Sunstruck

Oxana Timofeeva, *Solar Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022). 140pp., £9.99 pb., 978 1 50954 965 8

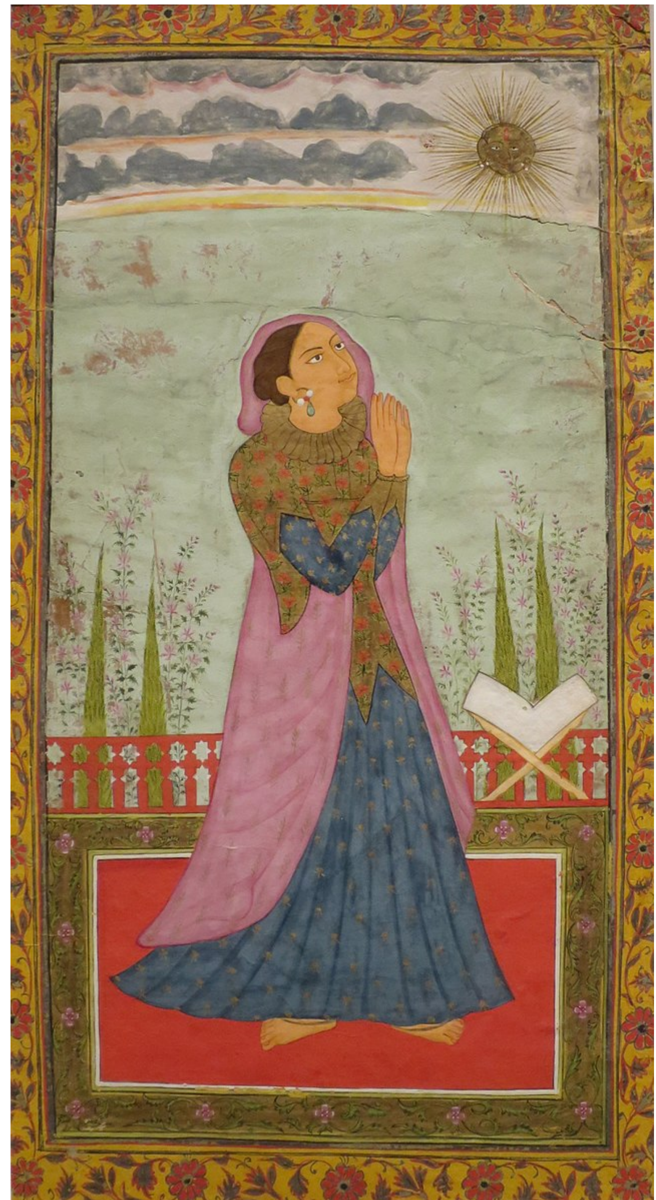
Since Antiquity, the sun has been tied up with earthly and divine authority. The solar god Sūrya, a Hindu deity, was worshipped in sun temples across India. In the fourth century, under Roman Emperor Julian's rule, the ancient Helios, like Sūrya depicted with a radiant crown and a horse-drawn chariot, became the central divinity. Fatally stabbed from behind, a few days after the summer solstice in 363, Julian flung his hands towards the sun, speaking his last words to Sol Invictus: 'Oh Galilean, you have conquered!' The ultimate source of life on earth, nourishing and disastrous, the sun continues to play a key role in radical politics today, from ecological utopianism to Solarpunk.

Written in times of global environmental crisis and pandemic, Oxana Timofeeva's *Solar Politics* is a bold, provocative attempt to fundamentally shift perspectives on ecology and radical politics. Taking the reader from the unbuilt City of the Sun in the Kazakh steppe to Hegel's *Phenomenology*, the book aims to unveil the relevance of Georges Bataille for contemporary environmentalism. His general economy, driven by generosity and exuberance, is presented as an alternative to capitalism's restrictive economy, based on expansive colonisation.

For Timofeeva, all utopian visions unite in a 'spirit of solarity'. Defeating exploitation, solarity creates a sense of 'cosmic solidarity' between human and nonhuman beings. Accordingly, solar politics 'breaks the promethean vicious circle of worship and extractivism, begins from the recognition that the sun is neither a master, nor a slave.'

What Timofeeva envisions is not the return to an idealised, pastoral state where people live in harmony with nature. Neither does she claim to colonise the sun as the final stage of the Anthropocene. Solar politics is a kind of in-between path that radicalises existing visions of solarity and transforms them into praxis. Unlike other environmentalist philosophies such as the Gaia paradigm, solar politics does not abandon the promethean tradition but aims to overturn it from within:

Solar Politics moves from rethinking climate change as a rebellion of the colonized Earth or revolutionary movement of oppressed nature to the development of the general strike as the solar strike, and decolonizing struggles and revolutionary movements as unavoidable climate change.



However, what Timofeeva shares with other ecological projects is her distinct focus on nonhuman agents. Rather than objectifying the sun, or extracting energy from it, solar politics treats the sun as a radiant com-

rade. In short, solar politics aim to decolonise the sun. But what might this radical politics look like? And what does it mean to treat the sun as a comrade? To gain more clarity, we need to look at Timofeeva's conceptual framework that takes Bataille's general economy as a blueprint. In the introduction, 'Two Suns and the City', Timofeeva retraces a 'solar utopian tradition' from Book VI in Plato's *Republic* through the Renaissance thinkers Marsilio Ficino and Tommaso Campanella to Bataille's experimental writings from the 1930s.

The central symbol in this tradition is a strange doubling of the sun. In the *Republic*, preceding the famous cave allegory, Socrates distinguishes between the visible and the invisible, the physical and the spiritual sun. Timofeeva reads Plato's solar metaphysics dialectically, stating that 'the sun and the eye communicate as if they are looking into each other through the layers of things encompassed by light, and the one reflects the other.' We keep staring at the sun and, through our eye, the divine eye of the sun looks at itself – although, as Timofeeva quotes Bataille, it is blind. In Timofeeva's view, Bataille, in his theory of general economy, was the first to develop a truly cosmic perspective on the sun. In the decentred universe presented in *The Solar Anus* (1931), the sun's 'luminous violence', like an eruptive volcano, penetrates the earth with its solar rays.

Timofeeva distinguishes the violent, dark sun appearing in *Rotten Sun* (1930) from later appropriations in neoreactionary movements, such as Nick Land's *The Dark Enlightenment*. Radical theories, she states in another section, are always at risk of being misused. Therefore, it is our responsibility to fight for the legacy of ambiguous ideas. Bataille's black sun, in her view, points to the inescapable bond between humanity and solar violence. The entanglement between the human and the nonhuman, which already surfaced in her previous book *The History of Animals: A Philosophy* (2018), again takes centre stage in *Solar Politics*. Timofeeva's fascinating twist is that she situates nonhuman alterity within ourselves. Thinking solarity means to find 'an inhuman element within the human, which will connect me to the serpent, the volcano, or to the sun.'

In the first chapter, 'Two Kinds of Violence', Timofeeva undertakes a daring yet at times drawn-out reading of Georges Sorel, Walter Benjamin, Hegel, Frantz Fanon and Bataille, illustrated by various examples – for instance, the Sisters Khachaturyan who made headlines in Russia for killing their abusive father. Her analysis of emancipatory violence in her home country, such as the protests in Moscow against fake elections in 2019, has become even more relevant after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Shortly after 24 February, Timofeeva, a Professor at the European University at St. Petersburg and member of the artistic collective 'Chto Delat?', was among the first intellectuals based in Russia who openly spoke out against the war. In *Solar Politics*, she appeals to protest against increasing oppression, terror and police violence. And after all, she jokes, there is always the possibility to leave Russia or Belarus to settle on Mars in the near future.

Emptying the concept of violence from moralistic dogma, she develops a definition encompassing both anthropogenic and nonhuman activity. She distinguishes between two types of violence, oppression as 'negation' and revolutionary violence as the 'negation of negation'. The left, she claims, should embrace 'a new common sense of revolutionary violence, the justifiability of which is debated with regards to historical precedents.' This rather open definition seems a slippery slope, potentially justifying all kinds of violent acts. While her analysis is provocative, it is, moreover, not immediately clear what place it occupies in a project of solar politics. Above all, where is the sun?

Some hints towards solarity are made in her interpretation of Bataille's non-anthropocentric concept of 'sacred violence.' This imaginary type of violence belongs in the realm of animality. While a spider or serpent may not do any harm, they still scare us. Their violence is uncontrollable because it is 'without a subject: no one really commits it, no one is to blame.' Here, her argument gains momentum again:

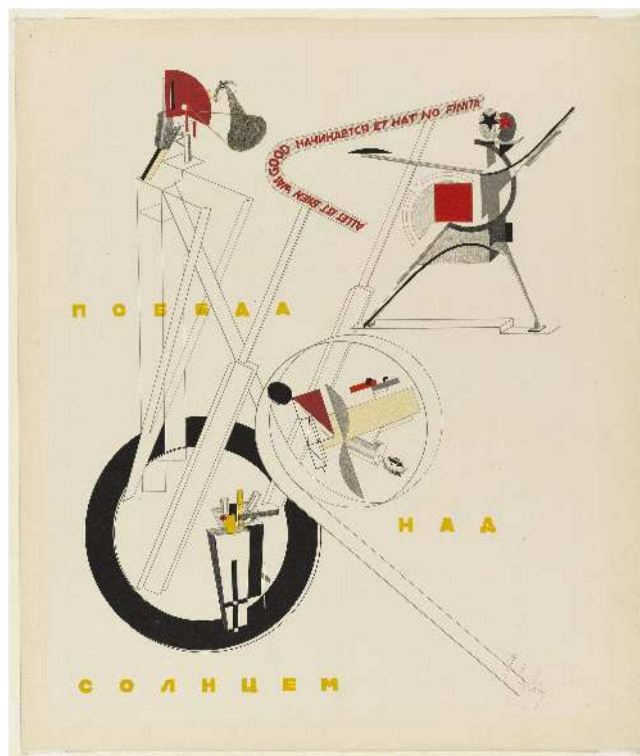
> The divine violence of the nonhuman that affects us can really be anything. A serpent, a spider, a new bacterium or virus, a hurricane, permafrost melting in Siberia, radioactivity, forest fires, methane blow-outs: all these present us with an image that differs from our conventional understanding of violence as a negative agency of certain individuals or groups of human beings, including anthropomorphic gods.

In a cosmic framework, not just anthropogenic climate change is considered violence but also nonhuman excesses of energy that bring changes on a planetary level.

This line of thought continues into the second chapter on ‘General Economy’, where we finally return to the sun. Timofeeva argues here for the relevance of Bataille’s unfinished project of a universal science for contemporary ‘energy humanities’, a new field that looks at ecological issues, such as global warming, waste or water pollution, from an interdisciplinary perspective. While Timofeeva refers to Imre Szeman’s project, we might also think of Michael Marder’s *Energy Dreams: Of Actuality* (2017). While energy is often regarded as a limited resource, Bataille emphasised ‘the excess of energy, the ultimate source of which is the sun.’ General economy, for Timofeeva, is driven by cosmic expenditure, generosity and surplus.

This ‘superabundance of energy’ is the main drive of a solar economy that models itself after the sun that ‘gives without ever receiving’. At first sight, this project seems paradoxical as it aims to think beyond growth while promoting ‘nonproductive expenditure’. However, with examples from wombats to the COVID19-virus, it becomes clearer what Timofeeva has in mind. The pandemic ‘demonstrated how everything is connected on multiple levels – people and other animals, weather conditions, surfaces of objects, interfaces and infrastructures, currency rates, science, emotions, air pollution, cultural developments, and industry machines’. Where governments shut down their borders to protect their restrictive local economies and the bodies of their citizens, the virus travelled freely, indicating that the destructive excess of nonhuman violence is already at work.

The inherently solar nature of the universe is a kind of nonhuman, ‘primordial togetherness’, a collective life based on generosity, gratuitousness and solidarity. While contemporary capitalism is considered a ‘restrictive economy’, a revolutionary, solar economy in the spirit of Bataille suggests, for example, an immediate ‘transfer of American wealth to India without reciprocation’. This claim might sound naive if we think of world economy as being shaped by nation states. It is not however from the perspective of the sun. If we take Bataille’s claim seriously, it unveils the limitations and hypocrisy of ecological thought under global capitalism. For instance, environmentalists campaign globally to protect Brazil’s Amazon, which is abundant with unused resources crucial for our ecosystem. On the other hand, the country is a developing economy that works towards catching up with the West. In the framework of restrictive capitalism, Brazil’s economic development goes hand in hand with the destruction of the rainforest. Is not solar generosity as radical redistribution a reasonable solution here? Solarity both liberates the rainforest from being an exploitable resource and rebuts a capitalist myth of progress.



In the third chapter, ‘Restrictive Violence of Capital’, Timofeeva claims that phenomena like the pandemic or climate change, catastrophic for human life, are direct reactions of the nonhuman against ‘the banal, normative, restrictive violence of capital.’ As explored in the example of the Gaia paradigm, we should not read solar violence through an anthropomorphic lens. Solarity is not some wilful act of cosmic punishment but nature’s indifference which poses a serious political threat to global capitalism. Another crucial point here is that solar generosity – or what she later calls ‘sacrifice’ – is unthinkable in a restrictive economy. We do not learn how to share by donating or working in co-working offices. These practices are ‘a parody of gifts just as team-building in the office is a parody of collectivity.’ Under capitalism, if we were as generous as the sun or the phoenix, ‘alight like a living sun’, we would ultimately die.

Instead of celebrating the sun, humanity traditionally aimed to colonise it, a tendency particularly central

for early Soviet ideology of the new man, as exemplified by Russian Cosmism, astronautics and the futurist opera *Victory over the Sun* (1913). Timofeeva argues that a 'hypermasculine image of humanity as an all-powerful conqueror of the universe' persisted in both communist and capitalist modernity. This will to power makes sense in an economy with growing demand of energy. After all, the sun is 'the most powerful fusion reactor in our planetary system'. But how can we use the sun's energy without exploiting it? In other words, how do we become solar, if 'to be solar is not the same thing as having a solar cell in your pocket'?

We have to become solar – and this is the controversial lesson that Timofeeva draws from late Soviet philosophy and science-fiction – through an ultimate 'cosmic sacrifice'. Solar economy does not mean the transition to renewable energy within a capitalist system. Only if we cease to fight for our survival will we truly open up to the sun. Many readers will find it difficult to take this step with the author. Towards the end of the book, we are presented with a vision of total annihilation, emerging from Evald Ilyenkov's 'Cosmology of the Spirit'. In her reading, this heretical text of late Soviet Marxism marks 'a dialectical passage from the restrictive economy to the general on the cosmic scale.' In other words, we become solar through our own self-destruction, the entropic 'fire' which consumes our universe.

Is this all we are left with? Our political actions are nothing but 'offerings to the planetary debauchery irradiated by the sun'? This would be an underwhelming if not alarming diagnosis. The conclusion, 'The Sun is a Comrade', does not offer a more satisfying resolution either. Highlighting the significance of nonhuman violence for emancipatory struggle, *Solar Politics* instigates an important, refreshing shift of perspective on the disastrous ecological crisis we are facing. Yet how solar politics might concretely tackle this crisis remains a mystery until the end. Maybe efficient political action itself, and this might be one reading of the book, already vanished when viewed at a cosmic scale. Now, humanity has to facilitate its final transition into the nonhuman sphere, gloriously illuminated by the sun.

Isabel Jacobs

Countering populism

Paul K. Jones, *Critical Theory and Demagogic Populism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020). 288pp., £85.00 hb., £25.00 pb., 978 1 52612 343 5 hb., 978 1 52616 373 8 pb.

Jeremiah Morelock, ed, *How to Critique Authoritarian Populism: Methodologies of the Frankfurt School* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2022). 502pp., £25.99 pb., 978 1 64259 767 7

Although there is now a massive literature on the right-wing populisms that have reshaped politics over recent decades, debates continue as to whether we have really understood these movements, and the nature of their parties and leaders. Two new books consider how the Frankfurt School tradition, in particular, can help us assess – and oppose – today's authoritarian or demagogic populisms.

In *Critical Theory and Demagogic Populism*, Paul K. Jones focuses on the Studies in Prejudice programme which members of the Institute for Social Research worked on between 1943 and 1950, during their exile in the USA. He argues that whilst resulting work, especially *The Authoritarian Personality*, 'continues to exert influence in social psychological and political psychological studies of authoritarianism, it has rarely featured in the contemporary literature on populism'. Jones sees this as a field in which political science and political theory are unfortunately privileged over work by sociologists or social psychologists.

Jones draws on the Institute's analyses to illustrate certain shortcomings which he identifies in 'orthodox populism studies'. These include an underestimation of the role of modern media in shaping what Theodor Adorno called the 'physiognomics' of demagogy and the ways this is enabled by 'the culture industry'; populism's social psychological dimensions; and the importance of understanding any particular form of populism in rela-