

fact that Bogdanov, unlike Mach, does not simply deny the validity of the 'metaphysical question' but, having declared it to be meaningless, then proceeds to try and solve it, which he cannot do without contradiction. His starting-point is a kind of collective subjectivism: the world is a correlative to the human struggle for existence, and it is no use ascribing any other meaning to it or inquiring as to its independent nature. Things are crystallizations of human projections, governed by practical ends; they make their appearance only within the horizon that biology determines for the human race; they are components of collective experience, which figures as the one absolute point of reference. Within the framework of this relativization 'mental' phenomena differ from physical ones only inasmuch as the latter are valid collectively and the former only for individuals. Having said this, Bogdanov then presents physiological phenomena as the 'reflection' of mental processes, which does not make sense in terms of the previous distinction. He goes on to seek analogies in the field of inanimate nature and thus falls into a kind of panpsychism; he tells us that it is not really panpsychism, as it does not presuppose any 'substance', but he does not explain its true nature. As a result, we are unable to fathom the meaning he attaches to the 'priority' of experience in relation to the distinction of mental and physical phenomena. He uses the term 'mental' or 'psychical' in at least three senses, though he appears not to be aware of this: sometimes it means 'valid only for the individual', sometimes 'subjective' in the ordinary sense, and sometimes 'reflected in physiological processes'. This results in hopeless confusion, which there is little point in trying to remedy.

None the less, the main intention of Bogdanov's epistemology is clear: to do away with metaphysical 'fetishes', concepts without empirical correlates, and to preserve a strictly anthropocentric point of view in which the whole of reality is presented as the intentional correlate of human praxis. In this way he seeks to eliminate all 'substantial' entities, especially 'matter' and 'subject', and also 'time', 'space', 'causality', and 'force', as well as the concepts of 'truth' and 'objectivity' in the usual sense. The resulting picture, he claims, is strictly scientific, being free from metaphysics, and likewise humanistic, as it firmly relates all reality to human existence. In both respects this is in harmony with the intentions of Marxism, which is a scientific, activist,

and socially pragmatic philosophy: it has no need of the category of individual subjectivity or truth in a transcendental sense, and relates the whole universe to human labour, thus making man the creator and organizer of the world. This, in Bogdanov's judgement, is true not of any form of Marxism but only of that embodied in the Bolshevik movement. He and the other Russian empiriocritics believed that their 'activist' epistemology was well attuned to the spirit of Bolshevism and to its general idea that the revolution would not break out of itself when economic conditions were ripe, but that it depended on the will-power of a group of organizers. Bogdanov, to whom 'organization' was an obsession, used the term with equal freedom in regard to party matters and the principles of epistemology.

Each of the Russian empiriocritics differed from the others in some respects. Some, like Valentinov, were strict Machists; others devised variant names for their ideas, such as Bogdanov's 'empiriomonism' and Yushkevich's 'empiriosymbolism'. However, they all agreed in emphasizing the anti-metaphysical, scientific aspect of Marxism as opposed to the dualism of 'matter' and 'subject', and in envisaging the world in terms of human social praxis. The same viewpoint of collective subjectivism dictated their interpretation of Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*.

5. *The philosophy of the proletariat*

Bogdanov endeavoured to apply his theory directly to the prospect of socialism as a system under which all minds would at last share the same picture of the world, and even the separateness of the individual ego would disappear.

The philosophical basis of 'proletarian culture' was as follows. All human cognitive activity is directed to one end, namely man's success in the fight with nature. One can of course distinguish 'scientific' activities, which are directly concerned with technical efficiency, from 'ideological' ones, which perform the same function indirectly through the forms of social organization. This is not a distinction according to epistemological criteria of truth or falsehood, but only relates to the way in which the activities in question increase the productivity of labour. In both cases the principle holds good that 'truth is the living, organizing form of experience; it guides our activity and gives us a foothold in the battle for life' (*Empiriomonism*, iii, p. viii).

In other words, the validity of the results of cognition does not consist in their being 'true' in the usual sense, but in the help they afford in the struggle for survival. We thus reach a position of extreme relativism: different 'truths' may be useful in different historical situations, and it is quite possible that any truth is valid only for a particular epoch or social class. Nor is there any epistemological reason to distinguish truth from emotions, values, or social institutions, all of which are equally to be judged according to how far they strengthen man in his fight with nature. At the same time, we can speak of the viewpoint of one class being 'superior' to another's, not as if it were 'true' in an absolute sense but because the social forces it represents are more conducive to technical progress.

According to Marx's theory, the division of labour led to the separation of organizational functions from executive ones, and in course of time to the division of classes. The managing class gradually ceased to perform any technical activity and became parasitic. Its ideology naturally mirrored this situation, evolving religious myths and idealist doctrines. Direct producers, on the other hand, are instinctively drawn to materialism: 'the technique of machine production, expressed in cognition, unfailingly produces a materialist outlook' (ibid. 129). The materialism of the 'progressive' bourgeoisie expressed their link with technical progress; but, being the outlook of a privileged class, it could not do without various metaphysical fetishes. The materialism of the proletariat, however, rejected metaphysics and took a purely scientific view of the world. The word 'materialism' was really a survival, and was appropriate to the new outlook only in the sense that it was anti-metaphysical and anti-idealist.

The proletariat, as the class destined to sweep away class antagonisms and restore to mankind the unity of labour, knowledge, and will, was the best embodiment of man's natural tendency to extend his power over nature. The proletariat was the standard-bearer of technical progress, which required the elimination of everything that opposed individuals to one another. In present-day society social antagonisms had reached their peak and it was almost impossible for the classes to come to terms or understand one another. The opposition of normative and cognitive ideologies is increasing and is dividing the classes into two societies that regard each other in the same

way as they do the forces of external nature' (ibid. 138). In the society of the future, however, there would be a return to perfect unity. In the solidarity of close co-operation men would have no reason to oppose their ego to others', all individual experiences would be harmonized, there would be 'a single society with a single ideology' (ibid. 139). This ideology, it need hardly be said, would be that of empiriomonism, as the most radical thought-form eschewing the traditional fetishes of metaphysics.

No other Marxist, perhaps, carried the doctrine of the primacy of productive forces over ideology to such an extreme as Bogdanov; nor did any express so consistently the collectivist ideal and the hope that individuality would disappear in the perfect society. The Utopia of the absolute unity of society in all respects was, to Bogdanov, a natural consequence of his Marxist faith. As all forms of spiritual life are wholly determined by the division of classes, and indirectly by the technical level of society, and as technical progress was the sole criterion of 'truth' and required the elimination of class antagonisms, it was clear that socialism would abolish all differentiation between human beings, and that the subjective sense of difference would lose its *raison d'être* when it no longer had an economic basis in the conflict of individual interests. These conclusions of Bogdanov's, which are not to be found in Marx himself, are a link between the former's views and the totalitarian Utopias of the eighteenth century.

The same doctrinaire belief, inherited from Marxist tradition, in the ancillary function of culture and its absolute dependence on technology led Bogdanov to the theory of 'proletarian culture' (Proletkult) and the belief that it was the proletariat's mission to effect a clean break in cultural history. Since the classes were so estranged and hostile that they regarded one another as things and not people, they could not possibly have a common culture. The culture of the proletariat must borrow nothing from the tradition of the privileged classes but must make a Promethean effort to create *ex nihilo*, paying attention to its own needs and to nothing else whatever.

In a pamphlet entitled *Science and the Working Class* (1920) and in other writings Bogdanov proclaimed the slogan of 'proletarian science'. Marx, adopting the standpoint of the working class, had

transformed economics; it was now time to recast all sciences in accordance with the proletarian world-view, not excluding, for example, mathematics and astronomy. Bogdanov did not explain what proletarian astronomy or integral calculus would be like, but he declared that if workers had difficulty in mastering the various sciences without long, specialized study it was chiefly because bourgeois scientists had erected artificial barriers of method and vocabulary so that the workers should not learn their secrets.

The theory and practice of Proletkult did not find favour with the Bolshevik leaders except Bukharin, who edited *Pravda* after the Revolution and supported Bogdanov's idea in its columns. Trotsky was against it, and Lenin criticized it sharply on several occasions. This was not so much because some of its advocates, including Bogdanov, had fallen into philosophical heresy, but because the idea seemed to Lenin an idle fantasy unconnected with the party's true objectives. In a country with a huge percentage of illiterates the need was to teach them reading, writing, and arithmetic (the ordinary kind, not a proletarian version) and give them an elementary idea of technology and organization, not to pull civilization up by the roots and start again from zero. In any case Lenin did not share the view of some Proletkult enthusiasts and their Futurist allies that the art and literature of past ages should be scrapped by the working class.

It was of course impossible for Proletkult to adhere consistently to the principle of a 'clean break', either in theory or, still more, in actual artistic production. None the less, Bogdanov and others had raised a question which is neither trivial nor absurd from the point of view of Marxist doctrine. Given that culture is 'nothing but' an instrument of class-interests—and Marx afforded much foundation for this view—and that proletarian interests are in all respects contrary to those of the bourgeoisie, at any rate 'at the stage of socialist revolution', how was it possible to defend the idea of cultural continuity or of a universal culture for all mankind? Did it not logically follow from Marxism that the proletariat, in the struggle for socialism, must not take over any part of the existing heritage? The theoreticians of Proletkult were, however, in an ambiguous position. In opposition to those who spoke of an 'art for all

mankind' they quoted historical examples to show that different classes and periods had developed their own artistic forms; it was natural, therefore, that the proletariat should evolve an art of its own reflecting its struggle and its historical mission. But, at the same time, they accepted the notion that art was common to humanity, although every class and every period gave it different forms according to its own tastes and interests. In effect, therefore, they agreed that there was a continuing cultural heritage to be added to by each generation—a view in accordance with common sense, but not with the theory that art is purely a matter of class interests.

Before the October Revolution these disputes were of no great practical importance, but it was different when the Soviet state had to decide on its cultural policy and what it meant by 'proletarian culture'. Lunacharsky, Lenin's first Commissar for Education, had to solve practical problems in this field, and Proletkult became, especially from 1917 to 1921, a fairly large organization devoted to the cultivation of revolutionary art and science among the workers. Lunacharsky showed moderation and tolerance, especially in comparison with the doctrinaire attitude of the revolutionary *avant-garde*. His belief in the dependence of art on social class did not blind him to artistic values, although—like most Marxist theoreticians on art, at all events educated ones—he had difficulty in accommodating his 'bourgeois' tastes to his 'proletarian' ideology. Thus, although he hoped to see an upsurge of proletarian art in the future, and explained its absence in the present by such evident facts as the workers' lack of education, he never shared the fanaticism of the Proletkult extremists. He pursued a policy of repression—mild enough at this stage—towards bourgeois artists and writers, but he realized that art would wither and die under police control. The period of his authority—from 1917 to 1929—is regarded as the golden age of Soviet culture, though it did not seem so to those who were harassed even then for producing works with insufficient revolutionary spirit. The artistic merit of the twenties may have been exaggerated, but there is no comparison between them and, for instance, Zhdanov's dictatorship over Soviet cultural life after the Second World War.

MAIN CURRENTS OF MARXISM

ITS RISE, GROWTH,
AND DISSOLUTION

by
Leszek Kołakowski

VOLUME II
THE GOLDEN AGE

Translated from the Polish
by
P. S. Falla

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