

Year Zero: The Temporality of Revolution Studied Through the Example of the Khmer Rouge

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The notion of Year Zero – the claim to be making a radical break with history – is central to modernity. The most famous instances of this trope are the instituting of a new calendar in 1792 during the French Revolution, and the proclamation of Cambodia’s Year Zero by the Khmer Rouge in April 1975. In this essay, I will begin by outlining the historical background to this nexus of ideas as they relate to the French Revolution, before proceeding to analyse it in greater detail using the example of the Khmer Rouge.

The French and Cambodian revolutions are both events that provide strong evidence of the connection between time and power, and of time’s usefulness as a resource both for political action and as creator of meaning. More specifically, we appear to be confronted here by two examples of what might be termed *revolutionary temporality*, a form of temporality centred on the claim to be making a radical break with the past. My investigation thereby joins a broader field of research situated at the intersection between philosophy, history, and political science, and pioneered by thinkers such as Reinhart Koselleck and Quentin Skinner.

Year Zero / The End of History

By way of introduction, it should be noted that modernity also incorporates a range of variations upon this theme in its wider sense. In both military science and medicine, the adoption of a kind of zero

point is central. For example, it can denote the point of impact for bombing, the point in time at which a military operation goes from the planning stage to execution, or index cases in the spread of an epidemic. In its current form, contemporary history is organized around a number of such zero points. To name just some of the most significant examples: the end of WWII in 1945 became Germany's *Stunde Null*; the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were described as zero points, and the site of the 11 September attacks was dubbed "Ground Zero". In the realm of epidemiology HIV/AIDS research has its own historical narrative. As early as 1987, a research group claimed to have identified a Canadian air steward, Gaëtan Dugas, as the epidemic's Patient Zero. Presumed to be the original source of transmission for the global epidemic, he was thought to be in a position to provide vital clues for solving the riddle of this disease. Although later studies rejected these findings by advancing alternative theories of transmission, Dugas quickly became a key figure in the mythology and historiography of the disease.¹

Conversely, modernity has been characterized by a continual search for the end of history, a point at which we can be said to have arrived, to be complete or redeemed, a point at which the truth of humankind and society has been revealed once and for all. When the Marquis de Condorcet predicted the future development of humanity in *Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1795), he seemed to be speaking from a vantage point in time and space – post-revolutionary Enlightenment France – from which the truth of humanity's history and future prospects could finally be apprehended. Condorcet believed himself to be on the verge of taking the final, decisive step. Were it to be taken, humanity would be redeemed – free, equal, and rational – and continue its journey upon even ground. Subsequently, the trope has taken a variety of forms, for example, in the writings of G. W. F. Hegel, Karl Marx, Auguste Comte, and Francis Fukuyama. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in autumn 1989, Fukuyama's article "The End of History", which had been published that spring, came to seem like a prophesy fulfilled. The collapse of the communist bloc in the East appeared to mark the end of history in a Hegelian-Kojévian sense, a point at which the precepts of liberalism had acquired a universal character as defining the ultimate goals of humanity, ostensibly

rendering obsolete every alternative path to human liberation and redemption.²

The mythology of the American Revolution, too, is premised upon the idea of a zero point, an intellectual trope which received its most striking formulation in Thomas Paine's oft-cited statement in *Common Sense* (published in 1776, the year of revolution): "We have it in our power to begin the world over again. A situation, similar to the present, hath not happened since the days of Noah until now. The birthday of a new world is at hand."³ This mythology also includes the notion of a specifically American historical task – "Manifest Destiny" – according to which America is the bearer of a set of universal ideas and ideals which it has been charged with disseminating to the rest of humanity. It is a conviction that has guided and legitimated American expansionism under the administrations of James Polk, Woodrow Wilson, and George W. Bush, among others.⁴

The French Revolution's Year Zero – the instituting in 1792 of the French revolutionary calendar and metric chronology – is probably the single most famous instance of this trope. Instituting a new chronology fitted well with several central aspects of the Revolution and the idea of the Republic. It paralleled an array of other reforms jointly premised on the notion of basing the social order on *nature*, rather than on heritage, history, or tradition. Reforms such as the creation of the Republic, the declaration of the Rights of Man, and the metrical measurement of space and material objects, were seen as the counterparts of a system ordered by Nature in which humanity was no longer bound by the tyranny of the past.⁵

As historian Michael Meinzer has shown, the introduction of the revolutionary calendar came to mark the birth of the Republic, rather than the moment of the Revolution. Immediately following 14 July 1789, official documents and pamphlets began referring to 1789 as "l'an de –" or "l'ère de la Liberté". After the proclamation of the Republic in September 1792, however, it was decided that the new chronology should begin retrospectively on 2 January 1792, which thereby marked the official instituting of the "era of liberty". After 1792, the calendar was variously described as "the French Revolutionary Calendar" ("Le calendrier révolutionnaire française") and "the Republican Calendar" ("Le calendrier républicain"). The revolution-

ary calendar divided the year into twelve months, named after the seasons (e.g. Brumaire, from the French word *brume*, meaning fog; Thermidor, from the Greek word *thermon*, meaning heat). Each month was divided into three weeks of ten days, the tenth of which was a day of rest (“décadi”). Meinzer has also argued that instituting a new chronology had strong implications as an act of *realpolitik*: it erased in a single gesture all the religious references that had structured Christian chronology, replacing them with a system grounded in Nature. As such, it directly indicated a conflict that was fundamental to the Revolution: the struggle against the Church as a political institution.⁶ Alongside this powerful symbolic connotation was the fact that its introduction coincided with the most brutal phases in the progress of the Revolution – the Terror of 1793–94 – which presumably is an important reason why the idea of Year Zero has acquired a sinister aura.

As Reinhart Koselleck has observed, each of these zero points echoes Christianity’s own Year Zero.⁷ A significant difference should be noted, however: at least until the American and French revolutions, the Year Zero of Christianity was static in nature. It was a pre-existing reference point from which Western chronology had subsequently been developed.⁸ What distinguishes the modern phenomenon, my particular concern here, is its dynamic character. It involves a series of zero points – albeit often claiming to be absolute and definitive – which recur time and again, in various guises, as it were, being successively revised as developments unfold.

The Khmer Rouge and the historical threshold

This is not the place to investigate the entire intellectual history of this very broad topic. In what follows I shall restrict myself – in order to foreground and discuss a number of topics which I regard as central to this problematic – to one of the more extreme instances of the use of this concept: the Khmer Rouge’s Year Zero in Cambodia in 1975. It makes an interesting case study on several counts: partly by virtue of its radicalness, but also because it is linked in various ways to the French example outlined above.

It is, moreover, an interesting example of Koselleck’s thesis, that modernity in the final instance must be understood as a particular

mode of experiencing time. A number of Koselleckian themes can be briefly adduced in this regard: the specifically modern sensation of living in a period of continual rupture; the eschatological aspect of temporal experience; the demand for absolute and definitive change, and a view of the present as a moment for conclusive historical-political action. And, most fundamental of all: the ceaseless acceleration, the battle against the clock, the idea that all previous developments must be surpassed in order to achieve victory.⁹

The Khmer Rouge's project can be likened to a continually accelerating tornado of events in which classical Marxism-Leninism was mixed with Maoism, traditional Khmer-Buddhist mythology, and a distinctly racist variety of nationalism. It was nostalgically backward-looking and utopian, hyper-emancipatory in its claims and unique in its brutality. The ideology of the Khmer Rouge has often been represented as anti-modern, a characterization with which I will take issue in this essay.¹⁰ As I will elaborate, my own view is that Cambodia's Year Zero must be understood as an extreme example of a quintessentially modern phenomenon.

Recalling the French example alluded to above, it should be mentioned that Cambodia was a protectorate of French Indo-China between 1863 and 1953, making it part of France's empire. After 1953, the country became an independent constitutional monarchy under Prince Norodom Shianouk. The deposing of Shianouk in 1970 in an US-backed coup accelerated the guerrilla war which the Khmer Rouge had begun in the nineteen-sixties.

With the exception of Pol Pot, every member of the group which emerged as the Khmer Rouge leadership (Noun Chea, Ieng Sary, Son Sen, and Khieu Sampân) had studied at a prestigious seat of learning in Paris in the fifties, including the elite Institut d'Études Politiques de Paris and the Sorbonne. Sary and Samphân had written doctoral dissertations on Cambodian agriculture and economics. Pol Pot had studied electronics at a vocational institute of higher education albeit without completing his degree. He was well known as a talented organizer and quickly assumed a leadership position within the group. Although Pol Pot and Ieng Sary had joined the French Communist Party in 1951, the group chose to organize itself into the secret Cercle Marxiste, which operated under the mantle of the Khmer students'

organization in France. When they came into contact with representatives of Viet Minh at a youth festival in East Berlin in 1951, the idea of a guerrilla war was born. Pol Pot's biographer Philip Short has described the group's fascination with French culture in general (the Enlightenment, Rousseau, Hugo, Montesquieu, etc) and, above all, the French Revolution; Peter Kropotkin's *The Great French Revolution 1789–1793* was an ever-present point of reference for the group.¹¹

It makes sense, then, that Ieng Sary should have initiated a discussion within the Cercle Marxiste on the topic of the French Revolution and its teachings. For Sary, the Revolution offered a number of suggestive parallels. Prince Shianouk was felt to be another Louis XVI; it seemed possible to forge an alliance between peasants and bourgeois intellectuals against an absolute monarchy. The problem, according to Sary, was that the French Revolution had not gone far enough. The revolutionaries had stopped short rather than pursue it to its ultimate conclusion. Sary and his comrades held Robespierre in particularly high esteem. Suong Sikoeun, later one of Sary's closest collaborators, maintained that Robespierre's incorruptibility, radicalism, and consistency were exemplary. "If you do something, you must do it right through to the end. You can't make compromises. You must always be on the side of the absolute – no middle way, no compromise."¹²

If the Paris years were defined by schooling in classical Marxism-Leninism, then the guerrilla warfare years in Cambodia were to a large extent defined by Maoism. Crucially, Maoism also provided the Khmer Rouge with an activist perspective on history, something that sheds considerable light upon their own Year Zero. This activist perspective – as opposed to the orthodox Marxist representation of history as a rational process of necessary advances – emphasized human will and the triumph of determination over material conditions. Put differently: not so much *learning* from history as *overcoming* it, diverting history in the right direction, as it were, by means of superior will and resolution.¹³

The French Revolution, as already noted, had met with failure by stopping halfway. Yet even Mao, argued Khieu Samphân, the movement's chief theoretician, had not been radical enough to overcome history by definitively abolishing private property, the family, received knowledge, and traditional teaching. For Samphân, the task of making communism a reality entailed an ideological zero point: "zero for him

and zero for you – that is true equality.” Moreover, the task would be derailed by any deviation from this formula.¹⁴

It is evident that the Khmer Rouge, in deliberate and skilful fashion, drew on history for political ends. Their leadership made repeated reference to the importance of “grasping the wheel of history”, and how history would crush those who stood in the way of development. In 1976, as part of Pol Pot’s consolidation of personal power, official party historiography was revised with an eye to the older Indo-Chinese guerrilla fractions within the movement, by moving the date of the party’s founding forward from 1951 (the First Indo-Chinese War) to 1960 (Pol Pot’s election to the Central Committee). At a meeting of the Central Committee in March 1976, it was noted with regard to historiography that “we must rearrange the history of the Party into something clean and perfect [---] Do not use 1951 – make a clean break.”¹⁵

Although the French Revolution was a continual point of reference, the party presented its own project as *sui generis* and unprecedented, one that would eventually serve as a model for future revolutions. The entire project was suffused with a sense of urgency: unless they got there before Vietnam, their militarily superior neighbours would swallow them up. The internal Marxist analysis indicated that Cambodia had to proceed directly from feudalism to communism – and within four years, at that – in a so-called “Super Great Leap Forward”.¹⁶

Cambodia Year Zero

The Khmer Rouge was surrounded by an aura of anonymity and secrecy that gave the organization the character of a zero point around which events in time and space turned. Until 1977, it referred to itself simply as Angkar (“the Organization”). Its leadership assumed anonymous *noms de guerre*. Unlike Ho Chi Minh (“Enlightened One”) or Stalin (“Man of Steel”), for example, Pol Pot (born Saloth Sar) is a common Khmer peasant name. Their true identities only became known after the fall of the regime in 1979. The organization’s love of numbers is strongly reminiscent of the French Revolution (S-21 [the headquarters of the security police], B-1 [the Foreign Ministry], etc). The leadership typically used names like “Brother Number One” (Pol

Pot), “Brother Number Two” (Noun Chea), etc. In official documents, the number of potential traitors of the people was given as an exact percentage; the number of Vietnamese whom every Khmer had to kill in order to secure victory was set at thirty, and so forth.¹⁷

Unlike the French Revolution, Cambodia (from 1975, Democratic Kampuchea) never officially proclaimed a new chronology, nor did it ever introduce a new calendar. On the contrary, the few official documents which survive from the period 1975–1979 refer repeatedly to the standard Christian, Western chronology: throughout, documents allude to “the glorious 17 April 1975”, to “the First Four Year Plan of 1976–79”, and to “1960” as the moment of the party’s official founding and the starting-point of the revolutionary struggle.¹⁸

In Cambodia, the concept “Year Zero” had a narrower meaning, as the Khmer Rouge’s term for the emptying of the cities that immediately followed their victory against Lon Nol’s US-backed regime on 17 April 1975.¹⁹ Even so, much in the Khmer Rouge’s ideology and concrete political actions supports the image of their seizure of power as a historical zero point.²⁰ A series of parallels with the revolutionary temporality of the French Revolution can be adduced in this regard: the demand for an absolute transformation, including, among other things, the claim to be making a decisive break with the past. Some of the official documents that have been preserved from Pol Pot’s regime make repeated reference to the Cambodian Revolution as unique and unprecedented. In these documents, Cambodia’s past – together with the experiences of other countries – is dismissed, time and again, as irrelevant.²¹

The uniquely radical claims of the Cambodian revolution have long been well-known. They encompassed a wide array of reforms directed towards the institutions of traditional bourgeois society. Money, markets, and private property, schools, institutes of higher education, newspapers, and religious institutions – all were immediately abolished after the seizure of power. Early eyewitness accounts relate how the hospital in Phnom Penh was emptied of patients, how the National Bank was set on fire, money burned in the streets. Immediately after the victory proclamation, book-burnings were orchestrated in front of the National Library and the Lycée français René Descartes.²² The country’s borders were closed immediately and the “cleansing of the

country from foreign influences” begun by deporting foreigners and domestic minorities such as Vietnamese, Muslim Khmer, Chinese Khmer, Thais, and Europeans.²³ It was also officially announced that “the individual” would be abolished. The traditional family would be replaced by the movement. In order to create a completely conflict-free society, revolutionaries were officially instructed not to have a personality. “The individual” was continually counterposed to “the people”, with the former representing division, factionalism, inequality, bourgeois values, and foreign influence. “The people”, meanwhile, embodied its polar opposite, something entirely pure: redemption; the extermination of particularity and contingency; and the realization of absolute freedom, equality, and fraternity through complete absorption into Angkar.²⁴

The emptying of the cities that came to be designated Year Zero – probably the single greatest cause of the mass starvation and killings which convulsed the country between 1976 and 1979 – has often been portrayed as the expression of a reaction against modernity.²⁵ I regard this as an overly simplistic interpretation of events. Superficially, the idea of restoring the urban population to a form of imagined “home villages” seems like an anti-modern project, especially since it was combined with traditional Khmer-Buddhist mythology of an originary golden age that had been terminated by humanity’s baleful desire for private ownership.²⁶

And yet this entire mythology was structured according to a temporality far more complex than any simple notion of turning the clock back. Rather, the desire for a pre modern origin, a longing “to return to nature”, is an essentially modern phenomenon. In a pre modern society, it would make no sense whatsoever. In the case of the Khmer Rouge, the issue was really a spatial movement from the cities out into the countryside, that simultaneously symbolized a journey back in time *and* a final step into an imagined future. To this was added some racist nationalism, a fascination with the French Revolution, conscious manipulation of their own historiography, a fixation with numbers, anonymity, and central planning, claims to be creating a new Man and transforming society absolutely, and a desire to divert history in the right direction.

In light of all these features, the Khmer Rouge’s Year Zero stands

revealed as a paradigmatically modern phenomenon that would be unthinkable in a pre modern society. As I have tried to show, proclamation of a new Year Zero – beyond its overt claim to be cutting ties with history – involves an opposite movement: a fixation on history. As such, it shares a fundamental premise of all modern attempts, from Condorcet to Fukuyama, to identify the end of history. These ostensibly contradictory impulses – the desire, variously, to end history and to institute a year zero – are in fact united by an underlying common desire to master history by bringing it to a definitive conclusion. What they share is a profound conviction that humanity stands on the brink of a final act after which it will continue its journey upon a level field. And yet it is as much the failure of these efforts – history, after all, just seems to keep on going – as the absoluteness of their claims that makes them so modern.

Notes

1. See for example Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* (New York: St. Martin's Press 1987).
2. For a systematic investigation of this theme in Hegel, Marx, and Kojève, see Perry Anderson, "The Ends of History" in *A Zone of Engagement* (London: Verso 1992).
3. Quoted in Jack Fruchtman, *The Political Philosophy of Thomas Paine* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 2009), 58–59.
4. Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansionism and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill & Wang 1995), 46, 111–121, 127–128.
5. Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* ([1984] London, Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press 2004), 1ff, 7off.
6. Michael Meinzer, *Der französische Revolutionskalender (1792–1805): Planung, Durchführung und Scheitern einder politischen Zeitrechnung / Ancien Régime, Aufklärung und Revolution Band 20* (München: Oldenbourg 1992), 295–306. Cf. Reinhart Koselleck, "Remarks on the Revolutionary Calendar and Neue Zeit" in *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. Todd S. Presner et al, foreword by Hayden White (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press 2002), 148–153.
7. Koselleck, "Remarks on the Revolutionary Calendar and Neue Zeit", 151.
8. During the Middle Ages as well as the early modern period, the dating of Christ's birth, and the introduction of the Gregorian calendar, were the objects of a series of revisions and power struggles. That Christ's birth should be year zero was, however, uncontested. The concept was in this sense static by nature, even

though the methods of counting and periodizing were themselves subject to controversy.

9. Reinhart Koselleck, “Historical Criteria of the Modern Concept of Revolution”, “‘Neuzeit’: Remarks on the Semantics of Modern Concepts of Movement”, and “‘Space of Experience’ and ‘Horizon of Expectation’: Two Historical Categories”, in *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press 2004)

10. See for example Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race Power and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge 1975–79*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press 1996), 27, and Gina Chon & Sambath Thet, *Behind the Killing Fields. A Khmer Rouge Leader and one of His Victims* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2010), 62.

11. Philip Short, *Pol Pot: The History of a Nightmare* (London: John Murray Publishers 2004), 73–74.

12. Short, *Pol Pot*, 73–74.

13. Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime*, 27.

14. Short, *Pol Pot*, 317.

15. David P. Chandler, *Brother Number One: A Political Biography of Pol Pot* (Oxford & Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press), 122; *Pol Pot Plans the Future. Confidential Leadership Documents from Democratic Kampuchea, 1976–1977*, eds. David P. Chandler, Ben Kiernan, Chantou Boua (New Haven: Yale Southeast Asia Studies 1988), 4, 121–126.

16. *Pol Pot Plans the Future*, 36, 120–123, 126, 171; Chandler, *Brother Number One*, 107.

17. Chandler, *Brother Number One*, 7–8.

18. *Pol Pot Plans the Future*, 213–227.

19. Chon & Thet, *Behind the Killing Fields*, 121–125.

20. Chandler, *Brother Number One*, 105, 227n.

21. *Pol Pot Plans the Future*, 123.

22. François Ponchaud, *Cambodia Year Zero*, trans. Nancy Amphoux (London: Allen Lane 1978) 17–38, 214–215; Chon & Thet, *Behind the Killing Fields*, 39.

23. Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime*, 33–40.

24. Short, *Pol Pot*, 318.

25. See for example Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime*, 27 and Chon & Thet, *Behind the Killing Fields*, 62.

26. Short, *Pol Pot*, 317.