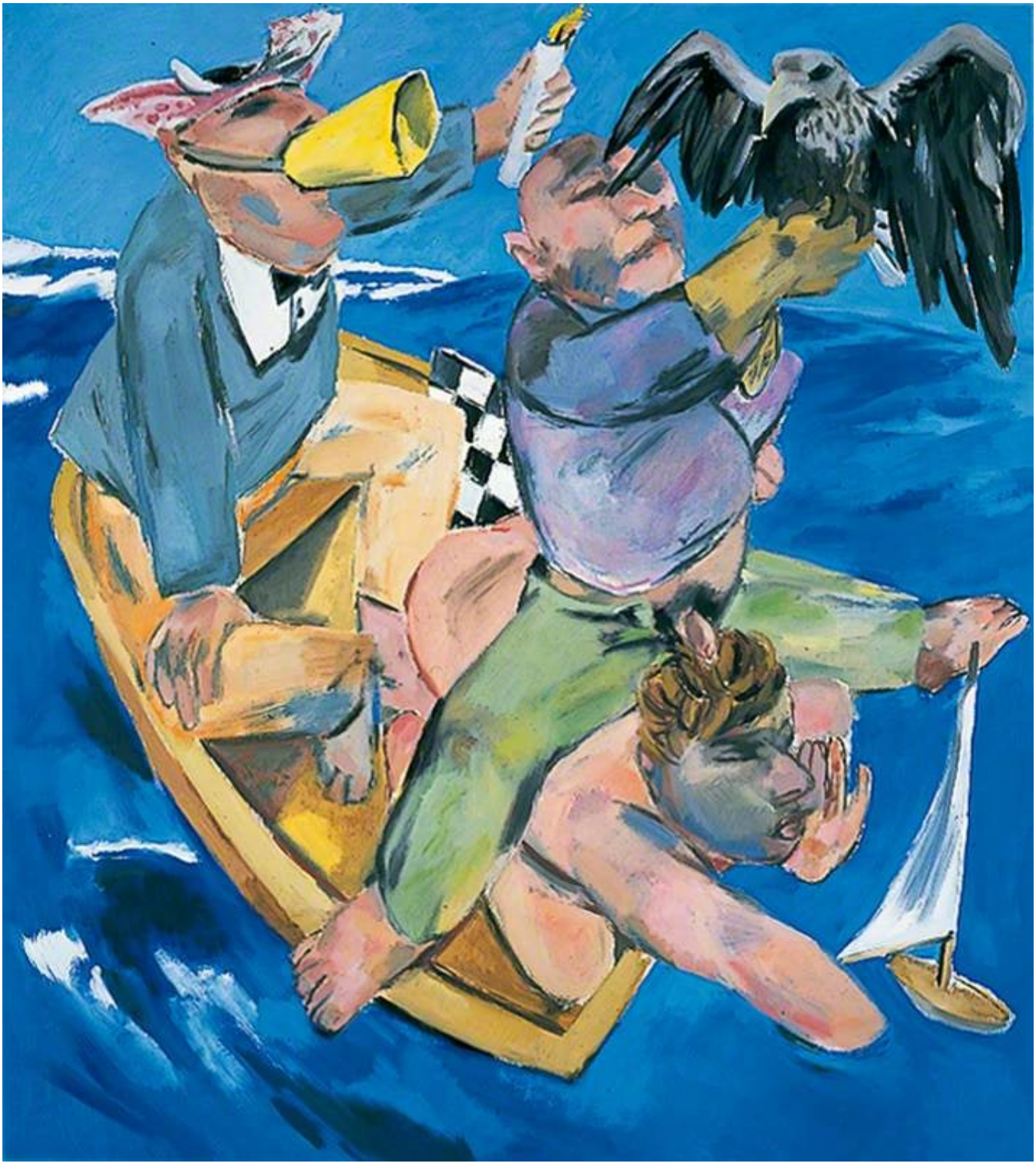
A Kind Word for Stupid

by Theodore Dalrymple (August 2024)



Ship of Fools, Peter de Francia (1972)

One of the most poignant photographs I know is of a man called

Malcolm Caldwell. It is in a book titled *When the War Was Over: The Voices of Cambodia's Revolution and Its People*, by the American journalist, Elizabeth Becker, published in 1986.

Caldwell was an academic at London University's School of Oriental and African Studies. He was also a political activist who was an active supporter of any so-called national liberation movement and its subsequent regime, which always proved to be much more power- than freedom-loving. He was particularly a fan of Asian communism: among his favourite regimes was that of North Korea. In his day he was prominent, in the small way that academic agitators often are; nowadays, I suppose, he would have been prominent in climate change agitation, but in his time nuclear disarmament, especially if unilateral, was one of his major concerns.

The photograph in Elizabeth Becker's book shows him with the long half-straggly, half-curly hair and goatee beard of the true intellectual, standing and smiling beside the number two of the Khmer Rouge regime, Ieng Sary, the foreign minister, who was Pol Pot's brother-in-law. Very shortly afterwards, he was shot dead in the government guesthouse where he, Elizabeth Becker, and another American journalist, Richard Dudman, had been put up.

Malcolm Caldwell and Ieng Sary, 1978 (Elizabeth Hue Becker)

They were the first western journalists or writers to visit Pol Pot's Cambodia, and they were due to leave the next day. Who exactly killed poor Malcolm Caldwell, and for what reason, remains uncertain, but at least two possible suspects were arrested, tortured and then executed. None of this, of course, is evidence, much less proof, of their culpability: a regime that had killed a quarter or a third of its own population was not much concerned with the niceties of evidence, nor would it scruple to execute scapegoats for its own conduct, for it had made scapegoating the central characteristic of its governance, the pretext or reason for killing on an almost unimaginable scale.

Various motives for the murder of Caldwell have been advanced. The Pol Pot regime was in its final phase, for its was clear

by the time of the three westerners' visit that Vietnam was about to invade. Although Pol Pot managed to delude himself that Vietnam, with one of the largest and by then most experienced armies in the world, would need direct Soviet aid to invade and conquer Cambodia, everyone (apart from him) knew that his days, at least at the dictator of Cambodia, were numbered. He had the mad idea that, if he could persuade the western nations that Cambodia was at risk of being overrun *de facto* by the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, NATO would come to his assistance.

Accordingly, an enemy or enemies within Pol Pot's tottering regime, convinced that Pol Pot might have been on to something with his theory of NATO support (and indeed, after his removal from power by the triumphant Vietnamese, he and his rump Khmer Rouge guerrilla movement *did*, quite disgracefully, receive western support on precisely the grounds than he had previously enunciated), killed Caldwell so that it would become more difficult for western nations to ally themselves with the regime. The death of one white man, they used to say in Africa, will give you more trouble than the death of a thousand blacks; and in like fashion, the killing of one academic—this was in the days when academics were still respected *ex officio*—would cause more condemnation and moral outrage that the killing of a million South-East Asian peasants. This was especially so because Caldwell was known as a sympathiser with the Khmer Rouge, which he had defended in public and written about favourably, claiming that the stories of massacre were black propaganda. To kill such a man as Caldwell would expose Pol Pot regime's madness, unable as it was to distinguish friend from foe, and utterly without scruple.

That is one theory, but it is unproved. Another is that Caldwell was killed on Pol Pot's direct orders. On the evening before their scheduled departure, all three of the western visitors were granted an audience with Pol Pot, but the two

Americans separately from Caldwell. The latter was the last to see Pol Pot and he talked to him about economic and agrarian policy, all of course in the abstract. It has been suggested—though there is no evidence one way or the other—that Caldwell had the temerity to disagree with Pol Pot on some arcane point of economic doctrine, Caldwell being the kind of man who thought that he was always speaking equal to equal in the search for truth, no matter to whom he was speaking, as if he were always conducting a university seminar or student essay supervision. On this theory of the murder, Pol Pot did not want accusations of false theory to be associated with his name, or appear in print in the west, and he knew of no better argument than the bullet.

Presumably we shall never know the truth. Recently, the whole story has been made into a film by the Cambodian director, Rithy Panh, though with many significant alterations—a film that I saw in Paris. It is not, in my opinion, a terribly good film, but there is a scene in it which reproduces the murder after the final interview with Pol Pot quite well—though the victim in the film is a French rather than a British communist sympathiser.

Only a couple of hours before he was murdered, Caldwell was defending the Khmer Rouge regime to Elizabeth Becker, who took a much dimmer view of it. According to the latter, Caldwell had been much influenced by a review by Noam Chomsky of the book first exposing the horrors of the regime to a wide western audience, François Ponchaud's *Cambodia: Year Zero*, in which Chomsky cast doubt on the veracity of stories told by refugees about the horrors of the Pol Pot regime. Caldwell was such an admirer of Chomsky that, for him, anything that came from his pen was authoritative, so much so that in this case he refused to waste his time, as he thought it, by actually reading Ponchaud's book—though Chomsky, despite his reservations, had said it was worth reading.

There can, I suppose, be few greater ironies than to be

murdered by the regime which you have been defending of your own free will only an hour or two earlier. (Even if the killer or killers were trying to harm Pol Pot's reputation in the west, they were themselves of the regime, as indeed was the puppet regime put in Pol Pot's place by the Vietnamese after their invasion. Heng Samrin, its head, a very senior man in Pol Pot's regime, had fled from Cambodia to Vietnam not because he disagreed with the mass slaughter as a matter of principle, but because he knew that he was the next to be killed.)

This is not entirely an unprecedented irony. How many foreign intellectuals admired the Soviet Union to the extent of taking up residence there, only to be purged later as enemy agents. I read a book about the so-called *Pieds-rouges*, French sympathisers with the newly independent Algeria, who thought that the revolution had been a secular social-democratic one, as if Algeria had been fighting to become Denmark, and some of whom paid with their lives for their naivety or suffered horrible torture at the hands of the liberators. On the whole, intellectuals are easier to deceive in such matters than are plumbers or drapers, for their hopes are of heaven on earth rather of a quiet life, a decent living and a comfortable home.

What do I see when I look at the picture of Malcolm Caldwell shortly before his murder? By all accounts, he was an habitually bad dresser, but he has made some kind of effort for his meeting with the foreign minister. He wears a very dark jacket, a black shirt and a striking white tie, all in the worst taste—a quality for which he probably had contempt anyway. But his face is full of charm, tilted almost coquettishly slightly to one side, next to Ieng Sary plumply sinister visage. And all descriptions of him after his death suggest that he was a kindly man and very helpful to students, though it must be remembered that after a death such as his people are reluctant to recall qualities less than agreeable,

in case they should be thought to be suggesting that he was no great loss. Elizabeth Becker describes him as argumentative, but that might be only because he attached so much importance to matters under discussion. A human side of him is shown by the fact that when (according to him) Pol Pot asked him to return the following year to monitor the progress of the Revolution, he agreed provided it was not at Christmas, when he wanted to be at home with his family.

One of his students, who became a professor at the School of Oriental and African studies, said that 'he was a gentle person, quietly spoken, very tolerant of opposing views. He treated everyone well.'

This, of course, raises an interesting question: how can a man of so pleasant a disposition have been a willing mouthpiece for at least two of the worst regimes in the second half of the twentieth century—an era rich in abominable regimes to choose from? And why did it not have any adverse effect on his career?

To this we might reply that we live in a liberal society in which no particular point of view is either required or forbidden. But this is not quite true. If Malcolm Caldwell had opted for Nazism, had spent his career extolling the development of the Volkswagen, or the building of the autobahns, or the enlightened Nazi anti-smoking policy, or the fellowship the youth found in the Hitler Jugend, I doubt that he would have been left to pursue his career in peace, indeed that he would have had any career at all, or that he would have found publishers for his academic work. Liberalism has its limits; but evidently, they permit the espousal of regimes as tyrannical as any in history so long as they claim some affiliation to Marxism.

There remains the psychological question of how someone can visit North Korea, as Malcolm Caldwell did, and fail to see that the country was in the grip of a monstrous regime. True

enough, all visitors were shown only what the regime wanted them to see, but the very fact that they, the visitors, were so closely shepherded should have alerted them even if they noticed nothing else—they who, back home, demanded the most untrammelled freedom and complained vociferously if they thought the slightest of their rights had been abrogated. How could someone who was said to be so tolerant of opposing views not have noticed or understood the significance of the perfectly obvious dragooned uniformity of North Korea?

It is an old saying that there are none so blind as will not see. When I was in North Korea, I visited several façade institutions more patently bogus than any film set in a studio, and much more sinister into the bargain, insofar as they required an enslaved cooperation of hundreds or even thousands of extras. Almost as interesting as the façade was the credulity of the visitors, all of whom (with the except of me) had arrived in the country with an attitude of religious devotion to it and its leader. They believed six impossible things before breakfast, six before lunch, six before tea and six before dinner.

In those far off days, it was not a general habit to judge people's characters solely by reference to their opinions. In fact, I liked my fellow-travellers (fellow-travellers in the purely literal, physical sense) even though they believed fervently in something utterly abominable. Of course, if they ever got into power I should no doubt have been one of their first targets for execution, shortly before they became targets themselves; but their adherence to the religion of Kim Il-Sung was sufficiently far from any practical realisation that I could count it a rather charming, if bizarre, eccentricity.

Malcolm Caldwell was one of them—a 'sweetie,' as Elizabeth Becker once called him. 'Naïve,' she also called him, a kind word for stupid. His was not the stupidity of low intelligence but that induced by an ideology that can see a heaven in hell

and mistake the unsatisfactory, which exists even in the best of countries, for hell.

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Theodore Dalrymple's latest books are *Neither Trumpets nor Violins* (with Kenneth Francis and Samuel Hux) and *Ramses: A Memoir* from New English Review Press.

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