

Letter on the Bogdanov Issue

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It is an excellent idea that *The Russian Review* has devoted a special discussion issue to Bogdanov to highlight “state of the art” interpretations outside of the Soviet Union. The articles of Marot and Biggart deal with two different decades in Bogdanov’s career and activities, yet we find a continuous search in his theoretical writings and methodology to adapt Marxist theory to changing conditions. Biggart is correct that Bogdanov departed from “classical” Marxism in developing a functionalist theory of class formation, though it is my opinion that his sociology (or “historical materialism”) complements rather than contradicts Marx. (I deal with the definition of “classical Marxism” in my own work, characterizing Plekhanov as an orthodox Marxist, Lenin as a Marxist relevant to the Russian revolutionary context, and Bogdanov as a *sui generis* Marxist, in my doctoral dissertation “La Controverse Lenine-Bogdanov” [Paris, 1967].)

The article by Marot on “Vpered and the Role of the Intellectual in the Workers’ Movement” addresses a very important question, namely, why did two Bolshevik leaders who had such important reasons to cooperate engage in such an ardent controversy? But I fear the answer is as yet unsatisfactory. The author is right when he deals with issues around the Duma—boycottism, ultimatism, and otzovism (recallism). Above all Bogdanov was an “ultimativist,” and the historiography which characterizes him as “otzovist” is dogmatically Leninist (nor was Bogdanov a *bogois-katel’* or *bogostroitel’*). However, I disagree that the philosophical issues were not “lofty” (Marot’s critique of Kelly) and that Schapiro’s argument that the debate was only a “smokescreen” concealing the “sordid dispute over stolen money” was merely “speculative.” Boris Nicolaevsky, whose arguments parallel Schapiro’s, persuaded me to accept his argument that the money problem was indeed crucial. The evidence is not yet conclusive, but perhaps the opening of the party archives will bring new clarifications.

Marot treats the RSDLP as a single party. Even before the split of 1912 this was not so. It was a bloc of fractions collaborating and fighting on different issues. Vpered was in fact marginal to these conflicts. We need to know a good deal more of what was happening in Russia proper. Revolutionaries in exile were fighting on different issues of far less con-

cern to those in European Russia. I wonder also why the author did not explore the significance of Lenin's tactical cooperation with Plekhanov (which would illuminate the reasons for a joint attack on "ultimatism" and "Empiriomonism"). The author also fails to analyze the foundations of Lenin's tactics as elaborated in "Two Tactics of Social Democracy" and "The Agrarian Program of Social Democracy in the First Russian Revolution" (as well as related writings in Lenin's *Collected Works*). He does not examine the significance of the novel formula "The Democratic Dictatorship of the Proletariat and Poor Peasantry," nor of Lenin's conception of the Party, nor the role of the Soviets, nor of his interpretation of Stolypin's policies. All this is necessary to resolve the issues he raises. And to understand Bogdanov's concept of the role of socialist propaganda it is necessary to explore his writings on political economy, his attitude (or indifference) toward the peasantry, and his utopian novels *Red Star* and *The Engineer Menni*, all of which tie in to Bogdanov's messianic vision of the working class and his future activities in Proletkult (in this connection I strongly recommend the collection of his essays *1905-Le Première Révolution russe*, edited by F. X. Coquin and C. Gervais [Paris, 1986]).

Biggart's article is exemplary in making use of the scarce new sources available. I agree with most of his analysis of Bogdanov's views of the 1917 Revolution and his conceptualization of the intelligentsia as a "differentiated social stratum rather than a new class." His discussion provides good evidence of Bogdanov's independent scholarly effort to revise the "classical" Marxist concept of class. Further study of Bogdanov on this question is in order.

I share with other scholars the efforts to see Bogdanov's "relevance" in the "modern" context. I wrote in the sixties about the links between Bogdanov and Lukacs; Sochor has written an article on Bogdanov and Gramsci, Biggart follows up on this in exploring Bogdanov's contribution to later theories of "new class." From his earliest theoretical works Bogdanov was concerned with the problems of consciousness and the "cultural maturation" of the working class. His writings on political economy always dealt in an original way with the problem of "superstructure" in all socioeconomic formations. Integrating these concepts with social psychology and the relationship of intellectual and physical work were essential to the corpus of his writings and thought long before Proletkult. Bogdanov was uniquely consistent in pursuing these issues in the early years of Bolshevik rule. Revolutions as he well understood are not simply a question of "the seizure of power," and others had to learn this lesson the hard way. Biggart's analysis of both of Bogdanov's writings and his probable influences on others are instructive for every scholar in the field.