven across the country's past and present.

What transpired next was an extended conversation with Cobra, who speaking fluent English, confirmed to me from inside Prey Speu all of the horrors that had been told to me by

those on the outside who had been through its tormented walls. Sotheara, my research assistant, is crucial to this story. As Cobra and I spoke, the manager of the center was becoming evermore concerned about our conversation, but being unable to understand English, Sotheara was relaying to him, *incorrectly*, all the "positive" things about the detention center that Cobra was supposedly communicating to me. Cobra's account was a very different tale than the quiet, sad smiles I had been receiving from the other detainees who were unable to voice their concerns, lest they be met with reprisal after I left. Cobra didn't hold back. He told me of the overcrowding, the starvation diet, the excrement, the beatings, the torture, and the rapes:

> There's a lot of secrets here so that's why they don't want me talking to you and I kind of know it. . . . They are bad secrets, not good ones. Do you know what I mean?
>
> *(Interview, American Convict Returnee, Male, Age 53, May 24, 2010, Prey Speu Center, Phnom Penh)*

After some time it finally dawned on me that I was having a conversation in English with someone who sounded more American than Uncle Sam. So I asked Cobra, how did you get here and why do you speak English with an American accent? He told me that he was American, or that at least he thought he was, until US law enforcement officials returned him to Cambodia (see Lim, this volume, Chapter 31).

It turns out that Cobra fled to the US with his parents during the Khmer Rouge era and, like many Cambodian refugees, his parents never bothered to apply for citizenship for their children. This was all fine for Cobra until he found himself in trouble with the law. He told me that he was drinking and driving and ended up killing four people in a car accident in Oregon. Following his life sentence he had a difficult choice to make. Immigration law passed in 1996 during the Clinton administration paved the way for an agreement reached after 9/11 that allows for the deportation of any Cambodian convicted of a felony who hasn't earned US citizenship (Mintier 2002; Plokhii and Tom Mashberg 2013). Given this prisoner return arrangement, Cobra could either spend the rest of his life behind bars, or he could say goodbye to his wife and three daughters and be sent back to Cambodia a free man. He took the latter option, was put on a flight to Phnom Penh, given US$100 when he arrived, and set free. Cobra told me that he didn't know how he was going to earn a living, but the only thing he really remembered about Cambodia as a young man was that he used to hunt for cobra in the jungle with his father. After befriending another American returnee who was in this line of work, Cobra found a way to make a life for himself, but it didn't last long. One day when his friend was off in another part of the forest, Cobra was bit on his right hand. He had another difficult choice to make. With venom shooting up his left arm and a machete in the other, Cobra did the unthinkable. It was his arm or his life. Hearing Cobra scream his friend came running and finding him passed out, he made a tourniquet, dragged him to medical attention and saved his life. No longer able to hunt for cobra with just one arm, Cobra adopted the snake's name as a testament to his new identity and took to begging on the streets of Phnom Penh. Within two days of doing so, a police round-up squad captured and detained him in Prey Speu where I found him about two months after he was first incarcerated. His crime this time? He was poor and visible in a public space.

Conclusion

Homelessness in Cambodia remains a profound problem that, *if seen*, poses a significant disruption to the neoliberal narrative being advanced by Cambodian authorities, who want to claim that poverty has been eradicated and social conditions have improved through two decades of

development. The testimonies of homeless people confirm two things. First, they verify the fact that they actually exist. Second, they demonstrate a cruel and uncaring regime that has become so engrossed in its blinkered version of economic growth and development that it refuses to see the damage it is causing through its quest for capitalist "beauty." Despite their shocking and shameful treatment, homeless people are not simply human detritus to be swept away by a terrifying version of gentrification. They are lives that matter, lives that can't simply vanish into thin air to support the deceptive myth of modernity and the authoritarian dream of order. A single shred of humanity would see us categorically refuse this aesthetics of violence. If a "beautiful" city means social exclusion, heightened inequality, routine terror, and the internment of the vulnerable, then our vision of beauty is a serpentine deception. We are willfully staring into the eyes of the Medusa with hearts turned to stone. The only thing deeper than the depth of this hideous lie should be our collective feeling of bottomless shame.

I returned to Phnom Penh to do follow-up research in the summer of 2013. I wanted to see if this pattern of illegal detention and arbitrary arrests was still ongoing. Although things had slowed down owing to the July 2013 election and a government attempting to secure votes by "making nice," the Prey Speu center remains intact. As recently as December 2014, opposition lawmakers visited Prey Speu and were presented with the same carefully orchestrated illusion that was shown to me during my visit to the detention center (Sony and Peter 2014b). Unfortunately, as of this writing, the opposition has done little to interrogate the inconsistencies or question the validity of the performance that they were presented with during their visit, even though significant evidence is coming to light that suggests things are not as they appear (Amon *et al*. 2013; Human Rights Watch 2010; Lodish and Naren 2008; Wallace 2010). This is of course an evolving story, but it is one with tremendous consequences for the future of Cambodia. The Ministry of Social Affairs, Veteran and Youth Rehabilitation have recently asked Phnom Penh City Hall for a new, larger facility (Mengleng 2014). Even more worrying is that there are whispers of plans for a "final solution" to Cambodia's homelessness problem. The rumor is that Cambodian authorities are building a huge detention facility in Oddar Meanchey, very far away from Phnom Penh near the Thai border, where people will be unable to easily return to the capital city should they escape. While it has been confirmed that a massive new prison with a budget of US$350,000 is being built in Oddar Meanchey (Crothers and Sony 2014), it remains unclear as to what its exact usage will be. Yet the fact that this rumor even exists is in itself quite telling. If the rumor proves to be true, it may mark a distinct return to genocidal politics, as it remains unclear as to why a detention center would need to be built so far away from the heart of the perceived "problem" and, crucially, hidden from the public eye. If it proves to be false, this rumor nonetheless speaks to the level of extreme terror that pervades the lived experiences of Cambodia's homeless and a government that has given them every reason to feel afraid. While Pol Pot advanced an anti-urban, anti-rich ideology that targeted the affluent class, in contrast contemporary Cambodia is characterized by an anti-rural, anti-poor bias that targets the homeless. What remains the same is the horrifying idea that internment in the country is somehow an acceptable practice. This is an understanding that desperately needs to change.

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