



**Solar**

**Politics**

**Oxana Timofeeva**



## Solar Politics

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Oxana Timofeeva

polity

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## Introduction: Two Suns and the City

In 1979, when I was a year old, my family moved from Siberia to Kazakhstan, where my father found employment with a big construction project. On the shores of the great Balkhash Lake, in the grey steppe slipping into a desert, they had to build a city under the name of Solnechny, which translates from the Russian as Sunny, or the City of Sun. It was supposed to be part of a planned industrial construction – of the South Kazakh power station. The first stage of this massive project consisted in preparing the land for construction works – more specifically, they had to transform a hummocky topography into a plain surface. My father was hired as a shot-firer: his job was to blast the hills. We lodged in a very

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basic wooden barrack, in a small settlement built for construction workers, without basic food and other supplies, eating the meat of rare saiga antelopes that my father was hunting in the steppe, and fish and water taken from the lake. The scariest residents of the steppe were scorpion-sized solifuges, or sun spiders: it was mistakenly believed there that their bites were lethal. Eventually, the City of Sun was never built, and all the funds for this ambitious project literally went into the sand.

Besides the many localities in the vast spaces of the former Soviet Union and beyond that bear the name “sunny,” there are also a number of unbuilt Cities of Sun, for which we never stop to blast out the rocks. They are called utopias: in a long historical tradition, the idea of the possibility of organizing a settlement according to certain rational principles, with the infrastructures designed as perfectly as possible to satisfy human needs and desires and to make their collective life to the fullest extent bright and happy, is associated with the image of our central star. From Plato’s *Republic*, to the modern-day Solarpunk speculative fiction and the prospects for more ecological sustainable economies provided by renewed energy expansion, the spirit of solarity

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frames the most elevated political projects for the future.

The paramount importance of the sun for our utopian imaginations is accounted for by its radiation, which is the ultimate source of all life on Earth. That is why in antiquity it was worshipped as a demiurge, or one of the supreme gods: Ra in Egypt, Tonatiuh in Aztec culture, Surya in Hinduism, Sol Invictus in the Roman Empire are just a few names for this multifaced deity. All over the place, there were numerous gods of the sun, of both genders, corresponding to different seasons of the year and different times of the day. Just like Helios in Ancient Greece, the Slavic early deity of the sun rides the sky in a golden chariot carrying with him a bright fire shield. His name is Dazhbog, or giving-god. He gives everything: light, warmth, and wealth. In one version, he is getting old and dies every evening, but is reborn every morning; in the other, he dies in December, and then is reborn after the winter solstice. Our ancestors welcomed their sun gods returning from the darkness of the night. For them, the radiant circle observable in the sky was literally the body of god, whose rays enabled each new day.

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Remaining in general faithful to the broad tradition of sun worship, Plato, the author of the reputedly first political utopia, introduces new content to this mythic worldview. In Book VI of the *Republic*, Socrates explains to his interlocutor, Glaucon, that there are actually two suns: the one that we see and the one that we don't see. The sun that we see reigns in the world of visible objects. It is itself a visible object, which differs, however, from all other objects in that it also presents the source of their visibility. Why do we see objects? First, because we have eyes. Second, because there is light. Third, because there is sun, that dispenses light. Socrates addresses the sun as one "of the gods in heavens," whose gift of light "enables our sight to see so excellently well, and makes visible objects appear."<sup>1</sup> The same holds for the intellectual world: just as the faculty of sight comprises the dialectics of the sun, the light, and the eyes, the faculty of thought aggregates the highest good, truth, and knowledge. Moreover, just as the physical sun gives to the objects of the visible world "not only the faculty of being seen, but also their vitality, growth, and nutriment," so the spiritual sun gives to the objects of knowledge "not only the

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gift of being known,” but also “a real and essential existence.”<sup>2</sup>

Book VII of the *Republic* famously begins with the primal scene of philosophy which can be traced back to the age of cave dwelling. A group of people is confined in a cavern that most notably resembles a cinema theater. They are shackled and can only sit still and look at the wall in front of them, where they see the shadows of what is going on above and behind their backs. There is a fire there, and a roadway nearby with some other people who carry with them figures of men, animals, and other items. Socrates suggests that the people in the cavern who take the shadows to be real things are we ourselves. The one who manages to unchain himself and leave the cavern will see the true sun “as it is in itself in its own territory,” as well as the true world exposed to its light. If this person returns to the cave and tries to describe what he saw on the outside, fellow prisoners, accustomed to the darkness of their chamber, will not believe him, and might even try to kill him. As if soothsaying his own death in Athens prison, Socrates invites us to compare the first, visible world, to the cavern, the light of the physical sun to the fire, the reflections of which