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Bogdanov's *Red Star* and Ilyenkov's Critique: Science Fiction, Technology, and Politics

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ABSTRACT: Alexander Bogdanov's science-fiction odyssey *Red Star* (1908) has been characterized as the first socialist utopia. While this early origin already marks the novel as historically significant, the text also stands out because Evald Ilyenkov's final book, *Leninist Dialectics and the Metaphysics of Positivism* (1979), includes a chapter-length critique of the text. Read as a pair, these two works represent an exciting convergence between two major Russian thinkers who are often overlooked in English-language commentary—and an opportunity to compare the perspectives of two intellectuals who wrote infrequently but potently about political art. This article looks at *Red Star* and *Leninist Dialectics*, assessing the significance of the novel and the efficacy of Ilyenkov's critique. I articulate Ilyenkov's critique and argue it has merits, but I also defend Bogdanov's novel against certain criticisms. More importantly, I show the two texts can be productively read side by side in a moment when the relationship between technology, science, environment, and politics is once again becoming the subject of intense debate.

KEYWORDS: Alexander Bogdanov; Red Star; Evald Ilyenkov; Marxist aesthetics; art and politics; literature; science fiction.

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Alexander Bogdanov's science-fiction novel *Red Star* (1908) has remained a subject of fascination for many decades. Beyond its significance as an early form of Marxist cultural production—written, no less, by a Bolshevik just after the failed Russian Revolution of 1905—Bogdanov's Martian chronicle stands out for its strong emphasis on the technological infrastructure of post-capitalist utopia and its thematization of environmental destruction. Adding to *the* appeal of *Red Star*, Evald Ilyenkov's milestone *Leninist Dialectics and the Metaphysics of Positivism* (1979) dedicates a central chapter to analyzing the novel and its prequel, *Engineer Menni* (1912), precisely to evaluate how they explore technology and utopia.

Science Fiction and Politics

Bogdanov (1873–1928) was a polymath who pursued politics, medicine, science, and the arts. In addition to his prominent role in the Bolshevik movement, he was also a proponent of the Soviet Union's proletkult artistic movement (see Potamias in this issue), a pioneer in blood transfusion, and a proponent of unitary systems theory. This latter element of his thought was expressed through his monumental studies of "empiriomonism" and "tektology" (White 2019).

Unlike many of Bogdanov's non-artistic works, *Red Star* remained popular through many of the decades following its publication. It was republished several times following the 1917 Revolution, was staged in 1920, and saw translations into German and Esperanto during the 1920s (Adams 1989, 32).

Red Star is set just as the Russian Revolution of 1905 was reaching its boiling point. In the midst of the struggle for social democracy, Bolshevik revolutionary and scholar Leonid is invited by extraterrestrials to visit a communist utopia on Mars. There, he discovers a society that has already realized his greatest dreams, unifying natural and humanistic sciences to allow its members to live in harmony. Their world has made use of advanced technologies like nuclear energy, eradicated social inequities, abolished the division of labor, and superseded the traditional family to produce a culture of free and open love. Consequently, their society has effectively forgotten the individualism and parochialism that defines Leonid's imperial and capitalist world.

Before we turn to the ostensible meaning of *Red Star*, it is worth contextualizing the novel in two key respects. First, the book is something of an oddball, bringing a Marxist perspective to classic turn-of-the-century science fiction while predating the more formal traditions of Soviet artistic production. Richard Stites argues that *Red Star* shares

elements with broader nineteenth- and twentieth-century science fiction (in Bogdanov 1984, 4). In a similar spirit, Mark Adams argues that "Red Star can be read in its entirety as a peculiar Russian variant of the Wellsian vision" (Adams 1989, 4). But while Bogdanov's novel was not without precedent, it stands out for coming from a different social perspective than bourgeois science fiction or Soviet literary works: a society aspiring toward communism as a future ideal.

Later Russian literary texts often take for granted their social formation and so tend to narrate the historical triumphs of the USSR or wrestle with what the future would look like now that the Revolution had come. Vladimir Obruchev's *Plutonia* (1924), for example, follows Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* (1912), exemplifying the romantic spirit and aspirations of a society finally freed to pursue its age of scientific discovery. Similarly, Alexander Belayev's *The Air Seller* (1929) echoes the tradition of Jules Verne, depicting Soviets who defend their society against a capitalist scheme to commodify the very air they breathe—doing battle against the counterrevolution.

Bogdonov's text, by comparison, exemplifies a Russia in search of a communist future. In this sense, the novel has much in common with Kurd Lasswitz's story about the Martian colonization of Earth, *Of Two Planets* (1897), and Edward Bellamy's politically-minded time-travel utopia, *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* (1888)—which had been translated into Russian and was read in worker's study circles (White 2019, 200).

Second, *Red Star* stands out for its specific treatment of science. Throughout the text, Bogdanov dedicates considerable energy to exploring the technical means of Martian society, not simply marveling at technological gizmos but explaining how they operate. In this sense, the novel shares elements of hard science fiction but predates that tradition by half a century. Additionally, Leonid clearly stands in for Bogdanov, a polymath who is equally versed in science, politics, and culture. His selection as a candidate to visit Mars is driven by his scholarly merits: the Martians discover that Leonid's paper on physics correctly theorizes the techniques of interplanetary travel already deployed on their more advanced planet, demonstrating his political and intellectual readiness to comprehend their society.

In other words, Leonid is a man who already possesses the political and scientific wherewithal to understand Martian communism, not a person struggling toward class consciousness *à la* the protagonists of Gorky novels like Mother (1906). As a result, he is guided through Mars

like an industry expert touring an industrial site. Representative is a fascinatingly action-free scene where he ponders tables of labor statistics to understand the distribution of workers in sectors (Bogdanov 1984, 65).

Ilyenkov's Critique of Technocracy

It is this sort of pedantic detail that exemplifies Ilyenkov's concerns about the novel's "technocratic" nature (Ilyenkov 1982, 82). He presented this critique of *Red Star* in a central chapter of *Leninist Dialectics and the Metaphysics of Positivism*, itself a study of Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* (1909).

Lenin had developed that earlier text as a reaction to *Studies in the Philosophy of Marxism* (1908), an essay collection that featured Bogdanov and several others who were influenced by the Austrian physicist and philosopher Ernst Mach. Lenin castigated this group for confusing idealist monism for an idea compatible with Marxian materialism, explaining in the preface to his book, "the task I have set myself in these comments is to find out what was the stumbling-block to these people who under the guise of Marxism are offering something incredibly muddled, confused and reactionary" (Lenin 1962, 14:21).

Lenin's focus was not on *Red Star* but on Bogdanov's philosophy, intended as "an *intervention* into a theoretical discourse at the margins of the political debate of Russian Social Democracy, which at that time was recovering from the failure of the 1905 Revolution and the massive reaction that followed it" (Freyberg and Kobakhidze 2025, 336). Even so, he did not fail to launch a barb at Bogdanov's novel: "On Mars, self-correcting systems and moving equilibria solve all problems of supply and demand…. In utopian consumption, goods flow without surplus or shortage…. Economic equilibrium is paralleled by equilibrium of bodily energy flows…. The Martian body and society are godlike; they possess perfect plenitude" (Lenin 1962, 66).

The contours of this debate are best left to other commentators (e.g., Oittinen 2024; Pushchaev 2024). However, it is a fascinating detail that Ilyenkov dedicates a central chapter of a rigorous philosophical study to literary criticism of a science fiction novel.

From the outset, we should keep in mind that, like Lenin, Ilyenkov had a more ambitious goal than mere literary criticism. His book was commissioned to commemorate the 70th anniversary of Lenin's earlier critique. On a deeper level, critics have contended that Ilyenkov's focus was less on Bogdanov than on using the earlier writer as a vehicle for quietly questioning the bureaucratic nature of the Brezhnev-era USSR

(e.g., Lotz 2024). Further, *Leninist Dialectics* was left unpublished upon its author's death and appeared in print only in an edited form.

Regardless, Ilyenkov contends that *Red Star* functions as a presentation of Bogdanov's broader philosophical views in disguised form and therefore is worthy of philosophical critique. He asserts, "The entire structure of images is organised by the ideas of [Empiriomonism], and for this reason *Red Star* is simply an artistic equivalent of Bogdanov's theoretical constructions" (Ilyenkov 1982, 56). For this reason, it is fascinating to see a major intellectual wrestle with this novel—and to do so in a way that takes seriously both the intellectual questions posed within and their manner of artistic presentation.

In *Leninist Dialectics*, Ilyenkov core claim is that the worldview of *Red Star* is a form of "technocratic" faith in science, a belief that communism could be brought about and sustained by recourse to advanced scientific and industrial growth. In a representative passage, he argued,

> Bogdanov's philosophy is therefore like no other in holding on to those specific illusions of our century which have come to be called technocratic. The secret of these illusions is the idolisation of technology—technology of every type—from the technology of rocket design to the technology of dentistry, bomb-dropping or sound-recording. And with such an approach, the engineering and technological intelligentsia begin to resemble—both in their own eyes and in the eyes of others—a special caste of holy servants of this new divinity. (Ilyenkov 1982, 82–83)

For Ilyenkov, Bogdanov's viewpoint valorized technology and expertise, reflecting a broader commitment to a worldview grounded only in the natural sciences. His worldview aimed to remove speculation and imagination, leaving only what could be understood from an empirically grounded methodology. This amounted to a betrayal of Marxism; Ilyenkov writes, "The economic framework of Marx has remained, but only as a framework, as a skeleton, while the flesh and blood, the concrete reality of the Marxist conception of the socialist future, has been cast aside and replaced by the Machist fantasy" (Ilyenkov 1982, 63).

There is truth to Ilyenkov's claim that the novel reflects Bogdanov's scientism. Beyond its broader structure, which is organized around Leonid's systematic exploration of the Martian mode of production, many discussions within the text showcase Bogdanov's elision of technology and socio-cultural life. On his journey to Mars, for example, Leonid reads a book that presents the history of Mars "in a popular form for Martian children," beginning with a chapter "devoted to the idea of the

Universe as a single all-inclusive and self-determining whole" (Bogdanov 1984, 51). In another scene, Leonid tours a children's colony and learns about how young people are reared and socialized into Martian life. During his visit, a character explains to him that on Mars, children still move from an individualist to collectivist mindset, a function of a "universal law of life" where the "development of the organism repeats in abbreviated form the development of the species" (70). The idea is a textbook form of monist systems theory, suggesting that biological systems are reproduced at higher levels of (social) organization. The most transparent example of elision between Bogdanov's intellectual interests and his drama is seen in a discussion of blood transfusion, when Leonid learns the technique has become a medically *and* culturally significant practice: "in keeping with the nature of our entire system, our regular comradely exchanges of life extend beyond the ideological dimension into the physiological one" (86).

Faced with a world where children are subjected to droll bedtime stories about metaphysics, it is tempting to take Ilyenkov's critique wholesale. Indeed, *Red Star* lacks much of the elegance of the best examples of socialist fiction, which use art to more subtly explore political ideas. Ilyenkov refers to Gorky's monumental four-volume *The Life of Klim Samgin* (1925–1936), a communist *bildungsroman* that chronicles a young petit-bourgeois intellectual's political awakening; this towering achievement of Marxist literature offers a masterclass in how to create engaged literature while maintaining a profound literary sensibility.

Bogdanov and Didactic Art

Despite the legitimacy of these concerns, it is worth digging deeper into *Red Star* to ask about the extent to which the novel really functions as an endorsement of technocracy.

Some more recent critics have at the least recognized the overt didacticism of the novel. For example, Richard Stites argues "one of the functions of *Red Star*, with its highly elaborate Martian system of feedback, information control and retrieval, statistics, protocomputers, regulation, and 'moving equilibrium,' was to lay out the author's first thoughts on the theory that has won him so much attention in recent years, both in the Soviet Union and in the world at large" (in Bogdanov 1984, 6). Natalia Grigoryan goes even further, arguing that the novel can be thought of as a kind of counterfactual thought experiment wherein dramatic narrative provides a logical structure for testing Bogdanov's social hypothesis (Grigoryan 2015).

For his part, Bogdanov made clear in his later aesthetic writings that he *did* have a heavily didactic conception of art. A leading figure in the *proletkult* movement that sprung up in tandem with the Second Russian Revolution, Bogdanov espoused a realist conception of art whereby aesthetic presentation serves to convey truths about the world. In his monograph *Art and the Working Class* (1918), for example, Bogdanov claimed that "proletarian art must capture, in the field of its experience, all of society and nature—all of the life of the universe" (Bogdanov 2022, 113). Further, he held that art "shows people what they can take from art to help them arrange their lives, both internally and externally—and how to do so" (ibid., 129).

Ilyenkov was destined to take issue with this perspective. By contrast with Bogdanov, Ilyenkov held to a conception of art that hedged closer to the nineteenth-century German aesthetics of writers like Schiller and Kant. His essay "A Contribution to a Conversation about Esthetic Education" (1974), for example, downplayed the value of art as a means of conveying information, instead arguing that creative education develops our ability to make use of our imaginative capacity. As he wrote, "Singing, drawing, literature, the plastic arts—all of these are means, merely means for the development of such a universal capability as *productive imagination*," a faculty "oriented toward the feeling of beauty, toward a feeling that enables people, immediately and without long reflexion, confidently to develop beauty and ugliness, mastery of the material free from the whims of individual caprice" (Ilyenkov 1974, 84).

Given the distinct perspectives of Ilyenkov and Bogdanov, the pair appear to disagree fundamentally about both politics and aesthetics. However, there are reasons to ask if Bogdanov merely uses *Red Star* to articulate and defend a perfect society.

The full arc of the narrative seems to suggest otherwise. Yes, Leonid is quite impressed by the world he encounters, and the society he observes is clearly organized in a fashion that Bogdanov finds preferable to imperial Russia. Even so, the story is more ambivalent than some interpretations suggest. As Leonid explores the planet, he discovers that his hosts have a less-than-altruistic interest in bringing him to their planet. The Martians are facing a population crisis and are considering the colonization of Earth—a process they fear might require the extermination of the planet's dominant indigenous species. Leonid's invitation turns out to be a test for whether humans are capable of coexistence

with their Martian superiors, and he fails it: faced with the terrifying fate of his world, he goes mad.

As Bogdanov navigates through this scenario, we see many instances that suggest the Martians are far from able to solve all problems via technology. In fact, they themselves are quite candid about their own flaws. In one scene, Leonid quips that Mars must have little need for tragic art, given its happy, peaceful nature. His guide, a young astronomer named Enno, replies, "Happy? Peaceful? Where did you get that impression? True, peace reigns among men, but there cannot be peace with the natural elements. Even a victory over such a foe can pose a new threat" (Bogdanov 1984, 79). Like ours, Martian art turns out to thematize sorrow and natural beauty, since they must also face the mortal condition that no science can overcome.

Thus, while Bogdanov does thematize progress, he does not insist that our ideals should be about the mere domination of nature via science. In fact, Martian culture is presented in many instances as live and spirited rather than stagnant and bureaucratic. For example, one extended scene sees the Martians engaged in a robust debate about what to do about their population crisis. Leonid's love interest, the Martian doctor Netti, mounts a spirited argument about why the Earthlings must be allowed to continue on despite the flaws of their society:

> Earthly humanity is splintered, its various races and peoples have fused with their territories and historical traditions, they speak different languages, and a profound mutual lack of understanding pervades all their relations. This is all true, and it is also true that because of these enormous obstacles our Earthly brothers will achieve their goal of uniting mankind much later than we. But if one is aware of the causes, one is in a better position to evaluate the consequences. This fragmentation is due to the immensity of life on Earth and the richness and variety of its natural environment, which together have produced a multitude of different world-views. Surely this makes Earth and her people superior rather than inferior to our world during the corresponding historical epoch. (Bogdanov 1984, 118)

This passage explicitly acknowledges that Martian society is not meant as a template for our own world, since humanity's burden is to confront natural *and* political obstacles. Moreover, the novel's ambiguous ending suggests that no simple formula can overcome these great existential struggles.

One might argue that the novel's conclusion was largely for dramatic effect. After all, there would be little literary value in a novel that ends with Leonid simply shaking hands with the Martians, congratulating them on their achievements, and carrying along on his merry way.

Importantly, Bogdanov's own philosophy of art stressed the balance of artistic beauty and didacticism. *Art and the Working Class* is representative, cautioning writers against producing vulgar propagandistic literature under the naïve desire to serve revolutionary goals. Instead, he challenges aspiring artists to write poetically and study the artistry of Pushkin, Gogol, Tolstoy, and other Russian masters (Bogdanov 2022, 123). Bogdanov also voiced his thoughts on science fiction as a vehicle for social commentary. In 1906, for example, he criticized Bellamy's earlier sci fi novel *Looking Backward* for presenting a world without nuance. As he wrote, "Bellamy's society is one that has become petrified in satisfaction and complacency, placidly resting on its laurels following the victories gained by preceding generations over nature, both social and external—such a society does not incorporate any stimulus for further development" (in White 2019, 200).

We can question the success of *Red Star* as a literary achievement, but we should also acknowledge that the novel was the first entry in a genre that had yet to exist. While Bogdanov's discussions of technical systems can drag in moments, the novel is far from a logical proof or a test of Bogdanov's social hypotheses. Moreover, we can acknowledge that in spite of its limits, Bogdanov's text does not present a society petrified in satisfaction or complacency. Ultimately, it might be best to interpret the text as Krementsov does: "Unlike classical utopias, Bogdanov's presented not the ultimate 'golden age'—a static, free of conflict and strife 'paradise'—but a dynamic society that continues to develop by resolving its conflicts and contradictions" (Krementsov 2011, 42).

Bogdanov and Ilyenkov, or: Science *and* Culture

If this interpretation is correct, then there is a powerful ambiguity in *Red Star*. This affords a timeliness to the novel and Ilyenkov's critique. In particular, *Red Star* problematizes technological and environmental themes (Djurasovic and Djurasovic 2021). These themes have only become more potent as people have begun debating concepts like abundance, degrowth, posthumanism, and similar ecological topics. Bogdanov and Ilyenkov can be read side by side to stage a debate about how and to what extent technology can address our social problems—and whether or not art can contribute to the conversation.

Meaningfully, Bogdanov does not present the choice facing the Martians as a simple matter of embracing or rejecting technological growth, something that is all-too commonplace today. In one of the book's most powerful scenes, Leonid discusses the Martian crisis with Enno. Leonid

wonders if they can simply colonize an empty planet or institute population control measures, but his host insists that "there are considerable difficulties everywhere, and the tighter our humanity closes ranks to conquer nature, the tighter the elements close theirs to avenge the victory" (Bogdanov 1984, 79). Enno also explains that Malthusian population control cannot solve the crisis, since to resort to a bureaucratic solution would be to undermine the faith that the Martians have in their social collective: "The meaning of each individual life will vanish together with that faith, because the whole lives in each and every one of us, in each tiny cell of the great organism, and each of us lives through the whole" (ibid. 80).

Ilyenkov's contribution to this conversation is to push us to be absolutely consistent in our ideals. He demands we resist technocratic solutions and orient materialism toward emancipation and human development. Read in this way, *Leninist Dialectics* serves as a caution against seeing the great organism as a machine rather than a living system, a potential risk in reading Bogdanov—and more importantly, an open goal of similar theories of a more recent vintage.

At a time when entrepreneurial technocrats have propped up AI and algorithms as easy cures—and when their opponents have begun to ask whether our great organism is worth saving at all—Bogdanov and Ilyenkov encourage us to hold on to ambiguities about the future. Seen in this light, the power of literature emerges in its ability to call forth contradictions and dwell within them, not simply prescribe answers. In this spirit, the two authors challenge us to link the political and technical, always keeping in mind fundamental questions about the role of technology, nature, and society in advancing humanity's cause.

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Biography

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