

The reception of Cambodian refugees in France

This article is submitted for the consideration of publication in the International Migration Review. It is based on interviews with primary stakeholders of the Cambodian community in Lyon, France, as well as the study of relevant literature and data available in archives and personal documents. This article is based on fieldwork conducted from February 1 to May 1, 2010, as part of the PhD trajectory: “Navigating a river by its bends”, CCSS and Cambodia Research Group, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

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ABSTRACT

Cambodian refugees' arrival in France has helped initiate an atypical political mobilization in the process of their reception. The French political power balance, the sociocultural "mood" (zeitgeist) and the "mediatization" of the Indochinese region have impacted on their resettlement and given them an advantage over other groups of immigrants. This is relevant as it unmasks the easily presumed "equality under law" of immigration procedures at all times. Also, it may help us understand the hidden nature of Cambodian communities in France to this day. These conclusions are based on fieldwork and recent interviews with French Cambodian community leaders in France.

Introduction

The members of the Cambodian community lead a life “in the shadows” of French society. Compared to the multitude of distinct cultural expressions by immigrant groups, the Khmer are hardly visible. Cambodian trade and commerce is often hidden behind the smokescreen of “Asian” or “Chinese” enterprise. You will be hard-pressed to find a French Cambodian grocery store or restaurant that is proud to promote itself as selling authentic Cambodian products. Either the products are of Thai, Vietnamese and Chinese origin, or the Cambodian owner is actually promoting his enterprise as Chinese (Gilles, 2004; Guerassimoff, 2003; Hassoun and Tan, 1986). Moreover, Cambodian community organizations stay out of the public eye. The activities organized by *sociétés* dedicated to Cambodian cultural, social or religious traditions are, generally, not listed in directories or event calendars meant for the general public (Prak-Vath, 1992). This article proposes that reasons for this relative “invisibility” may be found in the nature of the Cambodian refugees’ reception and resettlement in France.

These subjects merits attention as it has so far not been researched in conjunction and may provide us with lessons to be learned on the effective reception and resettlement of immigrant and refugee groups. Furthermore, their study may help governments in realizing their objectives in immigrant reception and community formation. Several elements of the subject central to this article have been studied in France. The exemplary ethnographic work of Ida Simon-Barouh (1981, 1983 and 2004) on Cambodian refugee experiences has concentrated on their reception. Her work, however, has only found sporadic resonance in later publications. In following years, a low-impact publication based on the Master thesis by Cambodian author Prak-Vath (1992) seems relatively unique in choosing the Lyonnese Cambodian community as his subject. Another element , the political and judicial backgrounds of the reception of the “boat people” in France, has been addressed by Meslin (2006), who has also conducted social studies on Cambodian refugees. Most notable is the work of Duclos and Cogne (2008) accompanying an exhibition on Cambodian refugee

resettlement in the Isère region in Grenoble in cooperation with the *Musée de la Résistance et de la Déportation de l'Isère*. The collection of interviews and essays in this book has, however, been published into an edited volume lacking the methodological rigor of academic research.

This article aims at contributing to fill this gap in a twofold discussion. First, it will show that the French political power balance, within the sociocultural “mood” (zeitgeist) of the sixties and seventies and the nature of “mediatisation” are essential to the understanding of the atypical nature of the reception of the Cambodian refugees. This argument leads to the conclusion that, Cambodian refugees have experienced subjective treatment, regardless of the apparent objectivity of judicial status under law that is generally presumed as “equality under law”. Next, this article proposes that the Cambodian refugees’ priority treatment has affected their resettlement experiences in France. Both the negative and positive effects of this subjective treatment are discussed and assessed.

This article was written as a result of extensive literature study, the comparison of written data available in archives and personal documents, conversations with members of the Parisian Cambodian community and three months of fieldwork and interviews with the Cambodian community in Lyon in 2010. In the basic assumption of a world existing of multiple realities that is in the business of continuously renewing, producing and revising them, this work offers yet another perspective of events to add to the accumulation of histories. It is thus an observation of the diversity of experiences and events, as witnessed in the direct extracts of interviews, and may lay no claim to portraying a uniform “truth” in its interpretation of the reception of the Cambodian refugees in France.

After an introduction of the way this study was carried out, first, Indochinese refugees’ reception in France is described in chronology and illustrated by personal experiences of the Cambodian refugees in the Rhône-Alpes region. This is followed by an introduction of French politics and society as related to immigrants and Cambodian refugees in the seventies and eighties. Although the nature of this qualitative study does not allow for causation in its

analysis, some propositions on the reasons for the observed invisibility of the French Cambodian community are brought forward in the discussion of findings and in the conclusion. Finally, after exploring some pathways for future research, the argument is concluded by a reflection on the results obtained.

Methodology

In order to appreciate the arguments made, first, some aspects of the methodology of the research are introduced here. Considering the complexity of the subject, the nature of the research question and a general lack of longitudinal quantitative data on refugee groups within French (governmental) organizations, ethnographic methods seem most pertinent for data-collection. Ethnography may be described as a holistic approach to cultural systems, trying to describe their socio-cultural contexts, systems and meanings. It is based on fieldwork by an active researcher trying to understand, interpret and reflect on dynamic processes and make a “thick description” of selected cases. A constructivist perspective is necessary here as, instead of quantitative measurements and absolute dichotomies, this study aims at bringing forward descriptions, personal narratives and qualitative assessments. During fieldwork and interviews conducted with former Cambodian refugees and stakeholders in Lyon and Paris the central subjects were: their personal history before arrival in France, the existent procedures they had to undergo upon arrival and in resettlement, their personal experiences of this reception, and in the incorporation in local Cambodian communities and French society.

First, after a thorough study of French and English literature, fundamental questions were identified on the subject of French immigration policy, refugee reception and local Cambodian communities. A formulation of questions into these fields enabled progression and comparison within the semi-directive interviews conducted in this way. In a three months period of research, twenty members of, and stakeholders in, the Cambodian community were interviewed and followed in social events. Some of them were interviewed

several times. This group consisted of women and men in ages ranging from 29 to 82 and with a considerable involvement in the Cambodian community in Lyon, and a limited number of members of the Parisian Cambodian community.

As exchanges of personal knowledge produced with the social setting of an interview, the triangulation of the information thus obtained was an important part of the research. The information was recorded and analyzed:

1. By testing the results using data available in archives, literature and other written sources.
2. By comparing the answers given in subsequent interviews, in additional comments and reactions to the first findings.
3. By the researcher's reflection on the theoretical, methodical and personal implications of the work for her respondent's (see also conclusion).
4. By an explicit effort to obtain feedback from respondents and other community members on the resulting chronology as described in this article.

This has resulted in the following description and interpretation of the reception of Cambodian refugees in France.

Coming to France

As of 1975, large groups of Indochinese refugees started arriving in France. For all Southeast Asian groups that arrived, the conditions for entry were determined by, either, their former involvement in French colonial government or French businesses; their French citizenship or their family-ties to French citizens, as well as their selection by French government in refugee camps based on the subjective criteria of "special skills or qualifications" (Mignot, 1984: 89-92). Once on French territory, the arriving refugees were helped in addressing their request for official refugee status to the *Office Français de Protection des Réfugiés et Apatrides* (OFPRA).

Typically, Indochinese refugees to France were welcomed at the airport by members of the Red Cross. The arrivals spent their first few weeks in one of four *Centre de Transit* in the Paris region for medical examinations and registration. The organization *France Terre Asile* handled first administration and coordination. In later years this organization was accompanied by the N.G.O. *Accueil France* that subscribed to similar goals. If so needed when there was no family present in France to welcome them, the refugees in resettlement were directed towards available housing in particular regional centers. In 1975, the institutional flexibility to cater to the arrivals' needs and wants was still obvious. All parties show a willingness to cooperate in order to arrive at the preferred solutions for resettlement. However, there was little left to personal choice after 1980 when the largest numbers of Cambodian refugees started arriving. Depending on the time of arrival, the choice of the region of resettlement was thus left up to the arriving refugee. The limited number of exiles received on the basis of "quota" before 1980 have the opportunity to opt and apply for acceptance in a community. The large numbers of refugees arriving later were directed to available locations for resettlement (CRARRDA, 1986; Duclos and Cogne, 2008). Still, there was always the choice to go about resettlement independently with no support from the participating non-governmental organizations. In practice, refugees with family sponsorship seemed to be the only ones who chose this option. Whatever their choice of method for resettlement, for at least six months the accepted refugees received financial support from the *Service Social d'Aide aux Emigrants* (SSAE).

When refugees decided to accept the help offered, they could find protection in a temporary shelter, a *Centre Provisoire d'Hébergement* (CPH). Many of the formalities around the acquirement of official residency for these Cambodians were summarized to a minimum as a form of judicial priority treatment (Meslin, 2008:38). Although the asylum procedures at this time are, generally, less "heavy" as compared to recent policies, still, for many members of this group of Indochinese refugees, they seem remarkably simplified and aimed at an easy relocation in France. In order to analyze the reasons and implications of this situation, the focus is now on the Cambodian arrivals.

Groups of refugees

At the time of the Khmer Rouge take-over in 1975 an estimated number of 40.000 Cambodian refugees were legally granted asylum in France (France Terre Asile, 1978 in Duclos and Cogne, 2008). They followed the basics of the process described above. In fact, at that time, these formalities surrounding refugee reception were still in the rudimentary phase and there was little government accountability for the introduction of additional procedures.

In addition to the relatively small group of new arrivals from Cambodia, a second group of Cambodian nationals were also offered refugee status. They were the ones already living in France before the Khmer rouge' take-over, having been granted temporary residency after their selection for a French study or internship under the educational cooperation agreement between the two countries. Their newly accepted status as a refugee, was, again, a temporary residency but without the scholarship funding they had enjoyed as bursary students. Theirs was now a refugee status without benefits such as the financial support by the SSAE and insurances. While losing their grants for study or internships, they obtained residency (a *carte de séjour*) without a work permit (a *carte de travail*). Members of this group were thus forced, either, into the marginal existence of working part-time jobs in order to get by, or, into the acceptance of the French nationality. As a member of this group states:

"But it was very difficult because we had no grant. We cannot work. Because, to get a job, you must have a work permit. And to have the work permit, you must have a job. So, this is just wonderful [sic] (Translation of interview Lyon 8 march 2010)

These two groups are the first groups of Cambodians to live in France as refugees. As of 1978 their relative number increased dramatically when France continued to receive

about a thousand Cambodian refugees per month. The entries allowed were subject to accorded quota for their entry. This rate of arrivals persisted until the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979. It forced the French government to form formal partnerships and institutionalize systems of refugee reception that, so far, had been instigated by social organizations and provisory in nature (Meslin, 2006: 39).

A new and more sizable group of refugees arrived after the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979 and, after 1980, they were joined by Cambodian exiles fleeing from the Vietnamese in the awareness that they had taken over Cambodia for the long term. These refugees had often fled through Vietnam and the camps in Thailand and are, confusingly, often referred to in France as part of the "boat people". In numbers, the mass of Cambodian refugees arrived at this time. As opposed to the students, merchants and intellectuals arriving before 1979, members of this group were often from rural areas and shared backgrounds as peasants or laborers (Mignot *et al* 1980; Mysliwiecz 1984). This group included the many refugees who had long time remained in Thai camps and did not want to return to Cambodia. Reuniting with family members in France, they acquired French citizenship by sharing their siblings' administrative "record" (Duclos and Cogne 2008; Prak-Vath 1992).

The CPH at Bron

In 1980, the Rhône-Alpes region held about 4.532 Cambodian refugees. They were registered with non-governmental organizations only under the common denominator of being Cambodian and "stateless". In 1985, while the transit centers around Paris were inundated with numbers of 25.000 to 30.000 asylum seekers, only around 4.966 of them live in the temporary centers in the Rhône-Alpes region. By the end of the eighties, this number augmented to about 6.000 (CRARRDA, 1986: 1; Prak-Vath, 1992: 20).

About 68% of the arriving refugees ended up in regional centers, the *Centres Provisoire d'Hébergement*. Their number grew quickly as 116 centers were opened in the eighties to cater to the increased number of refugees. Aimed at decentralization of the

asylum groups, they were spread over 68 French departments. Because the foundation of these centers was necessarily instigated by unique and regional public/private partnerships that took some time to form. Many of them are not ready to accept refugees until the early eighties. As a result of the autonomous nature of the foundation and management of the CPH as semi-governmental organizations, it is hard to make generalized statements on their aims and organization for France as a whole. Therefore, this study will focus on the CPH at the village of Bron, near Lyon, as an illustration of their aims, management and achieved results.

The center at Bron did not receive its first 13 refugees until 1983, when it was run in partnership with local and national governments. Before, as of 1976, the reception of refugees was run and financed by a catholic aid organization, the *Secours Catholique*. In the case of the Cambodians in the Rhône Alpes region, the state has no official place for them to stay until the foundation of this dedicated CPH. Remarkably, when the governments decided to cooperate in the establishment of a public/private organization, it is decided that the resulting CPH will be dedicated to Indochinese refugees. Its establishment was a result of the cooperation between, among others, the *Comité Rhodânien d'Accueil des Réfugiés et de Défense du Droit d'Asile* (CRARDDA, later *Forum Réfugiés*), the regional government (*Préfecture*), catholic and protestant aid organizations and the *Centre Pierre Valdo*, a center that usually functions as the regional shelter for immigrants (CRARDDA, 1986: 1). To explain this atypical use, the former director of Forum Réfugiés and the Bron center explains:

“The Indochinese refugees received an exceptional treatment, the government did not want them to be housed in the ‘Centre Pierre Valdo’. They received a special status as SEA (‘Sud-Est Asiatique’) and special centers were founded for them, like the one in Bron.” (Interview Lyon, 20 March 2010)

He interprets this policy as a latent fear of the, then, leftist Mitterrand government for, still existent, right wing anti-communist sentiment. The historical context of this interpretation will be discussed later.

Management of the CPH in Bron, Rhône-Alpes region

In many ways the center in Bron has shown itself a very successful resort for Cambodian refugees and many other groups of refugees that have been in the process of resettlement in France in later years. As of 1989, the Cambodian arrivals at Bron took a sharp drop. In all likelihood this was related to the ending of the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia (CRARRDA, 1989). In 2010 this location, and a similar center in Lyon, were still in use by *Forum Réfugiés*, the successor of the organization started as the *Comité Rhodânien* or CRARRDA.

CRARRDA management letters for the Bron location from 1986 to 1991 show that this location was used to its full capacity. The organization of the CPH at Bron was officially described as aiming at the long term integration of the refugees in French society. In order to facilitate the refugees in achieving this, language training, primary education for the children and support in finding a job were offered during the 6 months of a refugee's allowed stay, as well as counseling and advice after they had found local housing. As the archives show, the most urgent problem in achieving its aims, for this center, appeared to be in finding affordable and local housing for families. In general, new suburbs around Lyon such as Vénissieux, Vaulx-et-Velin and St.Priest labeled as *Zône à Urbaniser à Priorité (Z.U.P)* were the only available places to house the Cambodian refugees. In the low-cost and high-rise environment of modernist projects, the *Habitations à Loyer Modéré (H.L.M.)* these newly resettled families shared their environment with many other groups of immigrants. This situation was described by its "participants" as not contributing to their integration into French society and the formation of local Cambodian communities (Interviews Lyon, March and April 2010; Prak-Vath, 1992:125-6) .

Regardless of the difficulty in finding housing, however, finding a job was experiences as relatively easy by the interviewed Cambodian refugees. They benefited from a preferential treatment relative to other immigrant groups. A clear advantage on the restricted regional job market that was suffering from an economic depression at this time (Interviews Lyon, March and April 2010). Helped by a language course at the CPH and the centre's mediation in finding a job, the Cambodian refugees also were helped by the positive effects of media exposure on their ordeal under the Khmer Rouge and a general French awareness of the distinctness of Southeast Asian region as a former colony. A number of big enterprises stated their preference for these Southeast Asians on the subjective basis of expected skills, intelligence and mentality, thus granting them a relative advantage (Interviews Lyon, March and April 2010; Prak-Vath, 1992: 20). As the child of a Khmer refugee remembers his childhood in the region:

“There were always employers for my father. Even in the economic crisis. It was never a problem.” (Interview Lyon, 25 March 2010)

Nevertheless, and as general characteristic of the immigrant job market, the available and mostly low-skilled jobs did not correspond well with individual qualifications. Also, in defiance of the CPH aim to support local integration, a second relocation was often considered necessary to safeguard a regular income that may support a family. The need for survival led Cambodian families to industrial environments in major industrial hubs like Paris, Marseille and Bordeaux.

Remarkably in fact, despite or maybe even because of these movements and forced changes in their personal lives, traditional customs, religious traditions and structures of social and political division remain visible in the Cambodian communities established in French society. Findings show that the social networks are still centered on religious centers and the hierarchical structures and moral order so basic to Cambodian society seem to have been reproduced by the first generation of refugees within the limitations of the French

context (Prak-Vath 1995, Ebihara *et al.*, 1994). This reconstruction of a familiar societal order, however, is accompanied by a mentality of not drawing attention as a group. In the public eye, Cambodian refugees in resettlement are invisible as they display socially appropriate behavior. As respondents' explain it was generally agreed within the community that it would be ungrateful to "make trouble" after the hospitality shown by the French government and so many of its citizens (Interviews in Lyon, March 2010). The communities thus developed "in the shade" and found their way within and around existing societal structures.

This may be illustrated by the position of the Sino-Cambodians. Frequently, information about their resettlement is available as they are seen as part of the community of immigrant Chinese entrepreneurs that is a subject of research more often than the Cambodian French population. Publications on this group show that Sino-Cambodian refugees that have, legally or illegally, come to France were quickly incorporated in the dynamic Parisian Chinese community and have a preference to maintain their traditional positions. Similar to the economic activities and commercial monopoly they held in Cambodia, they also remain active as immigrant entrepreneurs in shops and restaurants in France (Hassoun and Tan, 1986:2; Nicholls, 2005: 350-1)). Within the Cambodian community this distinct position is acknowledged and the hybrid nature of Sino-Cambodian identity is referred to with the saying that: "A commercial failure will always be caused by a Cambodian, but when there is commercial success the owner will suddenly be Chinese" (Interview May 2010, Lyon).

Political Climate in France

The political climate in the France around and after the renowned year of 1968, in the seventies and even in the eighties, may still be characterized as a time of contestation and intense partisanship (Bourseiller, 2008: 407-409; Dreyfus-Armand *et al.*, 2000:25). The resettlement of the Cambodian and other Indochinese refugees in the French republic was managed through a deeply centralized system that brought local partisanship to the forefront

(La Gorce *et al.*, 1979). In these years, politics were dominated by differences that may be brought back to the dichotomy of socialist “left” against conservative “right”. This stalemate was incorporated by the political fights about the presidency between Valéry Giscard d’Éstaing and François Mitterrand and their respective periods as *Président de la République*.

After the conservative rule of de Gaulle and Pompidou, the much younger Valéry Giscard d’Éstaing wins the presidential elections in 1974. Trumping a prospective socialist/communist government under his socialist rival Mitterrand, Giscard d’Éstaing, manages to bring a fresh right-wing élan. Press reports exalted that –finally- a younger generation seemed to have taken over power (INA, 1974). Giscard d’Éstaing brought hopes of change, modernization and cooperation within the European community (Bernard, 2003). The openness and inclusiveness that are the first hallmark of his government were extended to the Indochinese refugees. It is not difficult to imagine how humanitarian actions for these former colonial citizens fleeing from oppressive communist regimes would fit with the ideals defended by Giscard d’Éstaing. With Jacques Chirac and Raymond Barre consecutively serving as its prime-ministers, the two governments of Giscard d’Éstaing have not managed, however, to live up to the high expectations. Divisions within rightwing parties, personal strife, accusations of passivity and, finally, the onset of an economic depression to arrive in the eighties, lead to the governments’ demise.

In 1981, old-time leftwing rival François Mitterrand wins the presidential elections. His would be a government uniting the left in a strong socialist character and cooperating even with the communist party. Mitterrand presented himself as a staunch defender of “suppressed peoples” all over the world. Including, as his 1981 speech in Cancun illustrates, empathy for the feat of refugees. Nonetheless, a clear ideological sympathy for the eastern block nations and communist regimes is apparent that laid its conditions on refugee support (Bernard, 2003; La Gorce *et al.*, 1979). This sympathy for communism made the plight of the Cambodian refugees fleeing from Vietnamese communism almost unimaginable for the

more dogmatic French. This left wing notion would resound even in the local reception encountered by resettling Cambodian refugees in France, as will be discussed later.

France as an immigrant nation

France has long denied the reality of being an immigrant country. This has resulted in notable inconsistencies between the ambitions of its official immigrant policies and their practical effects (Noiriel, 1988: 335). Even though it was the only European country encouraging permanent immigration in the first three decades after the second World War, in public discourse the labor migrations from southern Europe and North Africa have long been treated as a trend that would blow over. In this debate, as soon as industrialization in the countries of origin and the state of the French economy would allow, immigrants would just go back “home”. Consequently, immigrants were either perceived as passing visitors that would leave French culture undisturbed, or, when obtaining the French nationality, as equal citizens that could leave their former cultural identity behind. Horowitz and Noiriel have labeled this the “dichotomization of identity” meaning that:

“.. immigrants who are no longer ‘foreigners’ are presumed to exchange their former identity for a French identity. Hyphenation, the hardy perennial of American ethnic studies, is logically foreclosed in France.” (Horowitz and Noiriel, 1992: 7)

In the eighties, when the largest number of Cambodian refugees arrived, French immigrants were subject to rigid immigration policies that restricted their access to complete citizenship and excluded non-natives from government employment (Horowitz and Noiriel, 1992: 11). The reception of the Cambodians is atypical, and does not seem to suffer from the strictness of exclusion that characterizes this immigration policy. The close ties between the two countries may be one of the reasons for this particular situation.

French-Cambodian relations

After decolonization in 1953 the contacts and exchanges between France and Cambodia remain both strong and warm. These links are consolidated in the hundreds of Cambodians benefitting from educational cooperation agreements and studying in France. After their degree they returned to Cambodia and become key players in its intellectual life adding a “French touch” to its conventions. Furthermore, they were politically consolidated in formal exchanges on the global stage. For instance, we should not underestimate the geopolitical impact of the words of General de Gaulle in contesting the right to self-determination of peoples of Indochina in Phnom Penh in 1966. With it he underlined Cambodian neutrality and set an example for the refusal of a regional American domination (INA, 1966).

Accordingly, there was a clear breaking of ties during the time of the Khmer Republic (1970-1975) when American influence in Cambodia became palpable. The Lon Nol proclamation of a free and democratic Khmer republic that, contrastingly, takes place in a military situation that left him mainly financed by the USA, was not acknowledged by France (Kaon, 1993; Chantrabot, 1993). At that time, the bilateral ties were distinguished by the desire to welcome and assist the Cambodian refugees that start to arrive in the chaos of internal aggressions between Lon Nol and Khmer Rouge troops, and after the fall of Phnom Penh (1975).

These warm bonds, extending from a shared colonial history, imply that, in general, the educated refugees allowed into France already have a certain degree of knowledge of French culture and language, as well as, in some cases, existing economic and social ties. This rudimentary knowledge of French life and culture, a familiarity and general sympathy, will have facilitated the survival of the new Cambodian French community in their new homeland (Simon, 1981; Simon-Barouh, 1981). Moreover, the shared social, cultural and human capital resulting from these long-standing warm relations may have facilitated the “disappearance” of the Cambodian refugees into French society. By lack of a better and less

contested term, we may even label this a “successful integration”, according to the intentions of French immigrant policy makers (Prak-Vath,1992).

1968 and beyond

The above testifies to the fact that the nature of the priority treatment awarded to the Cambodian refugees needs to be understood within to the historical, social and political context of their arrival in France, the turbulent seventies and its aftermath. We are in the midst of the Cold war, turned bitter after the disappearance of charismatic leaders like Kennedy and Krutschev. The Chinese revolution was inspiring communist ideals all over the world, as had the Cuban revolution. While demonstrations against “the American imperialists” that had started a war in Vietnam were held all over Europe and the Americas, uprising is in the air. Third world countries were expected to rise up and fight for their freedom from colonial oppression. This was the time for change. This was the time for revolution (Dreyfuss-Armand *et al.*, 2008: 29, 35, 49).

In France, the landmark of societal revolt is 1968. This year was often referred to as the start of the “student protests”. Upon closer examination, however, the level of disruption surpasses the superficial. Large scale strikes in the automobile and other industries all over the country brought to the fore economic aspects of the general discontent, many other levels of society were affected. In hindsight, it was no less than a social, intellectual and cultural revolution in every sense, touching the core of French, and European society (Harmon & Rotman 1988; Marzorati & July 2007; Singer 2002).

As is the nature of government, until the revolts quieted down, the socialist/communist uprising by the anti-authoritarian “left” clearly affected the willingness to make available resources for its own ideological aims by the conservative “rightist” government (Dreyfuss-Armand *et al.*, 2008:297). Thus, all aid was granted to relocate those fleeing from imposing communist regimes under Giscard d’Éstaing. In public and political discourse their arrival and reception is quickly appropriated by the “right” to score points

against Mitterrand's outspoken and conflict-seeking "left" (Meslin, 2008: 39). A "left" that had already shown it was a force to be reckoned with in their public actions.

Signs of solidarity, public eyes on Cambodia and its "mediatisation"

In fact, in the dogmatic ideological practice of the time, the Cambodian situation exposed a serious problem. As a former refugee experienced:

"The left did not listen to the refugees. Even the Cambodian students told us: 'Oh, that's because you're on the capitalist side. You do not like the communists'. Afterwards, when the Vietnamese arrived, they saw the reality of Cambodia. " (Duclos and Cogne, 2008:114).

In the seventies and early eighties, the relatively recent memories of the second World War and the traumatic French war in Algeria may have stimulated empathy for the Cambodian refugees. The reality of the Khmer Rouge regime, however, remains opaque to most French citizens until the late eighties. As a respondent explains, this leads to hostile reactions towards the refugees:

"Some communities simply did not receive Cambodians. The local communists could not believe that people were fleeing a communist regime. " (Translation of interview Lyon, March 2010)

In hindsight, the contradictory French relations to the refugees and the political intricacy of the problems in "their" Indochina in the turbulence of the seventies, may be hard to imagine. Especially since the situation in Cambodia brought up some difficult questions of solidarity. For instance: how to come to terms with the Cambodian accusations of aggression and take-over by Vietnam. A country that many of the left-wing activists had just been defending against the imperialist tendencies of the United States? How to come to terms with

a people that claimed to be seriously harmed and oppressed by a communist regime. While communism was seen by many as the path to liberate the citizens of third world countries? Clearly, the complexity of the situation caused a lot of debate and misunderstanding in the French media on the “right” and “wrong” of a situation about which not all facts were, yet, known. Not until the publication of “Année Zéro” by François Ponchaud (1978) did the cruelties committed by the Khmer Rouge regime find the public domain. Only after the arrival of the refugees public awareness was broadly raised. On television the atrocities committed were widely broadcasted and prominent leaders in civil society protested their case. As a respondent that studied in Lyon at the time mentions:

"... For us, we all knew about the camp, Khao I Dang, it was like the village next door".

(Interview Lyon, March 2010)

Even under these circumstances of general knowledge, discussion and understanding, the validity of the French reception of Cambodian refugees remained a question on which opinions were divided, and on which partisanship led to denial of individual circumstances.

Illustrative of this is the group of critical left intellectuals around Jean-Paul Sartre and Bernard Henri-Lévy that have tried to help the public debate on Cambodia. Their changing of positions produced with mixed effects in public opinion. Even in 1979 Sartre addressed the government on the issue of the “boat people” but refused to accuse the communist regime of being inherently defunct (Meslin, 2008: 39). In 1980 he, and other international public figures such as Joan Baez and Liv Ullman, supported the *Marche pour la survie du Cambodge* that was initiated by *Medecins Sans Frontières*, a highly publicized demonstration march on the Thai border next to the refugee camps. In contrast to a similar march for Vietnam, this did not lead to widespread (inter)national political response however. This lack of effect may be contributed to the Cold War tensions that politicized any defense of the Cambodian victims (Duclos and Cogne, 2008:57-59).

Conclusion

This study began with the premise that the members of the Cambodian community lead a life “in the shadows” and have remained understudied in French immigration studies. The description of their reception and resettlement has focused on historical and social contexts, procedures and personal observations as narrated by the former refugees and others stakeholders in these processes. The description of their reception in France proposes several reasons and contexts for this relative invisibility. It uncovers some important contextual factors such as the socio-cultural atmosphere and political contestations that have contributed to an atypical political mobilization on behalf of the Cambodian refugees. This, however, may have affected their resettlement in both a positive and negative way. Conclusions are thus mixed on several levels.

The effects on an instrumental level are contradictory. The conflict and complexities inherent in the French contestation of “left” versus “right” have contributed to the occasional dogmatic behavior towards the Cambodian refugees as they were considered to flee communism. This confusion has, at the one hand, provided the refugees with an exceptionally easy run through procedures and willing employers to take them on in a difficult job market, however, it has also caused prejudice and provided barriers to their acceptance into local communities.

The effects on a personal level seem more positive and clearly enabled Cambodian refugees relatively smooth inclusion, and invisibility, in French society. The unpreparedness of the French government for the large group of Indochinese refugees has led to *ad hoc* organizations for their reception and resettlement. Public-private partnerships were set up and later institutionalized to provide them with provisional housing and first support. Little force and bureaucracy was involved in the reception of the Cambodian refugees. While the setting up of these structures and procedures took some time, it also gave refugee reception a

“face”. There was a “personal touch” to the way the French state and its citizens cooperated in the resettlement of its new arrivals. Added to the relative familiarity of this group through a shared history and abundant media exposure, this will have facilitated adjustment and acceptance of their life in a new, but well-known, country.

Of course, these findings and their assessment bring forward new questions. What are the effects of the nature of their reception and resettlement on the formation of Cambodian communities in France? What are the consequences of the projection of intrinsic positive qualities on this group at the time of their reception and resettlement? What is the relation, if any, between the priorities granted and considerable media exposure on the visibility of the Cambodian community to date? The effects of the exceptional situation central to this article definitely merit further research into the development of the Cambodian communities in France on the longer term.

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