Mundane Objects and the Banality of Evil: The Sociomateriality of a Death Camp

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Abstract

In this article, we study one organization that played a pivotal role in the Cambodian genocide of the 1970s: the S-21 extermination center. We analyze, in particular, how processes of sociomateriality in the death camp contributed to create order and normalcy in an extreme and abnormal organization. A more nuanced view of agency ensues from this analysis, one that helps the understanding of how the creation of material spaces critically influences organizing, including the organizing of genocide.

Keywords

organization, genocide, sociomateriality, evil organization studies, objects

Introduction

I dream that my boss, Hor, is screaming at me and accusing me of making mistakes. I am afraid of Hor. I am afraid even to look at his face. I think of Hor as a tiger. Hor was also afraid of Duch.

—Meng-Try and Sorya, 2001, p. 30

Kang Khleak, alias Duch, was the former commander of S-21, the headquarters and central prison of the Kampuchean internal security police, the Santebal, during the years of the Democratic Kampuchea regime. In this prison, the enemies of the revolution were interrogated, tortured, and eventually killed—Less than a dozen escaped alive. Between 14,000 and 20,000 people were massacred there. These numbers included 1,700 soldiers working for S-21, a fact that explains the chain of terror expressed in the quote of the guard above. Without organization, genocide, as the deliberate killing of a large group of people, could not be translated into action. The article demonstrates how genocide was organized materially at S-21.

Although organizational scholars should be expected to contribute to the making of theories of good management (Ghoshal & Moran, 2005), they should not be so affixed to the positive that they neglect analysis of the organization of evil in its organizational processes. Genocides, as organized bursts and flows of violence whose occurrence is all too regular, have historically been a blind spot for organizational researchers (Clegg, 2006; Madsen & Willert, 1996; Stokes & Gabriel, 2010), although there are notable exceptions in the broader literature (Abel, 1951; Bauman, 1989; Cohen, 1954). Given that genocide involves a substantial amount of organization, a lack of consideration by organization scholars might seem surprising. Genocide and reports of its occurrence somewhere or other are rarely out of the news: Horrors occurring in Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Srebrenica, and recent events in the Middle East are widely reported in news broadcasts.

We join a group of scholars interested in the organization of genocide and the involvement of organizations in genocide (e.g., Betton & Hench, 2005; Stokes & Gabriel, 2010). We analyze the unfolding of genocidal processes through applying a sociomateriality frame. To stress the sociomaterial is to insist on the importance of the material world for organizational analysis over and above the more usual stress on language, discourse, and cognitive or other cerebral functioning. A sociomaterial perspective considers people’s actions to be always locally emergent, situated, and defined, embedded within material as well as social processes and structures (Orlikowski, 2010; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008). Material and social facets of existence are mutually constituted and inseparable (Orlikowski, 2010; Wagner, Newell, & Piccoli, 2010).

Specifically, we aim to explore how the sociomaterial order plays a fundamental although neglected role in the
unfolding of genocidal processes. Genocide is a complex organizational phenomenon, involving extreme practices that break the bounds of social conventions and normal conditions for most people, most of the time—hence, the need to understand how normal people can be organized in routines that produce evil as normal work (Goldhagen, 2009) as well as the measures that genocidal organizations use to attract, socialize, and activate the potential for violence of members and followers.

The article is organized into five sections. In the first section, we discuss genocide as organizing. Next, we consider the role of sociomateriality in genocide and explain why it offers an important focus for the study of extreme organizational processes. We then move to the case, where we first contextualize S-21 and explain our selection of the case study approach. We then proceed with the analysis. First, we derive the major types of objects involved in the operation of S-21 and then explain the relation among them in an effort to “lift” data to a conceptual level” (Suddaby, 2006, p. 636). Finally, we discuss the implications of a sociomaterial view of genocidal organizations for organization theory in general.

**Genocide and Organization**

Genocides are defined as processes of “organized killing by a government or its agents of a people” (Harff & Gurr, 1988, p. 362, italics added). They are a persistent form of violence in history, a continuing assault on the humanity of humanity (Goldhagen, 2009). Harff and Gurr (1998) argue that genocide tends to occur where there are combinations of political upheaval and civil wars, accelerated by factors such as elite insecurity, aggressive posturing, and physical or verbal clashes. Other factors also intervene, including those that facilitate civilizational collapse, namely, environmental exhaustion and the tensions resulting from resource scarcity (Diamond, 2005). As Harff and Gurr’s research on genocides after World War II systematizes, every subsequent decade has witnessed the explosion of new genocidal processes. Genocides occurring after 1945 have claimed as many human lives as have organized combat (Harff & Gurr, 1988).

Genocide, in other words, is a form of organizing evil that is temporally enduring and spatially widespread. As such, one might have thought that it would be a regular topic in organization studies: One would be mistaken.

While scholarly attention has in the past been paid to some iconic terror objects such as the guillotine (Opie, 2003) and the gas chamber (Venezia, 2011), we need also to consider more mundane technologies of genocide. The sociomaterial order plays a role in genocide in the case we will consider because of the mundane objects that were used to torture and eventually deliver death, usually with fatal blows to the skull using an axle from an oxen cart. We will explore how objects intervene in the unfolding of a genocide process involved in normalization and punishment on a total scale. Although organization theory discusses processes such as standardization and normalization, the type of normalization considered here is rarely considered. The role of normalization (Foucault, 1977) may be conceived of as the tendency to organize any population through distributing it on the basis of a normal statistical distribution on some salient criteria. In the past, social technologies of normalization, such as examinations, were buttressed by forms of corporeal punishment, such as the cane. Normally, normalization only makes outliers deviant: In S-21, we are dealing with a form of organizational process that made everything that passed through it deviant. Moreover, this deviance implied not corporeal but corporal punishment. How is such action organized? How do mundane material objects contribute to organizing the organizations around them? How, in summary, are everyday things involved in the banalization of evil (Arendt, 1963)?

**Genocide and Sociomateriality**

Methodologically, we regard objects as potentially agentic; that is, objects such as administrative systems for conducting interrogations are able to make things happen, such as the deaths of millions of people. We will analyze how ideology and organizational features inhere in objects that render such extreme organizing possible. To understand organizations, we need to open the “black box” to which mundane objects are usually consigned and explore how “stuff” intervenes in processes of organizational becoming (Molotch, 2003). While technological objects have attracted significant attention, organizational researchers have often overlooked more mundane things. To research the “constitutive entanglement of the social and the material in everyday organizational life” (Orlikowski, 2007, p. 1438) demands abandonment of a priori dichotomies between the social and various others. As we will discuss later, one should be agnostic in relation to objects seen as being defined not by any presumed essence but by their use. Taken seriously, objects open up the black box into which everyday stuff has been consigned.

Humans exert their choices in concrete material worlds, of scarcity or plenty; as Marx (1852/1987) had it, they make history but not under circumstances of their own choosing: They are, at the same time, the product of history. Political leaders are moved not only by ideologies, societal visions, and personal desires but also by material possibilities. Pol Pot presented himself as an “instrument of history” (Chandler, 1999; Cunha, Rego, & Clegg, 2011); more recently, the anti-Gadaffi forces were able to enroll NATO as such an instrument. To view history through its tools suggests a refined understanding of the sociomateriality of the organized world.

We accept the assumption that “materiality is not an incidental or intermittent aspect of organizational life; it is integral to it” (Leonardi & Barley, 2010, p. 34). Objects should be seen to have emergent and relational qualities rather than being seen merely as fixed things. As Latour (2005) explains,
agency is not something that inheres exclusively in humans but should instead be taken as a capacity whose realization results from humans and those things on which, through which, and with which they act and that act on them. Latour (1992) argues, “We have been able to delegate to nonhumans not only force as we have known it for centuries but also values, duties and ethics” (p. 232). Several theoretical perspectives in domains pertaining to philosophy, technology, and the social sciences suggest that artifacts have an impact on the flow of events (Miettinen & Virkkunen, 2005): For example, rats can accelerate the decline of feudal relations (Anderson, 1976), computer-trading programs can cause market crashes (Clegg, 1990), and heavy objects attached to keys can arrest the momentum of departing hotel guests (Latour, Mauguin, & Teil, 1992).

Given the integral role of materiality in organizational life’s reliance on sophisticated instruments such as spectrometers, radiography, and computer programs, it may be pertinent to study the functions of objects, their associations, and the functions they enable users to perform. As Introna (2009) puts it, it is necessary to explore the dynamics in “our relationship with things . . . that surround us and constitute the very possibility for us to be the beings that we are” (p. 25). Such objects might be multivocal, objects that open up possibilities, as previous research has suggested (Knorr-Cetina, 1997), and they can also be univocal, objects that close possibilities and stimulate interpretive and behavioral convergence. Objects play an important part in the process of organizing due to their “histories and built-in affordances” (Engestrom & Blackler, 2005, p. 310): Think of Bentham’s panopticon (Foucault, 1977) and the way it afforded opportunities for instilling control into participants’ superego.

Analysis of the entanglement of the social and the material is necessary to understand how human agency is constrained by microdimensions of structuring while at the same time actively participating in the construction of these constraints. Constraints on human behavior play a fundamental role in the unfolding of genocides: People often explain their participation with the justification that there was no alternative for them, a line that is recurrent from Eichmann in Jerusalem to Comrade Duch in Phnom Penh. With leading functionalist and materialist social science theorists, they maintain that their action is constrained by systems of “domination, legitimation and signification” (Leonardi & Barley, 2010, p. 39). Nonetheless, such systems must be constantly reenacted into being in a myriad of everyday actions (Garfinkel, 1967).

With this study we aim to discuss how actors engage with banal objects to produce systems in a practical, material, and concrete way. Political regimes, such as the radical egalitarian Communist Kampuchea, are abstract, vague, and distant for entire segments of the population, and need to be materially translated (Czarniawska & Sevön, 2005) for execution to proceed. Relevant questions concern how translation occurs and the role that materials play in these processes of translation. We contribute to the literature on genocide and organization by considering the sociomateriality of genocide, that is, the way in which objects may help to create the contexts in which acts of genocide unfold.

**Contextualizing the Case:**

**The Kampuchean Genocide**

Genocide took place in Cambodia between 1975 and 1979. Cambodia was a participant in a wider Cold War conflict in Southeast Asia, one that led to it being bombed extensively by the United States even though it was not in a state of war with Cambodia. In this conflict (explained in detail, for example, by Kiernan, 2008), a radical communist movement supported by the Chinese, known as the Khmer Rouge, led by SalothSâr (alias Pol Pot, alias Brother Number One) seized power in Cambodia in April 1975.

Instrumentally, Pol Pot was a pawn in the political moves of the former Indochina, a contested geography where the world’s powers were rearranging their positions. China, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and the United States aligned with different regimes in the region, and the material conditions experienced on the terrain significantly influenced the outcomes of political and military operation. U.S. bombings of Viet Cong supply lines across the Cambodian border, for example, created conditions attracting combatants to the Khmer Rouge side (Kiernan, 2008).

Influenced by the Cultural Revolution in China, Pol Pot and his cadre enforced a vision of an agrarian, classless society of peasants, a society that was to be as pure as no other in history. Purity would come at the cost of impurity, which had to be filtered, sieved, or otherwise eliminated in order that only that regarded as valuable survived. The impurities that had to be eliminated, literally, were all forms of bourgeois ideology, which were worthless in the new society. Instead of using just radical processes of cultural revolution to reeducate the impure and unworthy by replacing “false” ideas with “politically correct” ideology, the Khmer Rouge quickly hit on the simple expedient of eliminating all impurity altogether: Those who were impure were to be executed. The radical process led to what Rummel (2008) qualifies as a “hell state” (p. 202). As he explained,

No other megamuderer comes even close to the lethality of the communist Khmer Rouge in Cambodia during their 1975 through 1978 rule (. . .) the odds of any Cambodian surviving these four long years was only about 2.2 to 1. (Rummel, 2008, p. 5)

In the process of political “purification,” all those who did not fit the vision were targeted for elimination. The process of elimination took place all over Cambodia, then rebaptized as Kampuchea, in a network of prisons and killing sites. At the center of this network was S-21.
S-21 was a compound of four buildings, three floors high, disposed as a quadrangle surrounded by tin and barbed wire fences (see Figure 1). At the center of the quadrangle was a one-level wooden office where records were kept. S-21 had formerly been the Lycée Ponhea Yat in the Sihanouk era; it became the most secret premises of the Khmer Rouge in the new state of Democratic Kampuchea, with several annexes, including the large killing field of Cheung Ek, 18 km west of Phnom Penh, to which prisoners were transported and then executed (Meng-Try & Sorya, 2001). It was a total institution in the sense that, organizationally, it controlled the totality of its individual members—guards and inmates—everyday lives. Although boarding schools, monasteries, and asylums, for instance, can also be thought of as total institutions, what characterizes genocidal ones is that the death of those within its grasp constitutes the ultimate mission of the organization.

S-21’s immediate mission as part of Santebal was to protect the Party Centre. The party was the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK). The mission of S-21 was accomplished by eliminating the enemies of the revolution: These “no good” elements were purged without hesitation in the context of total and absolute class struggle. To achieve this state of affairs, people were interrogated and tortured, during which they were made to write autobiographical confessions of their “crimes.” These confessions were demanded on the basis of the suspicions of the party, and once confession was extracted, the enemies of the state were finally killed.

S-21 combined a number of functions, including the juridical, incarceral, and investigatory, with counterespionage. A façade of a judiciary system substituted for a genuine rule of law. S-21 is better presented as an extermination camp rather than as a prison; it was a place in which obedience was expected to be total and where everybody, not only the inmates, lived and died under the omnipresent and restless eye of the Ângkar, the organization, in a policy of total and unconditional obedience (Cunha, Rego, & Clegg, 2010).

Method

We approach an extreme case (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007) to exploit “opportunities to explore a significant phenomenon under rare or extreme circumstances” (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007, p. 27) through a focus on the role of tools and other practical objects used in everyday life, such as weaponry, food, and medicines, examples of those phenomena necessary to make the abstract concrete in the execution of ideologies, visions, and desires. Denis, Langley, and Rouleau (2010) note that leadership and organizational processes can be studied through procedures and tools rather than only focusing on intentions or on visible effects of power. Such a position could allow researchers and practitioners to better understand the various ways the organizational knowledge embedded in these tools is deployed and appropriated by multiple actors, potentially linking them in a network. (p. 84)

We concentrate on this case for three main reasons: First, it was the central node in a network of prisons extending over Cambodian territory during the Khmer Rouge years (1975-1979). Due to its centrality, it played a critical role in a political process that claimed 1.7 million lives. Second, because there is good documentation about this case, especially David Chandler’s (2000) book Voices From S-21: Terror and History in Pol Pot’s Secret Prison, a work that provides a detailed account of life in the death camp, our object of study, which will be used here as a primary but not exclusive source of data and interpretation. Third, in studying a recent, if not literally contemporary phenomenon in a real-life setting, with a focus on organizational and managerial issues, from both an exploratory and descriptive focus, we align ourselves with Yin’s (2003) advice for case study research. We do not, however, follow the protocols for case study research laid down in the positivist tradition (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2003). According to Yin, a case study design should be considered when (a) the focus of the study is to answer “how” and “why” questions, (b) you cannot manipulate the behavior of those involved in the study, (c) you want to cover contextual conditions because you believe they are relevant to the phenomenon under study, or (d) the boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and context. All of these apply in this case. Although we strive for validity in our analysis, both internal for causality and external for generalizability, and reliability, we hope never to have to strive for replication, for evident reasons.

Yin (2003) suggests six methods for reporting a case study, including accounts that are linear, comparative, chronological,
theory building, suspenseful, and unsequenced. Meyer, Gaba, and Colwell (2005) stress complex unfolding processes of emergence, creation, enactment, and construction as the appropriate perspective for a case study analysis. Following Yin, we stress chronology but stress theory elaboration rather than theory building per se in what follows, rather than testing any specific organization theory. As with Meyer and his colleagues, we see the chronology not as linear so much as emergent, enacted, constructed, and in its own way, creative. As a guide, we followed Langley’s (1999) strategies for making sense of process data. First, we used pattern-matching strategy, using sociomateriality theory, looking not for correspondence in a positivist mode but for concordances and affinities, in terms of partial pattern matches. Our prime source of data, much as in earlier contributions such as Weick (1993), was a second-order carefully composed narrative that, in this instance, drew on a wide range of sources that would otherwise, for reasons of translation, have been closed to us. Using these data, we engage in content analysis (Duriau, Rerger, & Pfarrer, 2007) that assumes that groups of words reveal underlying themes and that co-occurrences of keywords can be interpreted as reflecting association between the underlying concepts. We also used images as data: In this respect, we connect with some recent developments in visual research, such as Emmison and Smith (2000) and Ray and Smith (2012). We also draw on explicit theory, and our lead is provided by Clegg, Courpasson, and Phillips’s (2006) power theory of organizations, building on Goffman (1961) and Bauman (1989). The basis for our research is a constructivist paradigm; hence, the reader will search in vain for propositions. We seek to demonstrate how the social construction of a reality that will seem bizarre and appalling to most of our readers was possible (Searle, 1995).

Analyzing Data: Identifying Objectual Categories

To understand the sociomaterial order in which objects mediated human relationships and participated in networks of intentionality (Knorr-Cetina, 1997; Suchman, 2005) in S-21, we proceeded to analyze the data in four steps.

First, one of the authors carefully read all the identified English language documents on S-21, of which Chandler’s (2000) book is the single most important written source. The author is the doyen of historians of Cambodia and an expert who participated in the trials of the Khmer Rouge crimes. (These are still taking place in Phnom Penh under the auspices of the United Nations as this article was written.) Judith Shapiro (New York Times, January 30, 2000) considered Chandler “the preeminent historian of Cambodia.” We thus take this book as a legitimate and credible source, and the most detailed work on the site. From the book, one of the authors took note of every passage mentioning objects—the material elements of the place. A table was constructed comprising references to 61 objects. (The table can be obtained from the authors.)

Second, these objects were organized into categories. To do so, the other authors, working independently, organized these objects into what they constituted as meaningful categories.

The third step saw the first author collapse the three analyses into a single frame that was then sent back to the other authors. The process was reiterated until a commonly agreed final classification was obtained. Objects that could fall into more than one category were discussed, with the passages in the book that cited the object serving to clarify disagreements among the authors.

Finally, the author who produced the original list checked the final list for validation. These procedures gave us confidence that the classification agreed on provides a meaningful way of organizing the objects.

The process described above was organized along the lines presented in Table 1. The table comprises four categories of objects structured by two axes. The first distinguishes ideological and practical objects, a distinction that echoes the established separation between symbolic and technical dimensions. The symbolic component is associated with legitimation functions and the technical dimension with efficiency functions (Adler, 2005).

As a place, S-21 was a central node in the Khmer Rouge system of command. It was souked in ideology—as were most organizations during the Kampuchean years. Ideological work was necessary to justify the actions taking place in S-21 and to infuse them with legitimacy. Ideological work, in other words, suggested that certain actions were not only acceptable but also actually necessary and even honorable, given the circumstances of class war and permanent revolution (Hinton, 2005). To participate in the revolution was a privilege, and, as proof of loyalty to the new order, people were expected, in Kampuchean jargon, to “cut off their hearts” and to do whatever needed to be done.

The second axis separates core and support objects, considering the mission of S-21. Core objects are those that were part of revolutionary processes (e.g., arresting enemies of revolution, “curing” the body politic). Support objects are those that help to facilitate and/or support the core activities (e.g., legitimization of violence, building a façade of bureaucratic rationality). Support objects should not be viewed as less relevant than core objects: They performed wider non-specific functions highly relevant to the operation of S-21 and common to many custodial institutions.

In Table 1, objects and functions are aggregated in conceptual categories, to create a sense of the sociomaterial order of S-21. The table displays four object categories: (a) core objects with ideological functions, referring to the reformed body of Kampuchea; (b) core practical objects, related to the processes of detention and torture; (c) supporting objects with ideological functions (which we call symbolic objects); and
Table 1. Objects in S-21.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Object</th>
<th>Functions performed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The reformed body (core, ideological)</td>
<td>Old and new people</td>
<td>Sustaining the revolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Guards in black</td>
<td>“Curing” the body politic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brutalized and animalized prisoners</td>
<td>“Processing” the “impure”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bodies of “traitor” comrades</td>
<td>Striving for purity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Building a new society with “pure” people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Arresting enemies of the revolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Change by terror</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Extracting confessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detention and torture objects (core, material)</td>
<td>Chains</td>
<td>Legitimization of violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Iron beds</td>
<td>Propagandizing “who is who” (i.e., enemies vs. pure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Handcuffs</td>
<td>people)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brick walls</td>
<td>Adoption of established ideologies (isomorphism)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Electric cords</td>
<td>Inspiring and modeling followers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Weapons</td>
<td>Dehumanizing the enemy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Whips</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Needles</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Heavy sticks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Iron ox-cart axle</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic objects (support/ideological)</td>
<td>Mao’s red book</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tung Padevat newspaper</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mao style caps</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Drawing of dog with Ho Chi Min’s face</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical objects of administration</td>
<td>Paper and office equipment</td>
<td>Registering confessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(material/peripheral)</td>
<td>Mug-shot photographs</td>
<td>Building a façade of bureaucratic rationality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Typewriters</td>
<td>Creating routine and repetition</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Van Nath: A Cambodian prison portrait—1 year in the Khmer Rouge’s S-21.
Source: http://andybrouwer.co.uk/vnath.html.

(d) practical objects with supporting functions, that is, administrative objects. These categorizations are discussed next.

The body (core/ideology). The critical objects comprising the central work flow of the organization of S-21 were bodies: bodies of the prisoners as well as bodies of the comrades (see Figure 2). S-21 was a place where the organizing processes aimed at the work flow sought, in Weick’s (1969) terms, to resolve equivocality through the creation of a new order. Equivocality was resolved by the disappearance of the bodies of prisoners, an output controlled by armed men in black. As an operation, it was supposed to contribute to a reformed social-political body: a new nation with no vestiges of “new people,” that is, the bourgeoisie. In this prison, dehumanized members of the new people were eliminated by the social power of the “base people,” that is, the agrarian class. The reformation of the collective body implied the “processing” of those viewed as impure. In this sense, S-21, with its attacks on the body of the bourgeoisie, was a critical node in the revolutionary organization: a place where purity was produced by removing the impure. S-21 “cleaned” Kampuchea by elimination. To use Mary Douglas’ (1966) words, it “processed” those people who, in the new political order, were “matter out of place” (p. 36): City dwellers, now refashioned as new people, were the target. “We evacuated the people from the cities which is our class struggle” (Kiernan, 2008, p. 64), a CPK magazine announced. None of the detained was supposed to leave the place alive: that would have been a failure of organization. Detention was a process of organization in which the preparation and extraction of confessions about “strings of traitors” was the work performed on the bodies confined there, prior to their exit from the system. To extract these confessions, another category of objects was necessary, as discussed next.

Detention and torture objects (materials for core functions). A second category refers to core practical objects, that is,
objects associated with detention and torture. The artifacts in this category perform incarceration and political functions. These include chains and iron beds, shackles and handcuffs, whips and needles, and objects crucial for the operation of detention and interrogation. Given the functions of S-21, these were used as torture tools, along with electric cords, sticks, and clubs. Such tools served to extract confessions from prisoners often reluctant to confess, in part because, in many cases, they were entirely innocent of the crimes against the revolution they were charged with (Chandler, 1999). For example, many prisoners confessed to working for the Central Intelligence Agency and/or the Komitet gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti. Vague associations with stereotypical Americans were enough to prove their “guilt”: “One prisoner said he had been recruited by an American named ‘Kennedy’ in the 1960’s” (Chandler, 2000, p. 93).

**Symbolic objects (supporters of ideology).** A third category we labeled as symbolic objects comprised ideological objects with supporting functions. Support work provided the functions related to the formality and legitimacy of S-21. These functions were directed to the “comrades” working in the site and the bureaucratic apparatus of the Khmer Rouge. As observed by Frost (1985), “the symbolic world of organizations is powerful, creating realities that benefit some people at the expense of others” (p. 5). Objects in this category included Mao Zedong’s Little Red Book as well as other Mao style paraphernalia. The Maoist Chinese objects served to signal the process at work: a revolution. In this revolution, the allies were clear (the Chinese), as were the enemies, namely, the Vietnamese and their Soviet allies, together with the Americans who supported the former regime and Lon Nol’s government. The war against these powerful enemies (the United States, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Vietnam) required total resolve. Other symbolic objects were also exemplars of the Tung Padevat (i.e., Revolutionary Flags) theoretical journal (see Figure 3).

Paying homage to dogs was one of a series of rituals that would confirm the degraded status of the prisoners. Ho Chi Minh was represented with a dog’s head:

We test them by getting them to pay homage to two dogs. Dogs have a political meaning. The first dog is America. The second is Vietnam. When they salute them they acknowledge that they support the two. (Chandler, 2000, p. 133)

The drawing was one artifact of the many used to dehumanize the so-called new people. These people were presented as microbes, vermin and disease, as well as animals. The drawing suggests that prisoners should not actually be viewed as human beings. Treated with indignity and submitted to abject conditions, they soon confirmed their animal status to the guards, fulfilling their evil prophecy (Hinton, 2005).

**Practical objects of administration(s).** Finally, there was a fourth category comprising material/support objects, used to perform administrative functions: paper and office equipment, typewriters, and mug-shot photographs (see Figure 4).
Together, these mundane objects performed functions that were critical in maintaining and justifying S-21 as a normal operation—just another bureaucracy. As Smith and Lewis (2011) observe, it can be said that if sales reps feel properly dressed in suits and R&D engineers in white coats in the lab, S-21 guards were functionaries of a prison system, and these artifacts were testament to their everyday bureaucratic work. As will be discussed below, even killing was preceded by some paperwork, in a demonstration of the legal-rational nature of the operation.

A sophisticated bureaucracy was in place to help the state search, find, interrogate, and eliminate enemies. As in any other state bureaucracy, detailed records were kept, precise procedures defined (e.g., how to conduct torture), manuals elaborated, and the most relevant tasks were subject to detailed job descriptions. Party Centre relied on the extensive documentation prepared to help make decisions. Among the archives that were left behind when the Vietnamese troops conquered Phnom Penh were 13 different types of documents listed by Hawk (1986), including arrest forms on troops conquered Phnom Penh were 13 different types of documents listed by Hawk (1986), including arrest forms on individual prisoners, mug-shot arrest photographs, the hand-written or dictated confessions of about 5,000 prisoners, signed execution orders, and so on. In summary, S-21 was a systematic bureaucracy of death, an observation that presents it as an example of “politics as the work of death” (Mbembe, 2003, p. 16).

**Interpreting Data:**

**Objects As Part of Processes**

Together, the objects grouped in each of the four categories facilitated the redefinition of killing via the circulation of meanings between objects, forming their interaction, as depicted in Figure 5. The four original categories of objects are presented in gray in the figure. The white cells in Figure 5 refer to the way these different categories of objects interact with one another, to create processes that were crucial to the activities of S-21: (a) The interaction of bodily and symbolic dimensions supported the purification metaphor and the need to reform society, (b) revolutionary symbolism was transformed into practice of purification first via detention of the impure, and (c) by subsequently connecting detention with administrative procedures, and finally (d) administrative indifference helped to routinize killing, as part of purification in a never-ending process.

Placed together, objects form configurations of meaning, and S-21 members activated this meaning to support sense-making efforts. People killed and were killed in the name of a revolution, an ideology, and a state. The whole process was death by government or necropolitics, not a matter of individual choice or responsibility. Situations influence behaviors (e.g., Nohria & Gurtler, 2004), and our interpretation indicates that situations, understood as material contexts, influence other situations and other material contexts: meaning travels from object to object. The interobject form of communication and comodification sustained the activity of S-21 and its liminal, intermediary nature, as a total institution, betwixt and between the old and the new. To understand S-21, one needs to consider that in liminality, the presence of structure recedes and the symbolic gains importance, illuminated by the simultaneous manifestation of familiar and unfamiliar elements (Howard-Grenville, Golden-Biddle, Irwin, & Mao, 2011): exploitation and redemption, poverty and opportunity, and power and powerlessness. In this sense, S-21 was a wholly liminal spot, simultaneously known and unknown, relating to the past but facing the future, a place of death in a process of rebirth, legitimate, and terrible, giving rise to the future new society. Given the special role of the place, extraordinary measures were accepted, and material practices interactively played a part in this process as we discuss next.

In Democratic Kampuchea, a new world, emptied of the old forms of human belonging (Buddhism, the family) and interaction (schools, markets), was being created on the ruins of the old order (Lanzara, 1999) through four analytically separable processes: (a) reforming, (b) registering, (c) persuading, and (d) killing. Meanings traveled from one to the other making sense as a configuration.

**Process 1: Reforming—the Creation of the Purified Body**

The revolution was triggered to reform/purify the body political of Cambodia, in a radical exercise in biopower: the choice, by the Kampucheans, of those who deserved to live and those who did not (Foucault, 1977). Reforming the body political of Cambodia was justified with a whole new symbolism. The process articulated death using new symbols. The cure of past evils required drastic measures. Everything was supposed to be new in the country, from the name of the nation itself to quotidian life (total collectivization of life in general included meals, the banning of religion, schools, markets, and money). In a purified Kampuchea, those who were not pure should be searched out, made to confess their errors, and destroyed. The reformation of the social body required the elimination of those stereotyped as “microbes” or “diseased elements” who were still working underground against the revolution: “In some cases the eradication of ‘microbes’ was likened to a public health decision” (Hinton, 2005, pp. 154-155).

The landscape of bodies in Kampuchea signaled the ongoing change: emaciated and skinny bodies, dressed in black, exalting the virtues of the base people, populated the landscape. Unusual objects were not welcome: As an example, in a country of peasants, wearing spectacles was dangerous, seen as an indication of some possible bourgeois inclination. The ideal of a new reformed body, a body of homogeneity, justified massive detention and torture. Detentions were
Figure 5. How material practices interact in producing four processes of fear/terror.
Reform implied significant amounts of bureaucratic work. Country with their subterranean and subversive activities. Those accused arguably belonged, those still corrupting the identities of the strings of traitors, the networks to which torture was required to extract and formally establish the necessary to arrest those who did not support the revolution, new detentions. Confessions were registered with bureaucratic work.

**Process 2: Persuading—The Symbolic Architecture of Ideas**

For the new symbolic order to prevail, it was necessary to find and detain those that were obstacles to the new order. Administrative process was supported and facilitated by the inculcation of ideology. Everyday life in Democratic Kampuchea was saturated with ideology, and behavior became increasingly performative. Eliminating “wrong thoughts” required a constant effort (Rummel, 2008). In S-21, the administrative work necessary to produce change and the cultural presence of objects related to the revolution infused administrative processes with revolutionary meaning. Mao’s China offered the symbolic guidance that signaled the direction of change. In Kampuchea, however, change in direction of a new society was even more radical than in the People’s Republic. Strong indoctrination processes coupled with a regime of terror and panoptical mechanisms of control (Angkar, the organization, has the eyes of a pineapple, it was said; see, for example, Hinton, 2005) combined to produce an ideology that found little or no successful internal resistance. Those who opposed the new order were arrested. The whole nation was a landscape of ideas in action, a political experiment in the making. Intense propaganda was produced and diffused to inculcate the new order. Those who resisted persuasion were detained and incarcerated.

**Process 3: Registering—The Administration of Modernity**

Detention produced results. Once arrested, prisoners were submitted to an administrative process, which produced confessions. The S-21 machine manufactured thousands of them. Each confession, recorded in a standard format, led to new detentions. Confessions were registered with bureaucratic zeal, which is the reason why it is possible to have a detailed perspective of the events at S-21. The rapid advance of the Vietnamese in January 7, 1979 and the urgency of the execution of the chiefs prevented them from destroying evidence: “You are stupid” (Kiernan, 2008, p. xiii), Nuon Chea, Pol Pot’s deputy told commander Duch when informed that the files were not destroyed.

In the genocidal process, the link between administration and detention was relevant. The processes were part of the same reality: Detentions were not the fruit of a capricious nature on the part of the Upper Brothers (as the top management team was known) but rather the outcome of a process conducted with rigor and zeal. The process of recording the data collected as confessions in official forms registered them as “facts” that displayed legitimacy, systematization, and organization, helping to explain a crucial dimension of authoritarianism and organized violence. Objects and meanings are mobilized to facilitate the exercise of domination. As Clegg (2009) explains,

[T]he techniques of total institutional power are assuredly organizational techniques, not techniques of caprice, will or individual voluntarism. Moreover, these techniques are deliberate acts of domination. By this we refer not to the violence but to the ordering, the social organization of ethical horror, in such a way that damage is domesticated, tamed, made normal. (p. 345)

**Process 4: Killing—The Mundanity of Terror**

Once it had been administratively established that the revolution’s enemies were “less than fully human beings” and “killing them is not murder, but rather like the slaughter of a lowly animal” (Hinton, 2005, p. 284), those who were not pure or amenable to reform should be “smashed.” The genocide was justified by the status of the victims, which had been formally established beforehand by the paperwork. Mass executions were mostly perpetrated at night in killing fields, often with clubs and sticks:

[T]he site was equipped with electric power to illuminate the executions and to allow the guards from the prison to read and sign the rosters that accompanied prisoners to the site. This was where the prisoners Nhem En saw were sent to be “smashed” or discarded . . . They were ordered to kneel down at the edge of the hole. Their hands were tied behind them. They were beaten on the neck with an iron ox-cart axle, sometimes with one blow, sometimes with two. (Chandler, 2000, pp. 139-140)

The separation of the S-21 operation into distinct processes is a conceptual artifice. In practice, the several functions interacted and blended. Consider the practice of interrogation according to a Santebal notebook that described how prisoners should be interrogated:

1. First, extract information from them.
2. Next, collect as many points as possible, to pin them down and prevent them from not answering questions.
3. Pressure them with political propaganda.
4. Press on with questions and insults.
5. Torture.

6. Review and analyze the answer for additional questions.

7. Review and analyze the answer for documentation.

8. Prevent them from dying, and prevent prisoners from communicating with each other.

9. Keep things confidential. (Meng-Try & Sorya, 2001, p. 31; see also Figures 6 and 7 on rules)

As the description indicates, some functions were to be used in combination (extraction of confessions, torture, propaganda), whereas others should not be (“prevent them from dying”). The several material practices (Introna, 2009) overlapped, communicated, and comodified one another. As these material landscapes are activated to influence behavior, they then “bite back” in multiple ways (e.g., Engstrom & Blackler, 2005, p. 310; Suchman, 2005, p. 381). In this sense, our splitting of objects aims to show how different functions were performed by different objects and how the sociomaterial order, including notebooks and forms, clubs and sticks, barbed wire and black uniforms, and animalized bodies and vigilant fearful guards, interacted to create S-21 (now known as the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum). Objects, we suggested, were more than mere and irrelevant things. They helped to create the place and its evil order. The “life of objects” (Miettinen & Virkkunen, 2005) is thus part of the explanation of the functioning of life-taking organizations.

What the four processes suggest is that different objects, put together, supported, implied, and justified one another. In this sense, objects are not only inert “things” with neutral meanings but also combine, linking together centers of state power, isolated camps, and killing fields, inscribing a new ideology and a new society. The zones of tension and continuity between the different material practices are presented in the white spaces of Figure 5. This influence is not the result of the isolated power of a given object per se but rather the outcome of the interplay between meanings. Object-cum-agents project meaning onto other objects-cum-agents and contextualize the agency of the embedded humans, facilitating some behaviors while countering others. The objects in S-21 can be viewed as univocal and sensegiving: They forced people to converge on preestablished meanings and interpretations, as part of the socialization in progress, resistance to which was difficult, dangerous, and probably futile.

Discussion

We started from the assumption that if organization theory is to be expected to contribute to human welfare (Starbuck, 2003), then extreme organizations, such as prisons, genocides, and the potential for organizational evil should figure on its research agenda (Clegg, 2006; Suddaby, Hardy, & Huy, 2011), as Goffman (1961) argues in his analysis of total institutions. We specifically approached genocide as a highly organized process. We studied, in particular, the role of objects in the construction of a sociomaterial order that catalyzes the unfolding of the process by creating follower willingness to obey via the construction of meaning-ridden genocidal contexts.

It is not new that space, physical and architectural, influences work and workers (Elsbach & Pratt, 2008; Kornberger & Clegg, 2004). But in this article, we went one level further in the analysis of space and considered the role of concrete objects in the creation of the space around people. In line with Introna (2009), we observed that things are not only innocently “just

Figure 6. Instruments of torture (interrogation paraphernalia) Source: http://herdaillydigest.com/2012/01/05/cambodian-nightmare-2/dsc_0190-2/.

Figure 7. “Security” regulations of the camp. Source: http://www.edwebproject.org/sideshow/khmeryears/s21.html.
there” (p. 27). Tools, in other words, “are there” to make possible the achievement of practical intentions. They allow members to make sense of a complex process of political reform, to register their actions as administrative procedures, to persuade followers via propaganda, and to kill in the name of a strategic vision. We are not claiming that objects prevail over humans: Objects are not “there” without a motive and, often, without human action. We interpret our findings with the notion that once a given sociomaterial order emerges, it participates in the process of distributing agency. Humans in this sense, as defended by the posthumanistic conceptualization, are not necessarily at the center of networks; thus, one needs to reconfigure notions of agency (Orlikowski, 2007) and to weave together more carefully the human and nonhuman elements that participate in the processes of organizing and of distributing agency.

From the above, we extract four core conclusions. We start from the more general ones in the object-centered and sociomaterial literatures, and then move on to those more specific to S-21. First, organizing is bound with materiality, as suggested before by several streams of research, including some organization studies (e.g., Orlikowski, 2010; Orr, 1996). People work in physical settings with objects and tools. These objects influence and participate in the concretization of possibilities, therefore being part of the agency process themselves. They are not inert things with fixed qualities but conveyers of meaning, values, and behavioral inclinations. Research suggests that “adults behave better when teddy bears are in the room” (Desai, 2011). Symmetrically, we suggest that they are more prone to behave evilly when surrounded by evil materials.

Agency is a relational process, with things and artifacts participating in the circuitry of agency. Some objects are mobilized to empower the dominant group and ideology and to disempower its opponents. The promotion of meanings precedes the creation of the sociomaterial spaces where these meanings are to be enacted (Denis, Langley, & Rouleau, 2006), which then reproduces and sustains the initial system of meanings. Second, to understand complex processes, one needs to look at some of the most basic elements. Things have a “life,” one that projects onto the action of “nonthings,” that is, humans. As will be explored next, the roles of some categories of things interact with the roles of other categories to produce a gestalt of meaning. Some categories of mundane objects helped to normalize the atrocities by giving a sense of bureaucratic banality to the unfolding genocide. Banal objects, props to mundane life, help create a habitus in which normal people can become functionaries. Terror requires banality to make evil banal. Objects, not only people and ideas, therefore play their part in the social construction of the banality of evil. Third, a “situation” of inflated revolutionaryries with clubs and sticks, ideological paraphernalia, and bureaucratic, punishment-oriented routines involved in the production of the manufacture of confessions offers what some authors describe as a “strong” organizational situation, that is, a situation that channels behavior in a given direction with no ambiguity or apparent viable alternative (Davis-Blake & Pfeffer, 1989). Fourth, different orders of objects, core and support, and ideological and bureaucratic, complement one another. They allowed S-21 comrades to “zoom in” and “zoom out,” to feel “burning rage,” and to distance themselves in the process, justifying violence and “normalizing” violent behavior. The mechanization of state violence transformed the process into a “technical, impersonal, silent, and rapid procedure.” Such a development was aided in part by “racist stereotypes and the flourishing of class-based racism,” as Mbembe (2003, p. 18) describes about the necropolitical order. The racism was often directed especially at near neighbors such as the Thai or, particularly, the Vietnamese, in an instantiation of Freud’s (1953) thesis of the “narcissism of small differences”: In the case of the latter, it led to the first and only internece war between communist states and the eventual overthrow of the Pol Pot regime.

The bureaucratic apparatus offered order and an appearance of rationality/organization that helped to justify the explosions of rage that were actually choreographed by the leadership, including Duch, as the chief of S-21 (Dunlop, 2005). These explosions of burning rage can be interpreted as aiming to produce an effect over the cognitions and emotions of others, to elicit fear and obedience. Emotions are contagious (Barsade, 2002), and the emotion of fear was endemic at S-21—As the literature suggests, a culture of obedience normally comes with “a heavy dose of fear” (Kish-Gephart, Detert, Treviño, & Edmondson, 2009, p. 177). Objects are a critical component of experiential gestalts (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011) of organizational participants, and the study of objects and their sensegiving properties in extreme organizational contexts may help to understand their presence in ordinary organizations (Suddaby et al., 2011). Those objects that open new possibilities for their application may be thought of as multivocal, whereas others that reduce possibilities may be thought of as univocal. We suggested that univocal objects were part of the process that created a world of symbolic order with alienating properties (Morgan, 1980; Morgan, Frost, & Pondy, 1983). The alienated world, in turn, was the environment that led to alienated agents willing to participate in the mass political genocide of their own people and nation. Finally, we argued that the study of the role of multiple objectual categories in the emergence of these sites of terror and extreme violence should occupy a position in organization studies. Banal objects, powerful ideas, ideological symbolism, and terror tools formed a collection of things imbued with properties of agency. Even the most mundane ones played a significant role in the construction of genocide. The contribution of this article is to bring genocide as a form of organizational action into the fold of organization theory, using an object-centered and sociomaterial analysis to do so.
Conclusion

It could be objected that this article deals with such extremities of human and organizational behaviors that it is irrelevant to the annals of organization scholarship. Yet, genocide is normal, if we judge the normalcy of a practice by its statistical frequency in recent history (Chalk & Jonassohn, 1990; Gellately & Kiernan, 2003). Moreover, not only does genocide have its own organizational characteristics, as we have outlined, but it also has given rise to a panoply of international organizations that seek to deal with its consequences, such as The International Criminal Court, which, although its constitution only enables it to deal with cases that have occurred since 2002, require the insight that the kind of scholarship we have deployed in this article produces, if phenomena similar to the Khmer Rouge are to be dealt with.

The fundamental point, we would conclude, is that such irruption of violence on a societal scale is irrevocably organizational and to the extent that we overlook it, or encapsulate it as the effect of evil, as a psychological mechanism, we allow it to flourish further. Organization is a meso-level instrument made possible by several classes of microtools, such as those described here, and can be used for good or ill: Given this contingency, it behooves us to be on permanent guard against the ways in which such instrumentality, pursued in the name of order and higher ideals, of strategic visions and global ideals is used.

Several object orders facilitate the sensemaking of processes that are incomprehensible for the nonparticipants. We discussed how sociomateriality is integral to the unfolding of atrocity. Such cautions are not reserved merely for the architects of genocide but are appropriate anywhere that those principles that have been established as human rights are violated in the name of some greater good. Regrettably, there are too many contemporary and even culturally close to hand examples for the majority of readers of this journal to deal with: The roll call should be familiar without need to spell out Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, or any of the other places with which one is probably familiar.

The contribution of this article to organization studies has been to raise questions about those phenomena that have been marginalized in past considerations. We have done so through reframing organization analysis in definitely material terms. The materialism that we have developed has been characterized as a sociomaterialism. While organizations are capable of doing many fine things, and we now have POS as a positive organization studies movement to advance our knowledge of these things, organizations can also be used to do many evil things. Perhaps the balance requires rectification through the development of EOS (evil organization studies; see Jurkiewicz, 2012) to ensure that the full range of organizational behaviors is paid sufficient attention and is actively countered: Sometimes, it may be necessary to understand and to use the psychology of evil to do good (Miller, 2011).

An organization study that only accentuates the positive or screens out the negatively deviant serves the future of humanity ill, as it slights all those who have been the victims of organization terror in the past and the present. While it is comforting, perhaps, to assume that atrocities are the responsibility of deviant personalities, we should recognize that they are, in fact, the product of deviant organizations.

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Note

1. Cultural artifacts can perform a similar role in cultural change processes in the corporate world—Jan Carlzon (1987) uses “red books” in the process of cultural change that he led at Scandinavian Airlines - SAS.

References


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