We Forgot How to Future

The Neoliberal Destruction of Great Works

By W.E. Dung

Introduction

Four decades into its global regime, neoliberalism has proven to be a destructive force. Environmentalists contend that it destroys pre-existing social relations and values governing environmental concerns, replacing the commons and the 'local' with only the concerns of the global market.[1] Social controls under neoliberalism were designated obsolete and superseded by state regulation, but because the neoliberal state is itself totally subordinated to the self-regulating market, state regulation proved existentially unable (that is, unwilling) to preserve the environment against the market. Species, spaces, and values were obliterated or made endangered under neoliberal projects. But also, world neoliberalization has attended a widespread psychic apocalypse—a defoliation of once verdant forests of ideas. 'We-feeling' ideas (solidarity, community) were especially targeted for destruction by neoliberal leaders, such as Margaret Thatcher who declared that there should ideally be "no such thing as society, only individual men and women."[2] Western market democracy sees itself as the culmination of the evolution of ideas heralding the "end of history", but by designating itself as the universal, as the very 'end', all other futures are abolished.[3] There is no progression beyond this end—that is, no alternative system to neoliberalism in the future. Future-imagining, world-shaping, and transformative change have been cast aside. This constriction of the horizons of possibility has deeply affected discursive understandings of what is 'doable', that is, what is possible under neoliberalism.[4] This is the neoliberal destruction of 'Great Works', both in mind and in practice. Great Works here are a catch-all term for large-scale physical or organizational projects deemed monumental, transformational, aspirational, or, especially, futurist.

What follows will argue this point by tracing the historical context of Great Works from prehistory to the high modern era of the twentieth century. The end of Great Works in the West will be identified as occurring simultaneously with the end of the global high modern era—that is, the fall of the USSR and the ascendancy of neoliberalism in the West. Examples of abortive Great Works under neoliberalism will clarify the general relation between neoliberalism, futurities, and Great Works. And finally, extensive Great Works projects in China, outside the neoliberal order, will support the argument that Great Works should or can be undertaken at all in the twenty-first century. Ultimately, Great Works may be a necessary vehicle for repairing global environmental harm. It is then arguable that neoliberalism, which does not permit Great Works, should be abandoned for something else entirely for the sake of environmental concerns. An intrinsic ideational gap within our current world order presents a significant obstacle to change.

Futures past and present

Great Works are monumental engineering projects which lead to transformative outcomes.[5] They are a means of shaping the future of a society. A Great Work is sometimes represented in a physical object such as the Aswan Dam in Egypt, but more often a Great Work is a comprehensive state program such as the Great Leap Forward in China or the New Deal in the United States

of America.[6] The undertaking of Great Works reached a zenith in the twentieth century with programs like these. But Great Works have long been a feature of human endeavor since the beginning of the Anthropocene—the current geologic age which has been characterized by human environmental transformation. Early humans of the Anthropocene shaped their environment with systematic and wholesale deployment of fire.[7] This was also the case with Aboriginal Australians up to the nineteenth century. Their continent was their Great Work. Australia was observed by the first European colonizers to be akin to parkland, with carefully ordered areas of woodland and grassland—clearly bounded yet unfenced and held in commons—each space manicured like a manor's grounds, with the undergrowth kept back by Aboriginal fire techniques.[8] Aboriginal Australians fostered animal and plant species in different spaces in a careful husbandry organized according to climatic, ecological, and human needs in concert. For example, they planted sweet-tasting grasses in one area to draw the grazing kangaroo away from human-desired wild grains in another area.[9] On a continental scale, woodland (of evenly-spaced trees) was grown or allowed to remain on poor soil, then cleared away with fire on productive soil so as to make room for yams, grains, and grasses.[10] This was possible because of a continent-spanning constellation of autonomous but deeply relationally entwined societies. Aboriginal Australians' rationale for undertaking such ecological transformations was derived from their belief that each highly autonomous individual had obligations to every other individual, including towards the land itself which was imbued with personhood.[11]

Parkland Australia is a prime example of humans undertaking a process of large-scale transformative change of their environment. Elsewhere, for millennia prior to the rise of the centralized Inca Empire, indigenous Andeans reshaped whole mountain ranges by constructing stone terraces across the slopes, turning the arid into the arable.[12] This kind of world-shaping—constructing a new present and therefore a certain envisioned future—is central to the Great Work.

The twentieth century was an era of rampant futurities—born of ideologies and aesthetics obsessed with a near tomorrow—and not coincidentally it was also an era of wild, runaway engineering projects, of Great Works unleashed. Assisted by a scientific industrial state apparatus, the scale of Great Works as planned by state authorities exploded beyond what was previously thought possible. These were projects shaped not by metis or local knowledge as with Australian or Andean Great Works, but rather they were a 'top-down' imposition of the state seeking to deliver a future of material prosperity according to rational scientific and technological planning.[13] This social engineering by universal scientific principles was a defining feature of high modernism, a framework of authoritarian state behavior throughout the twentieth century. Under high modernism, the state was but one more Great Work—a Great Work which itself enacted others. High modernism, the state, and Great Works all blurred together into a singular program with a united aim towards reconstituting society and nature.

The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) project of the New Deal (from 1933) was an

example of state rationalization of society and nature on a regional scale. At the time, the Tennessee Valley was a benighted river basin region whose population suffered underdevelopment, poor health, and a devastated natural environment. The TVA brought a utopian vision of science to the region to solve these problems. Dams were built along the river basin which provided electricity to the local population and further provided the foundations for industry and mechanized agriculture. Rural populations were forcibly relocated via eminent domain and trained in the methods of large-scale twentieth century agriculture, such as using chemical fertilizers and pesticides.[14] According to a later assessment of the TVA's goals, the TVA aimed to reach "deeply into peoples' lives to transform where and how they lived and worked, and how they saw the world".[15] This was a deeply high modernist Great Work which sought to reorder the natural, the social, and the psychic. But the high modernist excesses of this style of socialistic state intervention were stymied by weak United States federal institutions.[16] The high modern ideology was present, but there lacked an authoritarian apparatus to totally enact it. The TVA ultimately required a public-private partnership which, rather than delivering the Tennessee Valley into a utopia of the future, opened the valley up to the markets of the present—the modernized agriculture was simply corporatized agriculture, the industries which moved into the region were capital-intensive rather than labor-intensive, and by the close of the twentieth century the TVA was only a profit-driven public utility company providing electricity to the region.[17] The destruction of a Great Work such as the TVA by its subordination to the market illustrates the long arc of the Great Works of high modernism.

In the West, this style of high modernism was arrested by liberalism and later neoliberalism. The authoritarian ideological futurities of high modernism were countermanded by the universalizing dictates of the global market, as happened to an extent with the TVA. Meanwhile, in Soviet Russia, high modernism unleashed came to crumble under the sheer weight of its pretensions. At the end of the Soviet era in Russia, when high modernist state authoritarianism was plainly failing to deliver a materially prosperous future—in fact, the economy was in dire condition—a disillusionment with high modernity developed among Soviet Russians.[18] The whole of society understood that the state's discursive representations were false and hence their entire socially engineered society stood on evidently false pretenses. But because this was so existentially disruptive, anthropologist Alexei Yurchak contends that Soviet Russians simply accepted the false discourses as the new normal. They retreated into a kind of "dream world" in which the clearly false masquerades of the Great Works were simply 'how things were'—all because they themselves were so embedded in the Great Works that it was impossible to see any alternative.[19] No competing future presented itself, and so the future was abandoned in this process of "hypernormalization" of present crises.[20] The state concerned itself with maintaining the fragile images of the present in order to seem like it was still a functioning high modernist Great Work. This proved untenable. The Soviet collapse in 1991 heralded for many the ultimate demise of

high modernism and Great Works. Not just among Soviet Russians, but globally, it represented "the final failure of the dream that politics could be used to build a new kind of world".[21] Neoliberalism which purported to exist beyond politics was presented as the sole alternative.[22]

Defining neoliberalism—or classifying this or that scheme as essentially neoliberal—is fraught with problems. Neoliberalism manifests itself in various (sometimes competing) ideologies, discursive formations, institutions, and practices across time and space. It is more easily identified as the hegemonic program of the West in the current era. For the purposes of the following analysis, neoliberalism will be isolated as having a discrete period (circa 1980 to present) and discrete geography (the West, or Global North blocs—NAFTA and EEA countries).[23] In fact there is a far broader historical continuity and geographical remit than will be engaged with here. Neoliberalism is, in broadest terms, an ideology which demands the commodification of all goods and services in a society, opening all spheres public and private to a market-based mode of valuation.[24] Under neoliberalism, the worth of a thing, the meaning of a relationship, or the performance of an institution are understood according to market values. Everything is tied to the self-regulating market, which is normalized as some kind of objective, rational, technocratic natural force. Like high modernism, neoliberalism necessitates the reordering of a society's material, social, and especially psychic relations. But neoliberalism which desires the withering of the state, or indeed the withering of all things besides the holy market, is a stark opposite of high modernism. Where high modernism is aspirational, utopian, futuristic, neoliberalism is restrained, calculating, concerned with the present only. Neoliberalism contains no conception of the future; the future is simply the next point on the trend line of the market. With this lack of futurity, and with it plainly visible that its objective rationality is a lie, neoliberalism comes with hypernormalization hard-coded into its framework. The ascendancy of neoliberalism in the United States attended the demise of optimistic visions of the future in American discourse. At the end of the twentieth century, the future contained nothing but nuclear annihilation for the American psyche—and even after the fall of the Soviet Union, a new kind of "dark foreboding" crept in which continues to this day, seeing in the future only runaway forces of violence (9/11, the War on Terror, zombies and the post-apocalypse) or climate catastrophe (Ozone depletion, rising sea levels, climate refugees, Contolism).[25]

This presents manifold problems. Central to neoliberalism's relation to Great Works is neoliberalism's lack of futurity. With no alternative future possible besides the limitless neoliberal present—and in fact nothing but nihilism to be offered by a future under neoliberalism—there is no possibility of transformative change. There is nothing to change in the neoliberal order, as the market is absolute and inarguable. Only tweaks are permitted, provided that the system itself is not threatened in the process. In other words, neoliberalism can never suffer a Great Work to live. In some cases, a Small Work or two may be permissible. Abortive attempts at Great Works under neoliberalism include Green New Deal legislation in the United States,

which even in its non-binding mandate (referring here to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's House Resolution 332 of the 117th Congress) was not seriously considered for enactment.[26] Others include a proposal to reintroduce gray whales to the Irish Sea by airlifting 50 individuals from the Pacific, an ambitious if monothematic Great Work reminiscent of parts of Aboriginal Australian world-shaping.[27] But this too did not come to pass. The airlift possessed no intrinsic market value and so it was viewed as preposterous. In observing the neoliberal status quo order, social scientist Ulrich Beck has pointed out that any politician who now proposes to take control away from the market and steer society towards a better future is viewed as dangerous.[28] The horizons of possibility are not just tightly constricted under neoliberalism, but they also present a seemingly impassable boundary. The social and environmental disruption of neoliberalism demands real, transformative change, however. Neoliberalism presents the greatest obstacle to solving the myriad crises of the twenty-first century. The veil of hypernormalization must be pierced and an alternative system which allows for Great Works must be sought to replace neoliberalism. One way forward into a more optimistic future is perhaps to look to the Chinese model of Great Works. China presents an example of Great Works undertaken in the twenty-first century, decades after the wane of high modernism. This potentially represents an ideational oasis where aspirational future projects still survive.

Quite differently from the neoliberal hypernormal status quo, the modern Chinese state is intrinsically futurist. The current state capitalism in China is one point

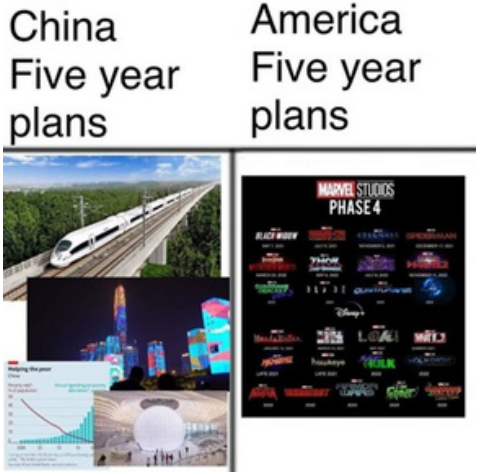

Figure 1. Discursive formation (meme) about Chinese versus United States futurities. Danny Haiphong (@SpiritofHo), "Where's the lie?", Twitter photo, January 16, 2022, https://twitter.com/SpiritofHo/status/1482706844334309379.

on a journey towards full communism. All of Chinese society is conceived of as a transitory ordering, incipiently futuristic. There is a discrete future that all of these Great Works are working towards.[29] The future is accordingly a deep existential concern of the Chinese system. The Chinese government constitutes a large authoritarian apparatus engaged in transformational programs of change—the state as its own Great Work, itself perpetuating Great Works. Government officials purport to always be reifying political and economic power, whether with anti-corruption drives as under Xi Jinping or market reforms as under Deng Xiaoping.[30] While the consequence in either instance is a more muscular authoritarianism, these and other measures represent a forward-thinking orientation. They are intended to effect the shedding of entrenched interests, which in Chinese discourse is understood to

be the problem with the United States—the US is captured by particular interests and has no recourse to fix that by reconstituting itself. This is also considered in China to have been the problem with the hypernormal USSR.[31] Despite Deng Xiaoping's introduction of markets to China —a neoliberalism by degrees—it cannot be said that China is neoliberal, if for no other reason than that its leaders do not take a laissez-faire attitude towards capital accumulation. Neither is there any academic basis for calling China a high modernist state.[32] What does recall high modernism, however, is China's myriad Great Works and the futures embedded within them.

A robust Chinese discipline of futures studies or futurology has seen rapid intellectual development since the start of the twenty-first century, producing a plethora of new ideas on the future. Where American discursive futures present literal wastelands, Chinese futurologists are optimistic about a Sinocentric future world of prosperity.[33] This is expressly a future with Chinese characteristics. In effect, the world's future is a Chinese future. Unlike the more cosmopolitan aspirations of futures studies elsewhere, the China Society for Futures Studies requires as part of its membership application that futurologists "ardently love the motherland", and the society's stated objective is to "build socialism".[34] Competing futures outside of Chinese officialdom (such as in the works of public intellectuals, science fiction novelists, and internet commentators) show a pervasiveness of discourses of the future in Chinese society, to such an extent that the future has become one of China's key exports.[35]

This can be seen in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a global infrastructure development initiative seeking to establish economic and cultural connections between African and Eurasian countries and China.[36] English-language government copy uses such terms as "transformation", "long-term", "for years to come", and "brighter future".[37] The BRI is expected to be completed by 2050, several decades hence. As a Great Work, it represents a program of transformative change intended to alter the very future by lifting millions out of poverty globally, along the way reconstituting Chinese international relations.[38] (An example of this relational restructuring already underway as a result of the BRI is the jokey aphorism "As a Kenyan official put it: Every time China visits we get a hospital, every time Britain visits we get a lecture."[39]) While these aspirations are self-evident, the unmitigated success of Belt and Road is less easy to grasp. Intensive Maritime Silk Road development in Sri Lanka has had a negative impact on local coasts, corals, and livelihoods of Sri Lankans, as well as fueling deforestation and pollution due to the mining needed by the development.[40] In China, the Great Green Wall is another Great Work, attempting to combat desertification by afforestation along 3,000 miles of marginal land.[41] This is world-shaping at a scale (geographic and temporal) beyond what is currently considered feasible in the neoliberal West. Western perspectives on the Great Green Wall are generally dismissive, pointing towards the program's use of monoculture plantation and its perceived inability to truly forestall desert encroachment.[42] In previous eras, control over nature signified a state's standard of civilizational attainment.[43] Today, states in the West seem powerless or

unwilling to contend with the runaway forces of the natural world, such as wildfires, epidemics, and flooding. With neoliberal societies devoted to the maintenance of the market masquerade, there has grown a fatalistic nihilism concerning the environment, if not a total structural unwillingness to address its myriad issues.[44] With no structural solutions in sight, many people are forced to seek individualistic solutions and hope in vain that they form, in aggregate, some kind of Great Work.[45] These occurrences under neoliberalism are inseparable from the system itself.

Horizons of possibility are tightly constricted under neoliberalism, whose ethos represents a death of futures. In comparison, in Chinese structures and discourse, there are futures aplenty. The Chinese state accordingly is able to conceive of ambitious long-term projects and implement them as Great Works, whereas a 'market values'-based paralysis in the West prevents Great Works from ever being attempted there. While it may seem that a modern authoritarian state is the only way to enact Great Works at a scale necessary to address irreparable environmental harm, this need not be the case. Prehistoric Great Works in the Andes and Australia exceeded the scale and ambition of Chinese Great Works and were demonstrably successful. To look towards alternative modes—whether Chinese, authoritarian, local, indigenous, or otherwise—is required in order to move the horizons of possibility under neoliberalism.

Towards future futurities

This modern age which has followed the wholesale rejection of high modernism does not presuppose an outright abolishing of the future. Nor does modernity necessarily require a constriction of possibilities as occurs under neoliberalism. Whether successful or not, that China attempts future-oriented monumental projects is evidence enough that some societies have retained discourses of futurity in spite of neoliberal globalization forces. Possibilities of transformational change exist outside of the neoliberal order. It serves to look to China not for authoritarian solutions, but for methods of preserving future-building and grand-scale possibilities in popular discourse. These discursive ideas will naturally inform which programs a state considers feasible (such as Great Works).

For true transformative change to occur in the world which would repair the damage wrought by destructive capitalist production, hypernormalized neoliberalism must be replaced with another system. China is one example of how to undertake Great Works in the twenty-first century. Key to their efforts is a clear and optimistic vision of the future within and outside official structures, deeply embedded in Chinese discourse. Futurity therefore seeming to be a prerequisite for effecting changes on the scale of Great Works, the West should embark on a vision quest for their own, new futures. Whether this means a backslide to high modernism or the adoption of something with Chinese characteristics, certainly something drastic is merited. The Small Works of neoliberalism can offer no solution to global environmental problems. Additional research which seeks practical methods of kick-starting futurist discourse in Western society—as daunting a task as that may seem—should therefore have a very real impact on the environment.

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[2] David Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 23.
[3] Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?", The National Interest, no. 16 (1989): 3-5.
[4] Horizons, intelligibility, and other discursive analytical methods drawn from Aletta J. Norval, Deconstructing Apartheid Discourse (London: Verso, 1996), 2-5, 7, 63.
[5] This is the author's own jargon and does not pre-exist in literature.
[6] S. Mohsin Hashim, " "High Modernism" and Its Limits – Assessing State Incapacity in Putin's Russia, 2000–2008", Communist and Post-Communist Studies 50, no. 3 (2017): 196-197; Richard Kyle Paisley and Taylor Warren Henshaw, "Transboundary governance of the Nile River Basin: Past, present and future", Environmental Development 7 (2013): 59-71.
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[10] Pascoe, Dark Emu, 115-123.
[11] Morgan Brigg, Mary Graham, and Martin Weber, "Relational Indigenous Systems: Aboriginal Australian Political Ordering and Reconfiguring IR," Review of International Studies 48, no. 5 (August 2021): 891-893, 903-904.
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[15] Ekbladh, "The Tennessee Valley Authority", 52.
[16] Morton Keller, "Looking at the State: An American Perspective", The American Historical Review 106, no. 1 (2001): 117.
[17] Keller, "Looking at the State", 116-117.
[18] Hypernormalisation, directed by Adam Curtis (BBC, 2016), 00:23:56.
[19] Hypernormalisation, 00:01:55.
[20] Hypernormalisation, 00:24:16.
[21] Hypernormalisation, directed by Adam Curtis (BBC, 2016), 01:14:57
[22] Hypernormalisation, 00:03:16.
[23] This is somewhat arbitrary; for a better look at the breadth of neoliberalism, see James McCarthy and Scott Prudham, "Neoliberal nature and the nature of neoliberalism", Geoforum 35, no. 3 (May 2004): 275-283.
[24] McCarthy and Prudham, "Neoliberal nature", 276.
[25] Hypernormalisation, directed by Adam Curtis (BBC, 2016), 01:40:00; Contolism here serves as a pop-cultural (that is, discursive) representation given form in the space exploration obsessions of the super-rich in the twenty-first century, e.g. Musk, Bezos—for more on Contolism, see Ian Gregory, "Towards a Historiography of Gundam's One Year War", Zimmerit, September 15, 2020, http://www.zimmerit.moe/historiography-gundam-one-year-war-canon/.
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[32] Which is to say, there are no monographs assessing China's high modernism to cite here.

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[34] Callahan, "China's Futures", 140-141.

[35] Callahan, "China's Futures", 140, 142.

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