

Dreamworld and Catastrophe:  
The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West  
Susan Buck-Morss

## Preface

The construction of mass utopia was the dream of the twentieth century. It was the driving ideological force of industrial modernization in both its capitalist and socialist forms. The dream was itself an immense material power that transformed the natural world, investing industrially produced objects and built environments with collective, political desire. Whereas the night dreams of individuals express desires thwarted by the social order and pushed backward into regressive childhood forms, this collective dream dared to imagine a social world in alliance with personal happiness, and promised to adults that its realization would be in harmony with the overcoming of scarcity for all.

As the century closes, the dream is being left behind. Industrial production has not itself abated. Commodities are still produced, marketed, desired, consumed, and thrown away -- in more areas of the globe, and in greater quantities than ever. Consumerism, far from on the wane, has penetrated the last socialist bastion of mainland China to become, arguably, the first global ideological form. State legitimacy continues to rest on the ideal of rule by the people put forth by "modern" political theories that are now several centuries old. But the mass-democratic myth of industrial modernity -- the belief that the industrial reshaping of the world is capable of bringing about the good society by providing material

happiness for the masses -- has been profoundly challenged by the disintegration of European socialism, the demands of capitalist restructuring, and the most fundamental ecological constraints. In its place, an appeal to differences that splinter the masses into fragments now structures political rhetoric and marketing strategies alike -- while mass manipulation continues much as before.

Commodities have not ceased to crowd people's private dreamworlds; they still have a utopian function on a personal level. But the abandonment of the larger social project connects this personal utopianism with political cynicism, because it is no longer thought necessary to guarantee to the collective that which is pursued by the individual. Mass utopia, once considered the logical correlate of personal utopia, is now a rusty idea. It is being discarded by industrial societies along with the earliest factories designed to deliver it.

This book is an attempt to come to terms with mass dreamworlds at the moment of their passing. Its point of departure is the end of the Cold War. It argues that the profound significance of this event was not so much its political effects -- the replacement of "really existing" (state) socialism by "really existing" (capitalist) democracy -- as the fact that this fundamental shift in the historical map shattered an entire conception of the world, on both sides. In a real sense, it marked the end of the twentieth century. From the present side of this temporal divide, the cultural forms that existed in "East" and "West" (to use the eurocentric terminology of the Cold

War) appear uncannily similar. They may have differed violently in their way of dealing with the problems of modernity, but they shared a faith in the modernizing process developed by the West that for us today has been unalterably shaken. It is with the aim of illuminating the changed nature of our present situation that this book compares their dreamworld forms.

The notion of dreamworld is borrowed from Walter Benjamin, who used it not merely as the poetic description of a collective mental state but as an analytical concept, one that was central to his theory of modernity as the reenchantment of the world. The term acknowledges the inherent transiency of modern life, the constantly changing conditions of which imperil traditional culture in a positive sense, because constant change allows hope that the future can be better. Whereas myths in premodern culture enforced tradition by justifying the necessity of social constraints, the dreamworlds of modernity -- political, cultural and economic -- are expressions of a utopian desire for social arrangements that transcend existing forms. But dreamworlds become dangerous when their enormous energy is used instrumentally by structures of power, mobilized as an instrument of force that turns against the very masses who were supposed to benefit. If the dreamed-of potential for social transformation remains unrealized, it can teach future generations that history has betrayed them. And in fact, the most inspiring mass-utopian projects -- mass sovereignty, mass production, mass culture -- have left a history of disasters in their wake. The dream of mass

sovereignty has led to world wars of nationalism and revolutionary terror. The dream of industrial abundance has enabled the construction of global systems that exploit both human labor and natural environments. The dream of culture for the masses has created a panoply of phantasmagoric effects that aestheticize the violence of modernity and anaesthetize its victims.

The essays in this volume deal with both extremes of mass utopia, dreamworld and catastrophe. The idea of comparing their forms in East and West grew out of a period of close collaboration with Moscow philosophers. From 1988 to 1993 I was a frequent visitor at the Institute of Philosophy of the Soviet (later, Russian) Academy of Sciences, and worked together with a new generation of intellectuals who were critically analyzing Soviet culture as a system of power. In the course of this exchange, the Cold-War world disintegrated. The imaginary topology of two irreconcilable enemies, ready and able to defend themselves by destroying life on this planet, dissipated with the abruptness of a disappearing dream. The historical rupture felt like sudden sanity. For a time the structures of power seemed to us so far in abeyance, and the burden of past history so light, that personal friendships alone would be strong enough to usher in a new, shared cultural era. But when new constellations of power began to coalesce and we found ourselves moving against the historical current, the limitations of personal agency became painfully apparent.

Our collaboration was part of an intense period of newly-allowed

exchange between thinkers whose work had been held apart by the Cold-War order. The projects we helped initiate were the means through which various aspects of Western thought were introduced to the USSR (later, CIS), including the first publication of Walter Benjamin in Russian, the first workshop on Deconstruction, the first Heidegger Conference, the last Soviet International Film Festival, and the first -- and last -- course at the Dubrovnik Inter-University Centre to include members of what might be called the Continental School of Soviet Philosophy, including its leading figure, Merab Mamardashvili. Jacques Derrida, Jürgen Habermas, Fredric Jameson, Jean-Luc Nancy, Slavoj Žižek, and others all played a role in these exchanges, so that the story becomes part of the intellectual history of our time. But hopes that we had for a transformation of political culture were not realized. Our project of establishing a common critical discourse was, and remains marginal to the dominant intellectual trends of the post-Cold-War era. In its place, the hegemonic discourse affirms the moral superiority of those who have been the victors in this century. There is little reflection on how many beliefs they shared with those whom they defeated.

Against the often-repeated story of the West's winning the Cold War and capitalism's historical triumph over socialism, these essays argue that the historical experiment of socialism was so deeply rooted in the Western modernizing tradition that its defeat cannot help but place the whole Western narrative into question. If the term postmodern is operative here it is not as the description of

a new historical stage -- the underlying structures of modernity have far from disappeared -- but as the awareness that there are no stages of history in the developmental and optimistic sense that modernity's dreamworlds once believed.

The book is divided into four parts. The first part, "Dreamworlds of Democracy," sees the political forms of East and West as embodying a common contradiction between democracy and sovereignty, one that had its origins in the French Revolution and its nemesis in the Cold-War logic of mutual annihilation. The second part, "Dreamworlds of History," examines critically the narrative of revolutionary time by telling the story of Bolshevik cultural politics in its terms, and suggests rethinking revolutionary politics without this temporal armature. The third part, "Dreamworlds of Mass Culture" takes its lead from the artists in the late Soviet period who represented the dreamworld of Soviet culture at the moment of awakening from it, and juxtaposes mass-culture images of East and West so that the struggle between these systems becomes visible as a competition to excel in producing the same utopian forms. The fourth part, "Afterward," places the book in the historical context of my collaboration with Moscow philosophers, weaving together personal and political history in an attempt to demystify them both.

The thesis of this book goes against standard wisdom that capitalism is desirable and inevitable, the normal natural arrangement of social life. It rejects the neo-liberal argument that

the social evils of modernity are distortions caused by political interventions into market outcomes, whereby socialism and recently even the welfare state are lumped together with fascism as unhealthy deviations from the norm. The Cold-War discursive binary of totalitarianism v. democracy is challenged at its core. At a time when politics on the left as well as the right seem eager to jettison the whole conception of the masses, it cautions that every political and cultural struggle of the past century which called itself democratic was waged for a mass constituency, and in their name. At the same time, it questions whether democracy can ever be compatible with a concept of sovereignty based on violence, either perpetrated by a single party in the name of the general will, or by a mass army in defense of the nation state.

Rather than stressing the unique pasts of particular human groups, this book tells a story of similarities. It interprets cultural developments of the twentieth century within opposed political regimes as variations of a common theme, the utopian dream that industrial modernity could, and would provide happiness for the masses. This dream has repeatedly turned into a nightmare, leading to catastrophes of war, exploitation, dictatorship, and technological destruction. To continue the same dream into the future, impervious to the ecological dangers, would be nothing less than suicidal. But these catastrophic effects need to be criticized in the name of the democratic, utopian hope to which the dream gave expression, not as a rejection of it. A world organized by global

capital in which industrial production continues to expand, but this time indifferent to the well-being of the masses and unfettered by political constraints, is not a world in which catastrophes will disappear. They will continue to happen. And no one will be accountable.

My special gratitude goes to the MacArthur Foundation, who funded several stages of the Moscow collaboration. I also wish to thank Cornell University, the Institute of Philosophy of the Russian Academy of Sciences, the Guggenheim Foundation, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the Fulbright Program, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Soros Foundation for their generous support of various aspects of the project. Without Cornell's magnificent libraries, the research would not have been possible. My thanks to its tolerant librarians, particularly Marie Powers, and to Michael Busch, my administrative lifeline, Joan Sage, my philosophical photographer (who first recognized Lenin's likeness to King Kong), and for various aspects of production, Laurie Coon, Jessica Ferrell and Kimberley Shults. Friends whose critical reading of parts of this manuscript helped to make it a better one include John Borneman, Teresa Brennan, Valerie Bunce, Alla Efimova, Zillah Eisenstein, Matthew Evangelista, Hal Foster, Peter Holquist, Aleksandr Ivanov, Christina Kaier, John Christopher Kern, Brandon Taylor, and Geoffrey Waite.

**Notes on Method** Although written in fragments, this book is meant to be read as a whole, as the argument cannot be divorced from the experience of its reading. I have relied on other books from multiple branches of knowledge, access to which was dependent upon a traditional research library of the most comprehensive sort. Discovery of the facts and images entailed constant disregard of disciplinary classifications. "Keywords" were too random and "subject" files too rigid to do the work of research against the grain. The organizing strategies of data banks were inappropriate. The idiosyncratic intuitions of the author provided the search engine.

The book can be read on several levels. It is a theoretical argument that stresses the commonalities of the Cold-War enemies, suggesting that socialism failed in this century because it mimicked capitalism too faithfully. On another level, the book is a compendium of historical data that with the end of the Cold War are threatened with oblivion. It rescues these data within new constellations that may be useful in thinking critically about the present. The book is also an experiment in methods of visual culture. It attempts to use images as philosophy, presenting, literally, a way of seeing the past that challenges common conceptions as to what this century was all about. The purpose of the book is to provide the general reader with a cognitive experience that surprises present understandings, and subverts them. It is a warning that the evaluation of the twentieth century should not be left in the hands

of its victors.

Each of the four parts experiments differently with the relationship between theoretical claims and historical fragments. Notes on Method introduce these parts, providing a guide for the reader (I Hypertext; II Time Fragments; III Constellations; IV Intersections). Here is the general overview:

Part I (Chapter 1): The theoretical argument (laid out in 1.1) is opened up to historical time by hypertext links to a series of keywords that provide partial narratives along its lines (the entries in 1.2).

Part II (Chapter 2): The theoretical argument (laid out in 2.1) protesting against a certain idea of time evokes in critical response a series of time fragments constructed out of historical images and text (2.2--2.4).

Part III (Chapters 3--5): The theoretical argument is fully integrated into the historical material in a series of constellations. Each of the constellations (subsections 3.1 -- 5.4) is constructed as a rescue mission by the present into the past, foraging across temporal and spatial boundaries in search of data, assembled around images, that have the power to alter conventional narratives of the twentieth century.

Part IV (Chapter 6) shifts the focus, making visible the invisible present that surrounds the book's writing. Constructed at the intersection between lived time and historical time, it is the author's version of a feminist strategy.