

The Bogdanov Issue: Reply to My Critics

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My essay [*The Russian Review*, July 1990] was an attempt to explain the Vperedist split, led by Bogdanov, from the Bolshevik faction of the RSDLP. In contrast to earlier interpretations, I tried to show that Bogdanov did not part from Lenin over their differences of philosophy, orthodox Plekhanovist materialism versus Mach's empiriocriticism. Nor did they separate because Bogdanov dissented from the Bolsheviks' decision to participate in the Duma, although it is true that Bogdanov and Lenin did assess that participation differently. I argued, instead, what they split over was their general political approach or outlook: specifically, over Bogdanov's desire to have the Bolsheviks place their emphasis on pedagogical/propagandistic tasks. That did cause them to differ not only on how to assess participation in the Duma, but much more generally on the value of the Bolsheviks' day-to-day work in connection with the workers' mundane practical activities, "where they were at."

My concern with the Bolshevik-Vperedist split is part of a broader effort to understand Bogdanov's ideas in relation to those of Lenin. My methodological point of departure is that the ideas of these men, and the several generations of intellectuals of which they are a part, are best grasped in relationship to their political practice. This is because they were not concerned to solve intellectual problems qua intellectual problems. They were, above all, concerned with the Russian workers' movement and helping that movement to develop fruitfully, and their ideas, however theoretical and complex, were shaped for this end. Specifically, their ideas were aimed at party-political organizations through which their connection with the workers' movement was mediated. I do not deny that one can ask other questions about the ideas of these men; but, do assert that an absolutely indispensable way to understand them—to be able to say in what ways they are similar, in what ways they differ, what distinctions are important—is by way of a detailed account of the interrelationships of their ideas to their political interventions—political interventions such as led up to, brought about, and resulted from the Vperedist-Bolshevik split. I believe some of my central differences with my critics can be

traced to the primacy I give to these men's practices as an indispensable, if not the only, key to understanding their ideas.

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My point of departure was that the political unity of Bogdanov and Lenin in the Bolshevik leadership from 1904 to 1909, despite their clear philosophical differences, was predicated on an overriding agreement on the tutelary role of the intellectuals in the Party in helping the proletariat come to revolutionary Social Democratic consciousness, a conception they shared with most of the leading thinkers of West European Democracy, as Aileen Kelly rightly recognizes.

Andrzej Walicki [in the July 1990 *Russian Review*] devotes much space to spelling out *differences* among Lenin and Bogdanov and Western European Social Democratic leaders on the role of the intellectual. I agree, for the most part, with his account of these differences, but do not agree with his assessment of its relevance. For I was in no way attempting to argue that Bogdanov shared with Lenin, let alone with all the other European Social Democratic thinkers, an identical view on the *nature* of and the *reasons* for the tutelary role of the intellectuals vis-à-vis the working class. My point was that, *despite their differences*, what was of overriding importance was their agreement on the need for this tutelary role: most important, Lenin and Bogdanov agreed, as did the rest of European Social Democracy, that the workers could not, out of their own activity, come to revolutionary consciousness. It was this point of agreement that was central, and not their differences, for it *overrode* their differences and *in practice* brought Bogdanov and Lenin together on the need for a party like the Bolshevik party and in their common participation in that party.

Walicki asserts that Bogdanov and Lenin were so sharply opposed in their understanding on the role of the intellectuals vis-à-vis the working class, that it drove them apart. Zenovia A. Sochor [*The Russian Review*, July 1990] even claims that Bogdanov opposed Lenin fundamentally from the very beginning on the vanguard Party. Walicki specifically argues that, for Bogdanov, all knowledge and truth is "derived from praxis," from productive labor and from the "different forms of class struggle," so that knowledge is "always relative, class-bound, sociologically determined and praxis-oriented." Walicki then goes on to say that, given Bogdanov's praxis-based epistemology, Bogdanov simply could not have held the view I attribute to him of the tutelary role of the intellectuals through the Party, because "it could not be justified by [Bogdanov's] theories." He says the "*very possibility*" (my emphasis) of this tutelary role "involves two assumptions: first, that it makes sense to talk about 'objective truth'; second, that such truth is accessible only to those people who have a proper professional training." Since Bogdanov's philosophy was a "radical rejection of both of these assumptions," he simply could not have held

the view I attribute to him. How then could they have worked together from 1904 to 1909 if they differed so radically, as Sochor and Walicki assert, on the Party and its tutelary role? Walicki finds this no problem. "In fact, this might be true about Bogdanov's practice but could not be justified by his theories." In other words, Bogdanov simply did not understand the implications of his own viewpoint, or was so insufficiently committed to them that he acted against them in practice. I believe this sort of reasoning is also implicit throughout Sochor, who is prepared to find in Bogdanov's theories a "clear departure from the premises of *What Is to Be Done?*" regarding the tutelary role of intellectuals.

I find this sort of reasoning extremely perilous and difficult to justify. One discovers what one believes to be a crucial disagreement between individuals based on *one's own* analysis of their texts; then, when their practice tends to bely this disagreement, rather than seek some further explanation as to how to reconcile the disparity, one simply asserts inconsistency between theory and practice. This sort of procedure is, in general, difficult to justify, for, as we all know, the relationship between theory and practice—especially epistemology and practice!—is exceedingly elusive and certainly practice cannot be understood to follow from theory as a logical deduction. What practices do and do not follow from a given theory is always a question of complex reasoning and argument. More specifically, given the rather extreme sensitivity to the interrelationships between theory and practice in the Russian Social Democratic movement, to say that an intellectual revolutionary like Bogdanov or Lenin is simply acting in a way that is entirely inconsistent with his theory should raise doubts.

I believe that Walicki, by speaking of the relationship between practice and theory, indeed epistemology and political outlook, as if it were one of logic and deduction, has simply imposed *his own* idea of what practices must be inconsistent with Bogdanov's theory. I agree with him entirely that Bogdanov's epistemology was opposed to Lenin's, and that he viewed Marxism, like other theories, as expressing the experience and standpoint of a specific class, in this case, the proletariat, and not of scientific bourgeois intellectuals. Nevertheless, I believe Walicki has no basis for concluding that therefore Bogdanov *must*, somehow, have opposed the tutelary role of intellectuals in the workers' movement. This fails to note what seemed to Bogdanov the obvious fact that, despite its origins and significance in the proletariat's position and experience, intellectuals could grasp Marxism more systematically than could most workers, and therefore had a crucial pedagogical role to play. It fails also to note, as Aileen Kelly rightly points out [*The Russian Review*, July 1990] that the particular ideology which supposedly sums up the workers' experience ends up, *de facto*, being defined by the intellectuals and imputed

to the workers. For this reason, as Kelly rightly emphasizes, despite appearances, the Bogdanovist perspective could bring about a highly paternalistic relationship between intelligentsia and the working class. As Kelly says, Bogdanov and Lenin “were united on one common belief: in the indispensability of the intelligentsia . . . The intelligentsia are precluded by their class origins from creating a collectivist ethic of the future, but they alone can define and expose deviations from it, because it is they who invented the rules of the game.”

Indeed, what are we to conclude from Walicki’s own evidence with respect to his view that Bogdanov simply could not have believed in the intelligentsia imposing consciousness from outside. “Bogdanov was not horrified and scandalized by the hypothesis that the Soviet state might be ruled, in the transitional period by scientific engineers rather than workers,” says Walicki. But who, then, besides intellectuals like Bogdanov, were judging the appropriateness of this substitution of the rule of the technical intelligentsia for the workers and how long the supposed transition period was to last? More directly to the point, Walicki tells us of Bogdanov’s “sensitivity to the dangers of a premature seizure of power,” which he believed, “was better than popular anarchy,” and that “the workers rule should be *a result* of their maturity” (Walicki’s emphasis). Is this really such a long way, in practice, from the scientistic position of classical Social Democracy, supposedly abhorred by Bogdanov, whose “main aim,” as Walicki tells us, was “to avoid the danger of a revolutionary voluntarism.” Isn’t it obvious that in both cases, it is the intellectuals who are warranted to judge just what represents mature workers’ consciousness and whether the workers, in any given case, have achieved it?

It should perhaps be pointed out in passing that Kelly muddies the water when, in commenting on my argument on the centrality of the tutelary role of the Party, she says that all Social Democrats, including Lenin, were, from the start, materialists and thus believed that consciousness could be changed by experience. No doubt this is true. But Lenin, Bogdanov, and the RSDLP more generally nevertheless concluded that the experience of the proletariat would not be enough in itself to lead them to adopt Social Democratic consciousness. Thus, in the turn-of-the-century dispute opposing the Iskristis and the economists, all Social Democrats, “orthodox” and “revisionist” alike, agreed that class consciousness developed actively, through the experience of class struggle, but they disagreed about how far that struggle, left to itself, would actually go. The Iskristis—Lenin, Martov, Akselrod, and Plekhanov—argued that workers’ struggle, on its own, would never transcend a reformist stage and progress to a revolutionary, Social Democratic one. The Party would make up for the lack of revolutionary activity among workers by *substituting* for it the Party’s scientifically based worldview and program. Bog-

danov shared the Iskrist perspective, and he continued to see the revolutionary process in this light after the 1905 Revolution: "The proletariat's ideological revolution—the achievement of class self-consciousness—precedes the all-round social revolution."¹ Quintessentially this was the argument of the Vperedists, as well as the programmatic basis of their political unity. It was also one argument, *among others*, the Iskrist had deployed in favor of organizing a vanguard Party according to their specifications.

In the 1905 Revolution masses of workers engaged in activity that was revolutionary, not simply reformist or narrowly trade-unionist, so that there was now, at last, a practical basis for revolutionary consciousness. The experience of 1905 prompted Lenin to extend a materialist interpretation to this new and unprecedented activity, not to invent that interpretation out of whole cloth. Lenin's new position from 1905 that revolutionary experience could itself revolutionize workers' consciousness was therefore a major break, although I never implied that its implication was to deny the need for a Party.

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What then caused the split? Kelly reaffirms her view that Bogdanov developed a voluntarist philosophy opposed to orthodox Marxist materialism professed by Lenin and Plekhanov. She agrees with me that Bogdanov's adhesion to Bolshevism in the summer of 1904 expressed his strongly held belief that the RSDLP needed, as Kelly says, to "assume conscious control over the spontaneous workers' movement."² By 1909 Bogdanov, Kelly says, was challenging Lenin's leadership of the Bolsheviks. Unfortunately Kelly never spells out the nature of this challenge. Throughout her commentary she refers to "political tactics" and "tactical considerations" that divided Lenin and Bogdanov in 1909 without detailing what these tactics were, let alone what was different about them.

I did not dispute Kelly's view that philosophical beliefs of the two men were connected to their political split in 1909, I only disputed the connection Kelly made. The Menshevik critique of empiriocriticism, she says, restating her 1981 position,³ offered a "useful insight into the unarticulated premises" of Bolshevik practice. Nevertheless, along with David Joravsky I argued against the view that empiriocriticism was,

¹ Bogdanov, *Padenie velikogo fetishizma: sovremennyi krizis ideologii* (Moscow, 1910), p. 114.

² Indeed, Bogdanov attacked the Mensheviks for denying precisely this role to the RSDLP and for resurrecting the old economist heresy that workers needed no Party to lead them. See Bogdanov, "Nakonets-to!" and "Roza Luxemburg protiv Karla Marksa," in *Nashi nedorozumeniia* (Geneva, 1904). For Kelly to assert elsewhere that Bogdanov denounced Lenin's view of the Party's role as "contrary to orthodox Marxism" is puzzling in the extreme. Bogdanov never said this.

³ Kelly, "Empiriocriticism: A Bolshevik Philosophy?" *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique* 21 (January-March 1981), pp. 89–118.

somehow, a Bolshevik philosophy. Kelly questions my agreement with Joravsky, claiming that Joravsky only disagreed with those who claimed that *Lenin* identified “machism” with a specific political tendency. But Joravsky also examined at length the identification of “machism” with Bolshevism made by the *Mensheviks* (and by Kelly), and concluded that it, too, was “erroneous.”⁴

But if empiriocriticism articulated the philosophical premises of Bolshevik practice, why did Lenin attack the philosophical premises of *his own* practice in *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*? In Kelly’s view only Lenin’s ruthless determination to undermine Bogdanov politically—by irrationally characterizing Bogdanov’s philosophical conceptions as non-Bolshevik—can explain why Lenin would actually defend philosophical positions at odds with his activist political practice.

I have already expressed strong reservations regarding a similar claim of inconsistency between theory and practice made by Walicki with respect to Bogdanov. Like Walicki—only in reverse—Kelly deduces an appropriate epistemological standpoint, empiriocriticism, from Lenin’s political practice. But, unlike Walicki, Kelly thinks she can avoid positing a contradiction between Lenin’s theory and practice by saying that Lenin’s practice includes a “utilitarian attitude to philosophical truth” which is itself an “epistemological position.”

In fact, Kelly does not give an accurate account of Lenin’s practice at all because Lenin explicitly attacked, *in practice*,—by publishing *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*—the very epistemological utilitarianism Kelly attributes to Lenin. To suggest, as Kelly does, that Lenin wrote a philosophical treatise merely to rationalize a political break with Bogdanov, is to acknowledge that the *actual* grounds for breaking with him lie elsewhere. This is what I argued in my essay, noting that these philosophical differences were real, not contrived, reflecting real, not illusory, differences of political outlook.

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I argued that the split between Bogdanov and Lenin was derived neither from differences over philosophy nor from mere tactical differences, but from differences of political outlook, made sharp by their differing conclusions from 1905. Bogdanov drew from 1905 further reaffirmation of his view of the need for pedagogy and propaganda, whereas Lenin *developed* his Marxist view on the connection between change in experience and change in consciousness, by dropping the idea that workers could not, out of their own experience, come to revolutionary consciousness.

I did not perhaps bring out enough that though Bogdanov and the Vperedists supported the Bolshevik majority on participation in the Duma

⁴*Marxism and Natural Science*, pp. 33–36.

and opposed the otzovists on this question, nevertheless they assessed participation in the Duma and the otzovist current differently. Thus Lenin saw it as "being where the workers were," as participating in their struggles and developing their consciousness in the course of struggle. Bogdanov and the otzovists, in contrast, tended toward abstention, though in different ways and for different reasons. Bogdanov thought that participation in the Duma as part of a wrong orientation detracted from the crucial task of offering to workers a well-rounded worldview. He thought he might get the support of the otzovists because both shared a desire to counter bourgeois ideology, the otzovists by avoiding participation in bourgeois institutions, Bogdanov by providing a worldview that could not be gotten merely through such participation. This set Lenin against both. Convinced that the Party had to engage in the day-to-day struggles with workers, even if not revolutionary, Lenin opposed the different forms of abstention of the Vperedists and the otzovists.

Kelly denies the significance, and perhaps even the fact, of this difference in approach. Lenin she says was as tutelary as Bogdanov, if not more. Indeed, his whole politics, she argues, was based on controlling spontaneity as exemplified in *What Is to Be Done?* She grants that in 1905 Lenin declared the working class spontaneously Social Democratic and decided to open the Party to workers. But she dismisses the significance of all this, saying by 1907 he had relapsed into his old authoritarian concern to control spontaneity and "reverted to his former concept of professional revolutionaries." Nevertheless, Kelly's view essentially ignores the trajectory of the workers' movement.

In 1905 workers were revolutionary and Lenin urged Social Democrats to participate fully and unreservedly in factory committees, in trade unions, and in the Soviets. Party membership grew from a few hundred to seventy thousand by mid-1907. It then abruptly declined as a result of the onset of counterrevolution, signaled by Stolypin's coup d'état. Lenin closed the gates of the Party in response to the departure of workers and the ebbing of revolutionary consciousness flowing from the ebbing of revolutionary activity. Kelly says that at this point Lenin reverted to his old views. I deny this and there is a test, 1917.

In 1917 the Bolsheviks did not suppress spontaneity, they participated in it. Revisionist historians of 1917 have established beyond a reasonable doubt that the Bolsheviks were an integral though distinctive part of the social forces pressing for fundamental change.⁵ They participated in all the workers' institutions, including the Soviets, as a matter of course. The Bolsheviks showed an acute sensitivity to shifting popular moods and desires. At the same time the political and organizational suc-

⁵ See Ronald Grigor Suny, "Toward a Social History of the October Revolution," *American Historical Review* 88 (1983) pp. 31-52.

cess of the Bolsheviks was predicated upon their capacity to provide a political and organizational lead for the popular masses in general, and for a majority of workers in particular.

The Bolsheviks were able to play a vanguard role in 1917 in part because of the way Lenin and the majority of Bolsheviks had worked over and critically accepted the experience of 1905. In "The Assessment of the Russian Revolution," written in April 1908, a few weeks before the split with Bogdanov, Lenin declared that 1905 had "provided a model of *what has to be done* . . . For the proletariat, the working over and critical acceptance of the experience of the revolution must consist in learning how to apply the *then* methods of struggle *more successfully*."⁶

But Bogdanov and a minority of Bolsheviks evaluated the 1905 Revolution very differently because it provided a model of what the Bolsheviks had failed to do, and of what yet needed to be done: apply *other* methods of struggle by adopting the Vperedist program of proletarian culture. The role of Bogdanov in 1917 was therefore quite different.

As Sochor has shown,⁷ despite Bogdanov's overt concern to prepare the workers to rule, Bogdanov grew increasingly apprehensive about the radicalization of the workers' movement in Russia between February and October because it pointed to the seizure of power by a working class not yet endowed with a well-formed proletarian culture—a clear sign that Russian Social Democrats had failed to work for the proletariat's complete ideological transformation as an indispensable precondition for socialism. And Russian Social Democrats were still, in 1917, not working for the working class's ideological demystification. Instead, they were engaged in "some kind of strange scholasticism" which excluded "all breadth and independence of thought," Bogdanov complained. Indeed, Mensheviks and Bolsheviks were not "conscious socialists" at all because they were ignorant of the "economic and historical foundations of Social Democratic teachings."⁸

As a result of the failure of the socialist intelligentsia to exercise a tutelary role in the workers' movement, Bogdanov logically denied the legitimacy of a number of important workers' demands, or objected to their practical realization. Specifically, he opposed the implementation of the eight-hour day; he had a very low opinion of the factory committees because so many ordinary workers and so few "experts" ran them; he denied the working class possessed "clear socialist consciousness;" and once again, as in 1905, counterposed a Social Democratic party of the

⁶*Collected Works*, vol. 15, p. 53.

⁷*Revolution and Culture: The Bogdanov-Lenin Controversy* (London, 1988), pp. 93–94 and 97.

⁸Bogdanov, "O partiinom edinstve," *Novaia zhizn*, June 13, 1917.

“European type” to the Soviet.⁹ In sum, the workers were not yet ready for socialism in Russia—or anywhere else, for that matter—until they had been ideologically prepared by the “scientific and technical intelligentsia.”¹⁰

Ed. note: John Biggart chose not to reply to his commentators.

⁹Bogdanov, *Zadachi rabochikh v revoliutsii* (Moscow, 1917) p. 14.

¹⁰Bogdanov, “Put’ k sotsializmu,” *Krasnyi podarok*, no. 13 (April ?) 1917 (Moscow).