

# The Cultural Hegemony of the Proletariat: The Origins of Bogdanov's Vision of Proletarian Culture

---

Jutta Scherrer

Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Science Sociales  
Paris

The great debates of the early twenties on *Proletkul't* (*proietarskaia kul'tura*) as an autonomous mass organization and on proletarian culture as a 'pure' product of workers in the most advanced sectors of industry, debates in which Lenin intervened with all the authority of the one responsible for the 'construction of socialism', are relatively well known. Both Soviet literature and western historiography have made important contributions to this subject in recent years. Much less is known however about the historical origins of the concept and, let it be said, about the vision of a proletarian culture.

The first organization of *Proletkul't* saw the light of day on the eve of the October Revolution; but the underlying idea of what in a few years was to become a mass movement, with as many members as the Communist Party in 1920–1921, traced its origins to the previous century. It was in the eighties of the nineteenth century, well before the establishment of the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party (RSDWP), that some young members of the intelligentsia made their debut as militant socialists by teaching the basic tenets of Marxism in workers' study circles. They thus anticipated by a few years Lenin's dictum that 'political class consciousness can be brought to the workers only from the outside', that is to say, by the 'revolutionary vanguard', the intelligentsia. In fact they were to embrace with enthusiasm the text in which he expounded, in 1902, the fundamentals of Bolshevism: *What is to be Done?* These were the group formed around Aleksandr' Aleksandrovich Bogdanov (1873–1928) and Anatolii Vasil'evich Lunacharskii (1875–1933), to be joined by the economists V.A. Bazarov and I.I. Skvortsov-Stepanov during their exile in Kaluga and Vologda along with some members of the 'literary' intelligentsia. From this to support the Bolsheviks in the party schism a year later was but a small step. The doctrine of tight party organization was to them as attractive as a certain degree of voluntarism for which they, as the intelligentsia and the bearers of the socialist consciousness, had a preference from the outset.

*Author's Note:* This is a revised version of the paper presented at a conference on Workers and Popular Culture at the History Department, University of Texas, Austin, 1986. Translated from the French by Madhavan K. Palat.

---

*Studies in History*, 5, 2 n.s. (1989)

SAGE PUBLICATIONS New Delhi/Newbury Park/London

With Lenin they created, in common, the Boishhevik fraction and launched the first Boishhevik journal, the illegal *Vpered (Forward)*. It could be asserted, without exaggeration, that the contribution of Bogdanov, with, to a lesser degree, that of his supporters, was of crucial importance to the formation and evolution of Bolshevism. It would be a mistake, therefore, to consider their 'philosophy of culture' as being, from the beginning, opposed to the conceptions of Lenin. It would seem rather that Lenin scarcely interested himself in questions of philosophy, ethics or aesthetics, at least before the revolution of 1905, and that he willingly, indeed deliberately, abandoned such concerns to comrades who formed the 'literary' kernel of the party and whom he was to dub later with some disdain as *literatori*. Now these latter had denied from the outset that Marxism was a system of explanation of social reality valid for all time: Marxism to them ought to evolve, progress, and be modernized with new and contemporary ideas. The epistemological postulate of Bogdanov's group became, in his words, 'the tradition of Marx and Engels must remain dear to us, not in the letter, but in its spirit'<sup>1</sup>. And Lunacharskii, in a similar vein, expected to be able 'to give to Marxism a larger emotional dimension without, in the least, modifying its essence.'<sup>2</sup> Marx the philosopher, perhaps the greatest of philosophers, was being sacrificed to Marx the economist and Marx the militant. His disciples and successors, therefore, had to open up territory neglected as much by Marxism as by the sciences, ethics, and aesthetics in order to contribute to making a theory of culture which, for them, was so painfully deficient in Marxism. In their struggle against what they called 'absolute Marxism' and 'pure materialism', Bogdanov, who had a scientific academic background tried to 'harmonize' Marxist theory with the most recent developments in science and philosophy. Lunacharskii, meanwhile, proposed to make out of scientific socialism a synthesis of idea and praxis. On the basis of normative and ethical considerations, he proposed in his principal work of the time, *Sotsializm i Religiiia* (Socialism and Religion) to 'define the place of socialism in relation to other religious systems' and to plead for a 'socialist religious consciousness'.<sup>3</sup>

They were, however, engaged in the common struggle to consolidate the Boishhevik organization in order to wrest control in the party, and then in the revolutionary process of the years 1905–1907; and all the proposals for a Marxist theory of culture, outlined by Bogdanov and his friends from the moment of their intellectual debut, took second place to their political activities, at least for the time being. Along with Lenin, Bogdanov assumed the most important responsibilities of the Boishhevik fraction, and for some years he belonged to the Central Committee of the party. It was only in west European emigration after 1909 that he could devote himself

<sup>1</sup> A. Bogdanov, *Priklucheniia odnoi filosofskoi shkoly*, St Petersburg (hereafter Spb), 1908, p. 66.

<sup>2</sup> A.V. Lunacharskii, *Velikii perevorot*, Spb, 1919, p. 29.

<sup>3</sup> Lunacharskii, *Sotsializm i religiiia*, Spb, 1911, vol. 2, pp. 337–38.

exclusively to elaborating, with programmatic intent, what he called that year for the first time 'proletarian culture'. But the new political and ideological context was to cast him as the principal adversary of Lenin on the latter's own terrain, Bolshevism. In fact, the 'Left Bolsheviks', as Lenin himself described them, clashed with him over his new tactics, not merely over his energetic demand for social democratic participation in the Duma. The entire analysis of the failure of the revolution of 1905, and above all of the role of the party intelligentsia, was now questioned. Lenin, therefore, in his *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*, first indicted Bogdanov for his philosophical errors on which the former had remained deliberately ignorant until now, and then expelled him from the Bolshevik faction in the summer of 1909. Bogdanov and his supporters riposted with their own organization, the 'Vpered Group' (*Gruppa Vpered*) whose *cri de guerre* was to become 'proletarian culture'.

Bogdanov had conceived of a scheme of the historical process and a theory of society from his first work, *Kratkii kurs ekonomicheskoi nauki* (Short Course of Economic Science) published in 1937. It was composed for the immediate needs of teaching in a workers' circle where he had to relate economic and technological knowledge very precisely to the spiritual culture of the time. The last phase in this evolution of 'cultures' he called 'collectivism', a code word in the aesopian language of the time to connote 'communism'. As a 'new concept of culture', it was to substitute for both authoritarianism and individualism which, for Bogdanov, marked the preceding phases. This new and ultimate epoch of the evolution of society was distinguished by the collective experience of the proletariat in its relations of work, which Bogdanov called 'fraternal union in work' or 'comradely collaboration' (*tovarishcheskoe sotrudnichestvo*); and its essence was, as a consequence, reflected in their own consciousness which substituted the collective 'we' of the class for the 'I' of the individual. For Bogdanov, the point of departure for a 'new moral principle' of the proletariat, which is to say, for a proletarian culture, lay in 'comradely solidarity' and 'social cooperation' as expressed in the 'harmony of work' (*trudovaia garmoniia*). In the light of the social norms of the proletariat and of the collectivist world, the intellectuals of bourgeois and petty bourgeois origin represented, for Bogdanov, pure individualism, the antagonism created between man and man by the individual 'self'. Practically from his first steps as a militant, Bogdanov felt that it was imperative to counter the individualistic culture of the epoch, proper to the bourgeoisie, with an alternative culture, proper to the proletariat; and it was a compulsion which determined his conduct as a member of the socialist intelligentsia and some years later, as a Bolshevik.

The collectivist vision of a humanity of the future, the appeal to the 'new man', and all that was understood by 'proletarian culture', found multiple and variable expression in a series of writings by Bogdanov and his followers which it is not possible to analyse here. (In these Marxist literary

circles the notion of *Übermensch* was used while referring textually to Nietzsche and other thinkers and writers of the turn of the century like Bergson and Sorel). Let me only mention here the collective work of this group of future Left Bolsheviks, the *Ocherki realisticheskogo mirovozzreniia* (Sketches of a New Realist Vision of the World), 1903, and the collection of essays by Bogdanov, *Novyi Mir* (The New World), 1904–1905. These would command special attention by themselves when identifying the constitutive elements of the programme that was later to be called ‘proletarian culture’.

At the height of his conflict with Lenin in 1909, Bogdanov returned with renewed conviction to his proposition of a collectivist society, with its corollary of ‘proletarian culture’. This was to take over from the individualist society to which the party intelligentsia belonged, which was henceforth Bogdanov’s preferred target. Countless letters by militant workers of the local party bodies, now practically defunct after the failure of the revolution, complained bitterly about the ‘flight of the intelligentsia’, until then responsible for party work, ‘from the ranks of social democracy’. Workers’ claims to independent initiative (*samodeiatel’nost’*) and to their own control of party affairs was to combine with their demand that the ‘intelligentsia should be formed from out of the workers themselves’. A true workers’ intelligentsia (*rabochaia intelligentsiia*) ought to take over from the bourgeois intelligentsia, to edit tracts and journals, conduct agitation and propaganda, in short, to assume the leadership of the movement. Taking to heart the ceaseless complaints of Russian party workers on the ‘treason of the intellectuals’, Bogdanov, Gorky and Lunacharskii established their first ‘Higher Social Democratic School of Propaganda and Agitation for Workers’ in the summer of 1909 at Capri, and then a second one in 1910–1911 at Bologna.

It was in these schools that the concept of a ‘proletarian culture’, independent of and opposed to the hegemony of a bourgeois culture, as represented by the ‘traditional’ intelligentsia, was disseminated for the first time in an ambitious educational programme.<sup>4</sup> All the teaching here, comprising courses on political economy, socialism, unionism, history, philosophy, literature, art, etc. sought to interpret the entire history of the thought and activity of humanity, not only from the point of view of the working being—which the worker could conceive—but even more as a complete product of the *experience* of the working human being. In this perspective, it was the collective experience acquired by work which had led not only to the first acquisition of technological and scientific knowledge, but even more to myths and religious legends, to songs, poetry and to the classics of literature. The experiences of the active man in the process of labour were at the source of all these creations. Scholars and artists, as individuals, often of non-proletarian social origin, do no more than

<sup>4</sup> See Jutta Scherrer, ‘Les écoles du parti de Capri et de Bologne: la formation de l’intelligentsia du parti’, *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique*, vol. 19, no. 3, July–Sept 1978, pp. 259–84.

transcend the experience of the collective which works. They are, in fact, the driving belt of the collectivity. Each discovery in astronomy or physics, each literary creation like an *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *Faust*, or *William Tell*, thus leads back to an experience of collective work. The true creator of spiritual culture (*dukhovnaia kul'tura*) is not, therefore, the solitary individual with his arbitrary act (*proizvol*) but the working being in the collectivity of work. 'The author', the 'creator', the 'genius', is quite simply the point (*tochka prilozheniia*) where the creative forces of society are concentrated in order to produce new forces through its consciousness. The author thus may be the creator, subjectively speaking, but objectively it is society.<sup>5</sup>

By the same token, only a 'proletarian culture' could render the socialist revolution permanent at a time of failure and collapse: and it is now that the concept of a proletarian culture was used for the first time for a new prospect on the party struggle. Now, for Bogdanov, the incapacity of the working class to guide the democratic forces during the revolution of 1905 were accounted for less by its minority position in Russian society than by its lack of class consciousness. In other words, to recall the judgement on Bogdanov by Stepan Krivtsov in his funeral oration, Bogdanov had attributed the failure of the 1905 revolution to establish a democratic republic in Russia to the fact that 'our political revolution has not been preceded by an ideological revolution in the manner that the Enlightenment preceded the Great French Revolution.'<sup>6</sup> It is only by the development of proletarian culture, Bogdanov would argue after 1905, that this failure could be overcome and that the proletariat would become a potent and independent force in society. As he declared in the first number of the publication of the *Gruppa Vpered*, there would no doubt be serious and new social conflicts which would lead the working class to align itself with the most heterogeneous social forces in order to direct them in the cause of its own struggle for socialism. In order not to succumb to their influence, however, and to remain true to itself, the proletariat ought to elaborate, in the most profound and complete fashion, its own vision of the socialist world, its own conception of class in relation to the life of other classes, and its view of human relations with other classes, in short, its own proletarian culture. Proletarian culture would consolidate the ranks of the proletariat and reinforce its mass power, thanks to the unity of idea and feeling. Although alone in contemporary society and foreign to other classes, the proletariat was going to be the strongest because it knew the direction of social development and the true substance as much as of its enemies as of its friends. 'The liberation of the working class, material and cultural, shall be carried out by the workers themselves', Bogdanov proclaimed.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Bogdanov, *Kul'turnye zadachi nashogo vremeni*, Moscow, 1911, p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> Stepan Krivtsov, 'Pamiati A.A. Bogdanova', in *Pod znamenem marksizma*, vol. 4, April 1928, p. 183.

<sup>7</sup> Maksimov [Bogdanov's pseudonym], 'Proletariat v bor'be za sotsializmom', in *Vpered*, no. 1, July 1910, pp. 2-6.

Workers' 'cultural liberation', launched in the party school at Capri, was the basis of the 'Platform' of the *Gruppa Vpered*. It was conceived and signed by the teachers and the majority of the student-workers; and its purpose was to oppose the 'fresh forces issuing from the proletariat itself'<sup>8</sup> to the bourgeois intelligentsia then enjoying a monopoly in the party. The alliance of the proletariat with the 'socialist intelligentsia' was subjected to a sharp critique, and it is easy to recognize the language of Bogdanov who inspired this document. It excoriated individualist and authoritarian conduct of the 'superior levels of the party', of the intelligentsia, as ineradicable attributes of individuals belonging to the bourgeoisie: their mentality when taking decisions on party matters, their ambitions reaching the point of personality cults, their intolerance of comradely criticism and their repugnance of discipline, the intrusion of private interests in collective matters, all reflected the authoritarian individualism typical of the bourgeoisie. To the signatories of this 'Platform', even the militant workers in the party were not totally free of the bourgeois spirit of their leaders and hence submitted blindly to recognized authorities without questioning their decisions.

Bogdanov argued that the defaults and weaknesses inherent in the intelligentsia's class and in the internal life of the party could be corrected only by eliminating their 'general and fundamental' causes. To this end the 'Platform' proposed the following programme:

The bourgeois world, with its developed culture having left its impress upon modern science, art, and philosophy, rears us imperceptibly in its fold, while the class struggle and our social ideal draws us in the opposite direction. We should not break entirely with this culture, which is of the fabric of history, for we can and should discover in it a powerful weapon in the struggle against this same old world. To receive it as it is would mean conserving in ourselves this past against which the struggle is waged. There is but one solution: use the previous bourgeois culture to create, to oppose to it, and to diffuse among the masses, a new proletarian culture; to develop a proletarian science, reinforce authentically fraternal relations in the proletarian milieu, elaborate a proletarian philosophy, and direct art towards the aspirations of the proletariat and its experience. This is the only route to attaining a universal socialist education, which would avoid the innumerable contradictions of our life and work, augment considerably our forces in the struggle, and approximate at the same time to our ideal of socialism, even while elaborating the more its elements in the present.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> N. Maksimov [Bogdanov's pseudonym], 'Ne nado zatemniat', in *Ko vsem tovarishcham*, Paris, 1910, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> *Sovremennoe polozhenie i zadachi partii*, Paris, n.d. [end 1909—beginning 1910], pp. 16–17. This quotation was used by Bogdanov again in his article 'Proletarskii universitet', in *Proletarskaia Kul'tura*, 1918, no. 5, p. 13. Cf. equally in A. Bogdanov, *La Science, l'art, et la classe ouvrière*, Paris, 1977, pp. 148–49.

Essentially drafted by Bogdanov himself, the 'Platform' of the Vpered Group, as the repository of a Bolshevism 'pure', 'authentic', and 'true', determined to resolve the party crisis as its primary objective. This was to be done by fashioning an independent 'workers' intelligentsia' on the premise of 'proletarian culture', an intelligentsia that was to organize the party on its own base and assume its leadership. Certainly the 'Platform' dealt also with the tactical and political programme in the narrower meaning of 'Left Bolsheviks'. But it was clear that politics in the usual sense of the term did not play a leading role. For the Vpered Group, the *autonomous* practice in politics and economics on the one hand, and *autonomous* creation and development in the domains of the spiritual life of the proletariat on the other hand, were intrinsically bound together under proletarian culture. 'The socialist consciousness of the working class should embrace not merely its immediate struggle in the economic and political fields but should also extend to its entire life.'<sup>10</sup> Such was Bogdanov's thesis, as much philosophical as practical, proclaimed in the name of the 'Left Bolsheviks' and confirmed by the Central Committee in January 1910 as an independent 'ideological' and 'literary' group within the RSDWP. In a statement directed straight at Lenin some months later, Bogdanov asserted in the same spirit that 'Bolshevism is not simply a political phenomenon, it is as much socio-cultural'. The political hegemony of the proletariat could never be attained without its cultural hegemony, he claimed. Had not Bolshevism after all been the first to affirm the hegemony of the proletariat over bourgeois classes in the 'bourgeois democratic revolution'? Now, if politics were linked organically to the other aspects of the ideological life of society, aspects which issue from the same social foundation, then the proletariat, with its capacity for political hegemony, should necessarily be able to assert its general cultural hegemony also (*obshche-kul'turnaia gegemoniia*). According to Bogdanov, who saw himself as its sole authentic representative, the 'inherent condition of Bolshevism' was 'to create as from now in the midst of existing society the great proletarian culture, stronger and more structured than the culture of bourgeois classes in decline and immeasurably freer and more creative'. He who is not conscious of this task is not a Bolshevik but somebody 'who thinks in bits and pieces, who puts politics in one cerebral container, and in others he puts science, philosophy, literature.'<sup>11</sup>

Bogdanov then developed the same idea more fully in the article 'Socialism Now', which appeared in the beginning of 1911 in the second collection of the Vpered Group. Returning to the central idea of the 'Platform', he reaffirmed that socialism was not to be treated as an objective located in the remote future:

<sup>10</sup> *Sovremennoe polozhenie i zadachi partii*, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> N. Maksimov [Bogdanov's pseudonym], 'Ne nado zatemiati', p. 5.

Socialism is not merely the future; it is also the present. It is not merely the idea but also the reality. It grows and develops, it is around us already. It is the fraternal link of the working class, it is its conscious capacity for organizational work in the social struggle. One should look for socialism now not in the ideal attributes of workers' organizations, of union, party or other bodies, but in their living class co-operation.<sup>12</sup>

Bogdanov was referring here directly to his own theory of 'comradely collaboration' or the 'fraternal union at work' of the most advanced strata of the proletariat in leading industrial sectors. It was a theory which saw the basis of proletarian class solidarity in the work process as such. According to him, the rapid development of machine technology, with its mechanization and automation denoting the terminal phase of capitalism, would erase the division of labour, the division of society into 'organizers' and 'executors'. The similarity of tasks carried out by a large number of workers, their dependence and understanding (from the moment of working together), the possibility of mutual assistance (by advice or manually), all create this form of fraternal union at work out of which the proletariat finally constructs all its own organizations. These largely mechanical links binding the proletariat together at work (and it was in this sense that Bogdanov considered the conveyor belt a positive factor), stimulated his sense of psychological unity, of the organic consciousness of unity, of 'collectivism'. Now, what Bogdanov termed 'collectivism' was the psychology of the working class, its consciousness of itself as a class. In fact it was in the process of collective work involving the masses (and not merely groups) that the fundamental type of organization of a whole class was constituted, a class unified as never before in the history of humanity. From that moment the proletariat was capable of elaborating new forms of life and thought, in brief, its 'culture'.

The interpersonal relations as exist already in the collaboration internal to the class and the fact of workers' relations at work, as opposed to the capitalist structure of property relations, should be affirmed equally in all domains of the daily life of the proletariat. Bogdanov evoked the new consensus of the man (*sobiranie cheloveka*) which issued from the social relation created by the collaboration inside the collective (*trudovoi kollektivizm*). These fraternal and 'collectivist' relations should become the organizational base of the party as much as of the proletarian family structure; they should serve for the elaboration of a new science, of a new philosophy and a new art. To Bogdanov, the struggle that the labour movement had already launched for socialism did not consist 'in any fashion in a simple rallying of forces in the war against capitalism. This struggle is at once a positive and creative labour—the creation of

<sup>12</sup> Maksimov [Bogdanov's pseudonym], 'Sotsializm v nastoiashchem', in *Vpered*, no. 2, Feb. 1911, pp. 67–68.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.



perennially new elements of socialism in the midst of the proletariat itself, in its internal relations, in the relations of daily life—the elaboration of the socialist proletarian culture.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, according to Bogdanov, the worker who would be consciously fighting for socialism this time would be that one who creatively participates in the making of modern life, in developing to this end *his* own forms of human relations and giving expression to them in *his* own social ideal. Of course, the proletariat would not be capable of realizing entirely its own socialist culture in the conditions of capitalism and in his struggle against it. However, it is not in the attainment of proletarian socialism that Bogdanov, in this appeal, saw the objective to be achieved, ‘but in the fact of creating and in the uninterrupted movement to the future’, ‘in the permanent struggle’ of the new class united by feeling and thought against the old society.<sup>14</sup>

While these two texts, as programmatic outlines, are distinguished above all by their appeals to the creative vigour of the proletariat, the concept of proletarian culture appears therein only in the form of embryonic theses. Bogdanov presented his first more universal and systematic elaboration of this concept in 1911 in his book *Kulturnye zadachi nashego vremeni* (The cultural tasks of our time). The original title, ‘The cultural tasks of the contemporary proletariat’ was dropped on account of censorship. For the same reasons he renounced the political connotations of this treatise. The two texts noted above had been written in the heat of the political debates which rent asunder the Russian social democratic emigration and in particular the Bolsheviks.<sup>15</sup> But Bogdanov now set out specifically to expound his theory of proletarian culture to a public larger than just workers.<sup>16</sup> In fact, this text of about a hundred pages contained essentially all the aspects of proletarian culture that he had conceptualized until then and which he was to develop later. All the further developments concerning specific domains of proletarian culture, like poetry, art, philosophy and science, conceived principally between 1917 and 1924, are no more than variations on the principal theme discussed here.

The point of departure was again a trenchant critique of Lenin as much as of Plekhanov. Marxism signified absolute and eternal truth to them; by

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>15</sup> Cf above all V.I. Lenin, ‘O fraktsii “vperedovtsev”’, in Lenin, *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii*, 5th edn., Moscow, 1961, vol. 19, pp. 312–18.

<sup>16</sup> In this context Bogdanov addressed certain comrades of the Vpered Group, e.g., G.A. Aleksinskii, M.N. Pokrovskii, V.R. Menzhinskii, who warned that, given the limited resources at the disposal of the proletariat, it should not be diverted from essential tasks to art. In 1914, in the article, ‘Vozmozhno-li proletarskoe isskustvo?’, Bogdanov returned to this theme and attacked not only the Bolsheviks but also the Mensheviks, especially A.N. Potresov. The latter, in a debate begun in 1913–1914 in the journal *Nasha Zaria* had stressed, after an examination of the proletarian literature of different European countries, that the political and economic struggle of the proletariat did not permit it, in capitalist conditions, either the leisure or the economic liberty necessary to generate its own culture, cf., in A. Bogdanov, *O proletarskoi kul'ture 1904–1924*, Leningrad-Moscow, 1924, pp. 104–16.

that same token they denied, in Bogdanov's eyes, the creative potential of the working class. He himself identified the creative force of the proletariat with the development and organization of its class consciousness. 'We on the other hand, wish to develop class consciousness, which means organizing class power.' Now, his principles of proletarian organization, according to Bogdanov, were absolutely identical with the principles of proletarian culture, which had to be introduced by workers in the total life of society. It was in this context that Bogdanov posed the question of the role of intellectuals. Certainly, intellectuals recruited from the bourgeoisie were capable of helping the proletariat in its political and economic organization. But in order to introduce proletarian culture in social life, 'all' the experiences of working class life had to be unified into a single system, 'all' its practice and 'all' its thought. This could not be accomplished by the 'Varangians', by the 'white crows' of the 'old' bourgeois intelligentsia. Only a new intelligentsia, a worker intelligentsia, which would not abandon the proletariat, would be able to forge the internal unity of the psyche of the class.

Bogdanov then demarcated three essential areas in which the proletariat should, in the first place, create for itself a cultural system free of the fetishism of individualist bourgeois norms, and of the autonomous and abstract character which these norms assumed in bourgeois society. They were totally independent and alienated from the social praxis of man, and, like fetishes, they subjected man to mere appearance. As the foundation of new social norms, Bogdanov fixed on the proletarian moral principle of fraternal solidarity (*tovarishcheskaia solidarnost'*). The new social norms would correspond to the technical norms of work; they would be stripped of their 'pure' and abstract character and would be reduced to the organizational principles of human relations. All would depend on the needs of the collectivity, and all would be done according to its interest. The norms of morality, of law and of custom, as developed by proletarian class life, would correspond only to their utility for the collectivity and to its social needs. It would be necessary to devise a new terminology, for words like 'law', 'morality' or 'religion', which as attributes of absolute authority no longer have any meaning. At the same time, expressions like 'proletarian morality' or 'proletarian right' were inadequate: new cultural forms necessitated new concepts. The truth itself was defined here by the experience of work and by the praxis of the collectivity.

In like manner, the new proletarian art had to integrate the experiences of the collectivity of work. The proletariat lived its own life distinct from that of any other class; hence it needed its own art imbued with its own feelings, aspirations and ideals. Bogdanov here energetically refuted the objections of those who held that the difficult conditions of working class existence and the still more arduous circumstances of the social struggle could hinder its assuming responsibility for its own art, at least as long as it was not in power. On the contrary, art organizes social experience through

live images, not only in the domain of knowledge, but even more in the domains of feeling and wants. Since it discharges thus an organizational function in the life of the collectivity, and by the fact that it harmonizes the feelings and ideals of the masses, it becomes the most powerful motor of the development and finally of the victory of the collectivity. The cohesion of the class would become the greater by the fact of art embracing a field larger than that of economy and polity.

Bogdanov is not explicit on the *forms* of the new proletarian art. 'I leave this to others who are more competent than I on such questions.'<sup>17</sup> But, from the point of view of content, he deemed it 'especially false and naive' to think that proletarian art ought to describe the life of workers, their *byt* (forms and mode of everyday life) and their struggle. The universe of the experiences of class, which is the object of the art of the class, is not for that reason in the least limited; it embraces all the being and all the *byt* of society just as much as all of nature. The proletariat lives alongside other classes, whether foreign or hostile, to which it is bound by numerous threads, spiritual, economic, and social. Many of these elements had been, consciously or otherwise, assimilated by the proletariat. And even if it combats them, they are after all a heritage of the classes of which the proletariat is the issue: the petite bourgeoisie (*meshchanstvo*) and the peasantry. Now, the more it knows these classes, their psychology, organization, and interests, the less the danger of submitting to their cultural influences; and it will be the easier for it to imbibe from their culture what is useful and progressive. From the fact of the organizational function of art, 'putting into a form and consolidating a definite social organization'<sup>18</sup> proletarian art would be able to show to workers at work, in their social struggle, and in their daily life, much of what escapes from their consciousness in the first instance. Thus art is a constitutive element of the consciousness of self (*samosoznanie*) of the proletarian class.

Since art organizes the human experiences of labour, not in abstract concepts but in concrete and 'live images' (*zhivye obrazy*), it is more democratic than science, more accessible to the masses, and disseminated amongst them. Yet Bogdanov saw in the 'democratization of scientific knowledge' (*demokratizatsiia nauchnogo znaniia*) the most urgent cultural task of the proletariat 'of our times'. According to him it was not a question here of literacy or of the assimilation of the specialized knowledge of distinct disciplines or of its popularization through pamphlets and public lectures, in the manner typical of bourgeois culture, but of wide knowledge. It was a question of realizing the 'sum' of knowledge, hitherto split up in partial domains, of returning from specialization to general experience,

<sup>17</sup> A. Bogdanov, *Kul'turnye zadachi nashogo vremeni*, p. 77.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51. Bogdanov here distinguishes, as in his other writings, three successive types of culture, each of which depended on a type of organization of labour, that is, of a technological level of society in different stages of development: the 'authoritarian' culture, the 'individualist' culture, and the 'collectivist' culture.

and, by that, to 'the general system of human labour'. The worker needs a global and unifying scientific explanation which would furnish him with a general awareness of the existing relation between the different technical methods which he applies with his own hands in production and the different methods, social, economic, and ideological, which are important for the organization of the class and fate of workers. The workers, therefore, should have access to the systematization of the different domains of scientific experience and to transcend specialist discourse. Hence the idea of creating the 'proletarian university' (of which the schools of Capri and Bologna were deemed the precursors), which should embrace all the fundamental sectors of science in its teaching.

It was with the same concern to systematize all the scientific experience of his time and to make it accessible to the working class that Bogdanov returned to the project of a workers' encyclopedia which he and Maxim Gorky had launched some years earlier when they were preparing to establish the school of Capri. The Great Encyclopedia of the eighteenth century co-ordinated the fragmented knowledge and experience of the bourgeoisie and thus experienced the 'truth' of the bourgeois era. The new encyclopedia would now explain the science and philosophy of 'labouring' mankind as the means to the organization of the *collective* activity of men, means produced by the historical solidarity of an entire generation.

In the ensuing years, Bogdanov himself undertook the 'proletarian democratization of knowledge', that is, the creation of a 'proletarian science' and of a 'proletarian philosophy'. Under the title *Vseobshchaia organizatsionnaia nauka* (Universal science of organization) or *Tektologiia*, he proposed to 'lay the foundation of a science which aimed to unify all organizational experience of all of humanity'. The first volume of this work appeared in 1913, and he was to keep recasting it for the rest of his life. In opposition to the 'compartmentalized' character of the science of the bourgeois era, the unifying science, the *Tektologiia*, would synthesize the knowledge accumulated by specialized disciplines. 'Tectology' (derived from the Greek 'tekton' meaning to construct) was universal because it encompassed the experience and knowledge of the entire world. For Bogdanov, it was the synonym of the 'modern' concept of organization. He wished to demonstrate here in particular that the essence of all processes, in nature and in history, reposed in organization itself: the world was an organized whole because all human activity was organizing activity. It was the 'form of economic organization' which determined the 'modes of production'. The 'science of organization' was for him the 'very science of the future' which covered all aspects of life.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Norbert Wiener, in his work, *The Human Use of Human Beings*, London, 1954, has shown at which point the 'tectological' ideas of Bogdanov have been taken up by cybernetics. Whereas until very recently, Bogdanov's political role and social theory remained almost entirely unknown in the Soviet Union, the *Tektologiia* was deemed in Khrushchev's time already a precursor to cybernetics. A new edition is planned to appear by the end of 1989. The

Bogdanov gave up his political activities as he devoted himself to this monumental enterprise that aimed, in the name of proletarian culture, to endow the proletariat with its own system of organization. He quit the 'Vpered Group' because of the 'politicking' of some comrades, in particular, G.A. Aleksinskii. In 1913, with the political amnesty on the occasion of the Romanov tercentenary, Bogdanov was able to re-enter Russia. He was to discharge major responsibilities in the Proletkul't organization which saw the light of day a few weeks before October 1917. His prerevolutionary theories then assumed expansive dimensions. But the odds were not easy. His theories now had to 'prove' or embody the new political and social conjuncture, which differed from the one he had envisaged.

'Proletarian culture' was equally inspired by thinkers other than Bogdanov. Here only Lunacharskii's decisive support to this idea need mention. After Bogdanov's return to Russia, he founded a 'Circle of Proletarian Culture' in Paris, and then in Geneva. It had for its members P.K. Bessalko, M.P. Gerasimov, A.K. Gastev, F.I. Kalinin, P.M. Kerzhentsev, P.I. Lebedev-Polianskii, all 'proletarian' writers and poets who were to play a major role in the organization of the future Proletkul't. Installed in Switzerland from 1914, Lunacharskii gave a new impetus to the Vpered Group which fused in 1917, at his instance, with the group 'Mezhraiontsy', which rallied to Lenin in summer. Now, as commissar of the Enlightenment, Lunacharskii was to inject into the cultural projects of the future regime an entire portion of the ideology of his 'vperedist' and 'proletkul'tist' past.

Bogdanov was not, therefore, the 'whole' of proletarian culture. Here we have confined ourselves however to recovering his new vision of the role and function of proletarian culture and to pinpointing the origin of the future Proletkul't movement in Bogdanov's thought. This was above all in order to expose the difficulties inherent in the movement and the hiatus between his theoretical prerevolutionary concept and the political, social, and cultural reality after 1917.

Proletarian culture, as conceived in outline by Bogdanov before 1917, was not then popular culture or the culture of the popular masses. It was a culture properly not of the people but of its avant-garde. Proletarian culture was not defined by popular arts and traditions or by folklore although it was related to them. It had nothing to do with making the masses literate, educating them, or simply appropriating or assimilating bourgeois culture any more than with rejecting the 'cultural heritage'. But it did not propose either a true aesthetic: we would search in vain for a precise aesthetic approach in Bogdanov's dilettantish analyses in which the proposition of a proletarian culture remained rather abstract. For him it was above all matter of making the proletariat conscious of what was

---

first conference on Bogdanov was organized by the Institute of History of the USSR, Academy of Sciences of the USSR, Moscow, in April 1989.

inherent in its *byt*, to 'deliver' its 'internal culture'. This was the internal comprehension of themselves: their life, labour, feelings, emotions, ideals, attitudes, and mentality, in short, that they should acquire consciousness of self (*samosoznanie*) by appealing tirelessly to the collective will which was for Bogdanov the same as combative creativity. Only the elaboration of this independent culture could guarantee to the proletariat its entire independence and autonomy.

Bogdanov had realized since 1905–6 that a party of the vanguard alone, however strictly organized and disciplined, would not suffice for revolutionary tasks. What mattered was the 'internal force', the internal links and class solidarity, thanks to which the fraternal relations of the future socialist society (pathetically described as universal humanity, *vsechelovechestvo*) could thereby be created, at least in embryonic form. The specific conception of the function of culture and ideology which Bogdanov had developed in his major philosophical work *Empiriomonizm*, written between 1904 and 1906<sup>20</sup> had led him to consider the revolutionary struggle for the liberation of the proletariat and its cultural emancipation as an indissoluble unity. That was why for Bogdanov, in all his writings before 1917, the political and economic revolution and the cultural revolution represented an undifferentiated unity. Without the cultural revolution—the revolution in the development of consciousness and conduct of the proletariat—the political and socio-economic attainments of the revolution would soon be lost and abandoned to a group of non-proletarian leaders with their own culture. These would be the intelligentsia, which would exercise its hegemony anew. 'The consciousness of the proletariat is the ideological revolution which precedes the general social revolution', he declared in 1909 in his *Padenie velikogo fetishizma* (The fall of the great fetishism) where he presented his most vigorous critique of the authoritarian behaviour of the ideological leaders who inhibited the development of the 'collective consciousness' of the working class.<sup>21</sup> And in 1914, in his *Nauka ob obshchestvennom soznanii* (The science of social consciousness), he specified that the 'internal socialist revolution should necessarily precede the external socialist revolution of society'.<sup>22</sup> In other words, Bogdanov had no doubt that socialism was possible only by creating the 'new world' of proletarian culture.

However, Bogdanov would not contest the achievements of the October revolution, though he questioned its socialist character for the lack of cultural maturity on the part of the proletariat as a whole. From now he

<sup>20</sup> While culture was, according to Bogdanov, already dependent on the technological level of a society, ideology was not a purely mechanical phenomenon of the superstructure; having a retroactive effect on the base, it influences technical progress and thus becomes an instrument for the organization of society and its progress.

<sup>21</sup> A. Bogdanov, *Padenie velikogo fetishizma*, Moscow, 1910, pp. 198–99.

<sup>22</sup> Cited here from its German translation, *Die Entwicklungsformen der Gesellschaft und die Wissenschaft*, Berlin, 1924, p. 7.

would plead ceaselessly for the cultural autonomy of the Proletkul't organization in the manner of the autonomy of the party in the political sphere and that of unions and cooperatives in the economic. Reasoning by analogy with what happened in the party, Bogdanov and certain other leaders of Proletkul't argued in the pages of their new journal, *Proletarskaia Kul'tura*, edited by Bogdanov, that the Proletkul't organization should be open only to the most highly qualified workers of the leading industrial sectors as well as to the most mature and active workers. Only they could organize the cultural and ideological leadership, the hegemony of the 'political bloc' over the petty bourgeois and peasant culture produced by the broad masses. Just as the party could not accept that its political line would be determined by the least conscious workers, he argued, so also Proletkul't could not admit that its cultural line should be determined by the least conscious workers. Proletkul't should become, by analogy with the party, an organization for the cultural vanguard of the working class and also represent, in Bogdanov's terms, a sort of 'laboratory of the pure proletarian ideology'.<sup>23</sup>

For this reason, Proletkul't was going to engage in a labour of pure 'creation', while the educational activities aimed at the masses would be confined to state bodies like the commissariat of the Enlightenment (*Narkompros*). The 'cultural vanguard', as a workers' elite, even a workers' aristocracy, should exercise a monopoly and lead its own existence distinct from that of the large masses of workers and peasants who constituted the social basis of this new state. To Lenin, this made the hegemony or cultural leadership of Proletkul't both suspect and unacceptable. That there was an analogy in the manner of conceiving the respective vanguards of Proletkul't and Party, as Bogdanov had done in his first reading of *What is to be Done*, which could not be tolerated by the author of this work, to whom hegemony meant the dictatorship of the proletariat, the purely political and military dominion. Lenin was opposed not only to Proletkul't but above all to its principal leader, an 'idealist philosopher' representing a 'leftward sectarianism'. He declared in 1920, that a proletarian culture could be only the due and logical (*zakonomernyi*) development of the sum of knowledge which humanity has acquired from capitalist society. In the conditions of Russia then, Lenin felt that a true bourgeois culture should suffice for a start.<sup>24</sup> The cultural hegemony of the proletariat, even the flowering of his own culture as an alternative to that of the bourgeoisie (the final objective and principle to which Bogdanov devoted his entire life), appeared at this moment as a distant vision, imaginary and utopian. Thus it was different from the image of the new world to which Russia was from now headed. To

<sup>23</sup> On this, see above all 'Plan organizatsii Proletkul'ta', in *Proletarskaia Kul'tura*, 1919, no. 6, Feb., pp. 26-29.

<sup>24</sup> See Lenin's speech to the Third Congress of Communist Youth, 'Zadachi soiuzov molodezhi', in Lenin, *Polnoe Sobranie Sochenii*, 5th edn., Moscow, 1963, vol. 41, pp. 298-318.

Bogdanov, the revolution ended here. Lenin, whom he reproached with 'raising himself above the collectivity'<sup>25</sup> and who limited himself now to a concept of 'culture' which merely expected to raise the most elementary educational level of the masses, now definitely brushed him aside.

The project of a proletarian culture by Bogdanov and his followers was located without doubt in the ever-growing demand for another and different culture, to which the social democrats of the Second International stood witness to some extent everywhere in Europe. It is significant however that the Left Bolsheviks' project, which would after 1917 stimulate a mass movement not only in Soviet Russia but also in other European countries in the form of international sections of the Russian Proletkul't (under Comintern tutelage) had taken root in the peculiar context of tsarist Russia. Is it not here that literary criticism, and, what is more, reflection on culture, were deployed for the first time after the emergence of the intelligentsia, as a capital instrument to assault if not to overthrow the regime? There is no doubt that Bogdanov's concept of art represented only his extension, admittedly extreme, of the utilitarian concept of art developed by Belinskii and the radical critics of the sixties, but then that is another subject of research.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. A. Bogdanov, *Vera i Nauka*, Moscow, 1910, pp. 194, 211, and A. Bogdanov, *Padenie velikogo fetishizma*, p. 74.