

## REVIEW ESSAY

# The Constructions of Mass Utopia

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**Susan Buck-Morss**, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000/2002, 368pp. inc. index, \$70.00/£45.00, ISBN 0262024640 (hbk), \$28.00/£18.95, ISBN 0262523310 (pbk)

History's least familiar episodes frequently are its most revealing ones. Such is the case with a series of purchases made in the 1930s by Andrew W. Mellon, the then Secretary of the US Treasury, from the Soviet Union. From April 1930 to April 1931, Mellon acquired several paintings, including works by Jan van Eyck, Rembrandt, Van Dyck, Botticelli, Rubens, Titian, Velázquez and Raphael's *Alba Madonna*, from the Hermitage collection. The transaction totaled nearly \$7 million – or about one-third of the official total of Soviet exports to the USA. The purchase was, of course, kept secret owing to the fact that the USSR had not yet been granted diplomatic recognition by Washington.

Four years later, Mellon was charged with evading close to \$3 million in taxes. At issue was the taxable status of his newly acquired paintings. Charges were dropped only after he pledged to bequeath his paintings to the US Government and to build a museum in which to house them. The rest, as they say, is history. In 1937, shortly before Mellon's death, Roosevelt accepted in the name of the American people the donation of his entire collection of art and the National Gallery which was soon to become its home. But why was the Soviet Union so anxious to sell off these 'cultural treasures'? And, why to the United States?

In 1930, the Soviet Union had embarked on an aggressive industrialization program. Consequently, the regime commissioned Albert Kahn and Co., the firm that had built Henry Ford's River Rouge Plant as well as factories for GM, Packard, Oldsmobile, Chrysler and de Soto, to collaborate on the First and Second Five-Year Plans. Ford himself was approached to design an assembly line for the Gorky Auto Plant and to provide technical assistance. Given falling exports of grain resulting from the forced collectivization of its agriculture, the Soviet regime needed a source of hard currency to pay for what Cold War historian Anthony Sutton calls the single largest technology transfer in history.

The Soviets therefore sold art to the USA in order to buy state-of-the-art industrial technology. During the Cold War, this exchange of culture for factories became increasingly embarrassing for both sides for it showed how dependent these bitter enemies had become on each other. While the Soviets were heavily

indebted to American industrial technology, the US culture industry was profoundly if subtly influenced by such Russian avant-garde film-makers and visual artists such as Eisenstein and Tatlin. Yet the mutual inter-dependence between these two antithetical social systems went far beyond industrial technology and culture and extended to their very identities. Today, therefore, such an episode remains an embarrassment for those who argue, with Francis Fukuyama, that the triumph of liberal-democracy spells not simply the end of ideology but the end of *history*. Since capitalism depended upon its 'other' to give it a sense of purpose, the victory of liberal-democracy can only be regarded as Pyrrhic. Such, in any case, is the central argument of Susan Buck-Morss's book.

One of the most sophisticated writers on Critical Theory in the English-speaking world, Buck-Morss teaches in the Department of Government at Cornell University. Her previous two books have dealt with the legacy of the tragic, German-Jewish thinker Walter Benjamin who took his own life fleeing Nazi-occupied France in 1940. While the first, the *Origin of Negative Dialectics*, traces the profound impact of Benjamin's work on the Frankfurt School, her second, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, provides a masterful reconstruction of Benjamin's notes for his unfinished *Passagen-Werk* or Arcades Project. If Benjamin sought to uncover the utopian possibilities of the Arcades and boulevards, arts, fashion and poetry of Paris, the capital city of the nineteenth century, then Buck-Morss seeks to do the same for the dream images that were generated through the modernization logics of the Soviet Union and the United States in the twentieth century.

While the first two chapters set out the theoretical and historical contexts in more or less a conventional manner, the next three put into play a form of historical writing deeply indebted to Benjamin, involving the construction of constellations out of 'historical facts, theoretical speculations and visual images'. Less concerned about the way things 'really' were, these constellations present history as it appears to us retrospectively, that is, in light of the political concerns of the present.

Buck-Morss takes as her starting point what she calls the paradox of democratic politics. While the Soviet regime was, at least in theory if not in practice, a substantive, economic democracy aiming at the equal distribution of the social product, American liberal-democracy is grounded in the formal equality of citizens. Both regimes, according to Buck-Morss, are products of the French Revolution which represented a decisive break with the mythological 'Divine Right of Kings' and established popular sovereignty. The *paradox* of these regimes lies in the fact that while they claim to rule in the name of 'the People', they, at the same time, constitute legitimate political power in a manner that places it beyond their control. In other words, modern sovereign states harbor within them what Buck-Morss calls a 'wild zone': a zone in which power – arbitrary, violent state power – is above the law. How, then, does the modern state set about legitimizing its use of violence? Under socialism, the class nature of the state is called upon to do so; in liberal democracies, it is the claim that democracy represents the popular will. However, this alone is not a sufficient explanation, for, in

Buck-Morss's view, 'The class nature of the socialist state may explain its violence but not its legitimacy; the democratic nature of the state may explain its legitimacy but not its violence' (p. 6).

To explain the legitimization of political violence, Buck-Morss draws upon the work of Carl Schmitt. Schmitt defines the essence of 'the political' as the moment when the enemy comes into view. Buck-Morss accordingly argues that the paradox of modern statehood is solved through this act of defining the enemy; through this act, the sovereign brings the collective, the 'masses', into being. State violence against the masses can be justified, therefore, as action against 'enemy acts' (p. 9). Taking up the concept of the 'political imaginary' from Russian philosophers Valerii Podoroga and Elena Petrovskaia, a concept that differs from its Lacanian counterpart by virtue of an explicitly visual dimension, Buck-Morss shows how the enemy comes to be defined in iconic terms: 'it can be said that the three icons of the political imaginary are brought into this field at the same moment: the common enemy, the political collective, and the sovereign agency that wages war in its name' (p. 12).

Buck-Morss goes beyond Schmitt, however, in distinguishing between 'normal' and 'absolute' enemies. Normal enemies appear within the political imaginary; absolute enemies threaten the political imaginary as a whole and, thereby, the very existence of the collective. The spatial divide that Winston Churchill, in the aftermath of the Second World War, called the 'Iron Curtain' marks the division between two distinct political imaginaries. While the Soviet political imaginary was organized by the concept of *time*, that of the United States was based on the concept of *space*. The difference between the two political imaginaries becomes clear in the historical episode discussed above. While the Soviets were able to convert the 'cultural treasures' expropriated from the aristocracy into industrial technology, which they viewed as a direct conduit into the *future*, the same works of art were, in the National Gallery, placed in the service of *geo-political* ambitions of US *Imperium*.

Yet the Soviet attempt to build a socialist society by way of capitalist industrial technology resulted in a betrayal of the ideals of socialism and led the USSR down the perilous road to dictatorship. The failure of the Soviet attempt to emulate the American model of industrial modernization was most clearly revealed in the articulation of public and private spheres. Soviet society, having become almost completely organized around production as the site of fulfilment, devalued the domestic sphere; indeed, the emotional affect of domesticity was deflected onto the sphere of the production. The 'boy meets tractor' aesthetic of socialist realism has its roots here. The attempt to invest capitalist forms with socialist content failed abjectly to provide adequate living spaces for its citizens as numerous families were forced to endure the cramped, dirty communal apartments that became such a fixture of urban Soviet society after the war. Ultimately, the idea of a 'utopia' of production was precisely that – it existed *nowhere* but in the imagination.

While Fordist and Taylorist production techniques in the 1930s acquired a certain aesthetic aura and formed the basis for imagining the dreamworld of a

glorious socialist future in a quickly modernizing USSR, the 'catastrophic' nature of industrial modernization was already becoming apparent to American workers. It was thus in the sphere of consumption that these workers received what was taken from them in the sphere of production. A thoroughly commodified domestic space, replete with state-of-the-art consumer durables, provided American culture with an abiding dream image. Indeed, as the Cold War progressed, the production of commodities was the only aspect of industrialization not copied by the Soviets and therefore served as the crucial marker of the difference between the two systems. American democracy becomes, in the process, reduced to the choice, as Gore Vidal put it, between Aspirin A and Aspirin B.

If the Soviet dreamworld was purely imagined, then its American counterpart was purely compensatory. The failure of both became readily apparent when viewed through the prism of the women's movement: 'It is one of the great ironies of this century that socialism betrayed the interests of women by obliterating domestic space, while capitalism betrayed their interests by idealizing it' (p. 205).

The Soviet appropriation of Western technology, however, was far from inevitable. It was the result of a battle between the Russian avant-garde, figures such as Malevich, Tatlin, Rodchenko and other representatives of Suprematism and Constructivism, which antedated the Revolution, and the political vanguard, the Bolsheviks. At stake was nothing less than the interpretation of Marx, in particular, his conception of time. On the one hand, the Bolsheviks were deeply indebted to the mature Marx who understood the Promethean unleashing of the productive forces as the *necessary*, though not *sufficient*, condition for socialism. On the other hand, the avant-garde drew upon the Marx of the Paris Manuscripts of 1844 whose fundamental idea, later taken up by the Frankfurt School, was the reconciliation between society and nature.

The contradiction between Russian avant-garde art and Bolshevik politics thus lay in their antithetical answers to the question of whether the revolution was the culmination of historical continuity within a larger narrative of historical progress or a radical rupture. Was the revolution to be understood as the eternalization of the present or a temporal disruption opening up unprecedented modes of experience? Clearly, the avant-garde argued the latter.

It did so, for instance, by proposing the idea of 'socialist commodities' or commodities as 'inter-subjective partners' rather than as reified objects. According to Hubertus Gassner, the utopian dimension of such constructivist objects lay in the predominance of use over exchange value; their enhancement of human activity rather than, as with capitalist commodities, as objects that stifle it. Such a principle is also reflected in Tatlin's flying machine, 'Letatlin', which depicts technology as an enhancement of human sensory experience on the horizon of an 'aesthetics of everyday life'.

Had the avant-garde carried the day, Buck-Morss suggests, the revolution might not have culminated in the Stalinist terror. For in its radical interrogation of the nature of time, its transformation of technology and its re-imagining of

the relationship between the human species and nature, the avant-garde might have arrested the process by which the dreamworld promising happiness for the masses was turned against and underwrote their own domination.

The force of Buck-Morss's argument culminates in her presentation and analysis of visual mass culture in East and West. At its inception, mass culture was created and disseminated by means of radio transmission and the cinema. To this end, Russia aggressively embarked upon a massive project to electrify the entire society. Here, again, Russia mimicked the Western model. Cinema was the principal means by which individuals could recognize themselves as members of the 'masses'. It was, however, a double-edged sword. While its mirror-effect could spur the transformation of the inchoate assemblage of people into a purposeful crowd, with at least the possibility of acting collectively, it could also, according to Buck-Morss, blind them if it obscured the way in which representation itself was structured by relations of power.

The differences between the two distinct political imaginaries, as well as their fundamental inter-dependence, reach a crescendo in Buck-Morss's astounding reading of the correspondences between the Palace of the Soviets, an unrivalled monument to Stalinist dictatorship, and the iconic, sci-fi classic *King Kong*. These antithetical, yet complementary, forms embody not simply dream images of mass utopia but also the contradictory ways in which such dream images were turned powerfully against the very masses whom they were intended to benefit. The statue of Lenin atop the Palace of the Soviets and King Kong atop the Empire State Building both symbolize the masses themselves: 'Like all dream images their meaning is ambivalent, vacillating between a desire that is expressed and a fear that holds it in check. This is what gives them their power to thrill. It is through seduction that they exert control' (p. 176). King Kong embodies the power of our own desire to seek comfort and recognition in a representation that shows the manner in which industrial civilization brutalizes our own animal nature.

The Palace of the Soviets, in contrast, embodies what Buck-Morss calls the 'Soviet Sublime', according to which the damage modern technology inflicts upon the 'empirical' human body is overcome via the 'intelligible' realm of the glorious socialist future to come. 'It is the double-edged imaginary of Stalinist culture, the dreamworld promised to the masses and the nightmare awaiting those who were banished from it, that became the effective means of social control' (p. 188). It is here that the enactment of the fateful dialectic of dreamworld and catastrophe comes sharply into view. Assuming that she is bracketing the history of European colonialism, Buck-Morss argues that

Capitalism harms beings through neglect rather than through terror. Compared to the personal will of the dictator, the structural violence of market 'forces' appear benign. Those individuals (or groups) excluded from capitalism's dreamworlds appear themselves to be to blame. The fate of the poor is social ostracism. Their gulag is the ghetto. (p. 188)

A central assumption of Buck-Morss's argument is the conflation of 'the people' and 'the masses'. However, while 'the people' emerge as sovereign in the French

Revolution, as Buck-Morss herself indicates, 'the masses' are a much more recent phenomenon; they are a product of mass society and mass culture. Moreover, as Hannah Arendt (1958: 219) and, more recently, Giorgio Agamben (2000: 33), have pointed out, there is a crucial ambivalence in the very notion of 'the people' itself. The term 'The people' signifies two contradictory things: (1) the body politic as a *whole*, as in, for example, the US Constitution's language of 'We, the people'; and (2) as a *part* of the body politic, a multiplicity of needful and excluded bodies. While historically there had always been a way of naming this split as in, for example, the Roman distinction between *populus* and *plebs*, with the French Revolution, sovereignty becomes grounded in a single entity: the people. According to Agamben, when sovereignty becomes invested thus, the poor, the marginalized, 'the wretched of the earth', become an 'intolerable scandal in every sense'. The point here is that violence against 'the people' is not justified simply by virtue of an external, absolute enemy, but also can be seen as a function of a deep fissure in the very term itself. 'Our time', suggests Agamben, 'is nothing other than the methodical and implacable attempt to fill the split that divides the people by radically eliminating the people of the excluded' (2000: 33).

Buck-Morss argues that, just as Soviet society, based on the 'Dictatorship of the Proletariat', did not deny the existence of nations, the American nation-state did not deny the existence of social classes. This is the case, she argues, because it enabled each state to claim the dominance of a particular identity produced by their respective political imaginaries: class solidarity in the case of the former; national belonging, in that of the latter.

However, it could be argued that the reason the notion of the 'masses' becomes such a crucial political identity in each case is because the identity upon which political legitimacy is claimed and exercised is *insufficiently* compelling. As Rosa Luxemburg argued, the Russian Revolution erupted in a society in which the forces of production had not developed sufficiently to produce a mass proletarian class capable of wielding social and political power on its own. In the United States, a society in which the social class structures of the Old World were supposedly absent, class distinctions were embarrassingly present, particularly during the Great Depression when American radicalism reached its zenith. The amorphous concept of the 'masses' becomes a way for each regime to deflect attention from its own specific problems of political identity.

It is also unclear whether it is possible to speak of the *masses*, as Buck-Morss does, as if they could achieve the same kind of political consciousness as *classes*. Marx certainly had very good reasons for doubting that this was possible. Indeed, Buck-Morss suggests the viability of a kind of art for the masses that involves, upon closer inspection, a contradiction between realism and modernism. It is doubtful whether, in fact, the self-recognition and identification of individuals with the representation of the masses on the screen (realism), could be maintained in an artistic form that, at the same time, laid bare the relations of power governing the representation itself (modernism).

Such a contradiction is evident in Buck-Morss's discussion of Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). This film seeks, in Buck-Morss's view, to

project film-making itself as a form of experimentation with ways of knowing by intimating the full range of the camera's technical possibilities. Thus, the leading role is played by the camera itself which consequently enables the masses to learn about movie-making *from the position of the person operating the camera*.

The question that emerges, though, is whether aesthetic experience can, at the same time, be squared with mass or collective experience. For aesthetic experience, at least in modernist terms, involves a certain suspension of identity, whereas mass politics requires a reinforcement of identity through stable forms of representation.

These criticisms are, however, ultimately trifling in relation to a book that so powerfully intertwines rigorous and imaginative political theory and strikingly insightful cultural criticism. What is especially compelling about this book is its demonstration of the important role the Russian avant-garde played and continues to play via late Soviet and post-Soviet era artists such as Leonid Sokov, Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, Dmitrii Prigov and Aleksandr Kosolapov, in opening up a reflection on the ruins of the past as the basis for building a much different future.

Through this art, we are presented with a past that is powerfully charged with what Benjamin called 'now time' a past that comes to life and speaks eloquently to our desperate and beleaguered age. Against the grain of the cant of this age, that what *exists* is all that is *possible*, and, consequently, that any suggestion otherwise leads directly to the gulag, Buck-Morss convincingly shows that the danger lies not so much in the idea of utopia as in the *failure* to realize it.

### References

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