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The Epistemological Basis of Alexander Bogdanov's Theory of Proletarian Culture

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ABSTRACT: The present article is a critical approach of the epistemological basis of A. Bogdanov's theory of proletarian culture, aiming to detect the way, in which Bogdanov conceives not only the construction process of social reality but also reality's transformation process. In this context, some of the most crucial Bogdanovian concepts are discussed, such as construction-organization of reality, the cognitive system of organization, collective consciousness, the special principles of proletarian culture, proletarian science and art and the assimilation of cultural heritage.

KEYWORDS: Cognitive system of reality organization, empiriocriticism, subjective idealism, tektology, proletarian art.

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In this article we attempt to examine—in the manner of the criticism exerted against A. Bogdanov by V. Lenin, E. Ilyenkov, M. Lifshitz and G. Lukacs in several historical moments—Bogdanov's theory of proletarian culture in relation to his epistemology, highlighting his relation to Kant's and Fichte's epistemology and the consecutive dissociation from both materialism and Marxian thought. Considering as crucial for understanding the theory of proletarian culture the designation of its epistemological ground, the article persists exclusively on this aim, and puts some other issues regarding proletarian culture aside, issues such as the historical placement of the Bogdanovian conception of proletarian culture in the context of the debate over culture and art that took place in Russia during the pre-revolutionary period and, mainly, during the first years of the October Revolution and in which many of the leading figures of the Bolsheviks participated (e.g. A.Lunacharsky, V.Lenin, L.Trotsky, N.Bukharin, V.Serge, A.Voronsky), as Bogdanov's and *Proletkult's* undeniable contribution to the eradication of illiteracy and the rise of the education level of the Russian working class, as the influence the theory of proletarian culture had on the Russian avant-garde artistic movements and, especially, on Russian constructivism.

The prioritization of the ideological-cultural revolution over the political revolution

Bogdanov adopted from the beginning a skeptical stance towards the October Revolution because he believed that the working class in Russia, at the time when the Bolsheviks occupied the Winter Palace, could not carry out the *organizational tasks of socialism,* to build a socialist society, since it had not yet formed its own independent culture. Therefore, he attributes a bourgeois-democratic character to the October Revolution, based on the assumption that the democratic reforms that the Russian bourgeoisie was unable or unwilling to carry out, and which will be realized by the October Revolution, would offer more conductive political and cultural conditions for the proletariat to develop its own independent culture and system of thought, on the basis of which it would be able to organize life and society socialistically in the future.

For Bogdanov, the lack of such a system of thought is responsible not only for the Russian proletariat's impotence to lead society to socialism—through the October Revolution—but also for earlier events, such as the defeat of the Russian Revolution of 1905 and the collapse of the Second International after the outbreak of World War I. When the war broke out, Bogdanov writes;

> "The weakness of the new shoots of culture was immediately revealed, their inability to play an independent role. The old bourgeois-state culture almost without opposition carried the day, uniting its forces with national-patriotic slogans. The internationalism of the working classes at once disintegrated because it only existed as a feeling or an attitude of the masses; it [the working class] could only be a real force to be reckoned with if it were the incarnation of a particular and integral class culture" (White 2013, 57).

The lack of a universal scientific, cultural, and socialist *education of the working class* allowed the prevalence of "*bourgeois-elaborated forms of thought over the proletarian experience*" (Bogdanov in Rowley 2017, 307). The fact that the proletariat had not yet developed its own culture resulted in choices and actions determined by bourgeois culture and, consequently, nationalism dominated its ranks immediately after the outbreak of war. In other words, when the working class faced a difficult and unprecedented issue such as a global military conflict, it adopted the perspective of bourgeoisie, that is, it *subordinated* itself to a foreign aim, because it lacked an all-round and unified culture that would have allowed it to confront the outbreak of war from the perspective of its own interests, values, and ideals. Similarly, the defeat of 1905 is attributed to the absence of an ideological-cultural revolution that would have preceded the political revolution and would lead the proletariat to shape its own culture.

Bogdanov substantiates the necessity of such an ideological-cultural revolution in the relationship existing, according to him, between the intellectual movement of the European Enlightenment and the French Revolution. Just as the European Enlightenment paved the way for the advent of the French Revolution and enabled bourgeoisie to manage both the revolutionary process and the construction of a new society, so too the ideological and political revolution of the proletariat prepares the ground for the socialist revolution and empowers it to stand up to the *organizational tasks of socialism*. Consequently, Bogdanov attributes the previously mentioned blows suffered by the working class to a fundamental organic inadequacy, to its inability to develop its exclusively own system of thought, which led to its cultural and intellectual dependence on and subjugation to bourgeois culture.

In order to overcome this crucial inherent weakness and build a new socialist society, the proletariat must shape, in the course of its *uncompromising* struggle with bourgeoisie, its own culture, a culture distinct and independent from bourgeois culture. Namely, the formation of pro-

letarian culture is, according to Bogdanov, a prerequisite for the overcoming of bourgeois society. Only if the proletariat succeeds in constituting its own culture, is the transition to socialism possible. Thus, in Bogdanov's view, the formation of proletarian culture precedes the transition to socialism and constitutes the necessary means for the realization of this transition. At the same time, however, it is also the goal of the socialist revolution, since the development of proletarian culture is the essence of socialism. In other words, the formation and spread of proletarian culture is, according to Bogdanov, both the source and the end of the revolutionary change.

Consciousness as the constructive principle of reality

I. The priority and the decisive role that Bogdanov attributes to the cultural over political revolution is based on his philosophical system, and particularly on his epistemology. According to this, objective reality initially appears to man in the form of a *chaos of elements*, as "*an unregulated stream of sensations, impressions and feelings*" (Ilyenkov 1979), which man is called upon to organize through one's intellectual effort and thus transform it into an orderly reality. Only from this empirical data (sensations, feelings, impressions) can man shape reality, provided, however, that these are linked and unified on the basis of the *general* a priori principles of human collectivity, economy of effort, and equilibrium. Thus, in its struggle with the chaotic nature of experience, humanity gradually tames it, controls it, masters it, and *organizes* the *universe* step by step on the basis of the general a priori principles, using three organizational instruments: (a) *speech*, which makes cooperation between people possible; (b) *idea*, which coordinates human efforts; and (c) the establishment of *social norms*, which regulate human relations (Bogdanov 1984a, 1–3).

Therefore, on the one hand, there is the *primordial chaotic world* of experience and, on the other, the principle of organization, the *collective consciousness*, which seeks to manage the initial chaos, to bring it into order and, thus, create reality itself. That is, consciousness, by arranging the empirical data becomes the creator of reality in the sense that it arranges it harmoniously and uniformly. So, *collective consciousness*, the *cognitive system of organization*, as Bogdanov calls it, is a constructive, guiding principle which, by organizing man's *chaotic* experience into a universal and unified system called *tectology* (from the ancient Greek word τέκτων = builder), through which it shapes the world itself and constructs objective reality. In other words, humanity, regarded as collective consciousness, in the process of organizing the chaotic nature

of experience according to the *general* a priori organizational principles, arranges harmoniously and uniformly the real world and, consequently, creates it.

Given this, we could argue that, as in I. Kant's epistemology, the untidy material of the senses is organized, acquires order and unity through the a priori insights of Reason, so too in Bogdanov's epistemology, the unification of the chaotic human experience takes place according to the a priori principles of consciousness. Just as in Kant, Pure Reason is a regulatory principle, through which unity is attributed both to the realm of the senses and to the acts of the intellect, so consciousness in Bogdanov is an organizing and unifying principle of human experience, a principle that regulates its chaotic nature. However, Bogdanov, unlike Kant, argues that the role of consciousness is not limited to the organization of human experience, but extends through this organization to the construction, i.e. the unification of reality itself, and as a result reality, as a—more or less—uniform and harmonious entity, appears as a product of the organizational capacities and processes of consciousness; and the laws that govern reality also seem to be derivatives of consciousness. In other words, Bogdanov, adopting Kant's definition of construction, according to which: "*to construct a concept means to exhibit a priori the intuition corresponding to it*" (Kant 1998, 630), applies it not only to the realm of concepts but also to that of reality itself, considering that reality is organized or unified a priori according to the idea corresponding to it. Namely, Bogdanov claims that the role of consciousness consists in constructing-unifying reality on the basis of certain a priori principles, or, else, he raises reality "*to the realm of construction, imaginatively and symbolically structured*" (Stavrakakis 1996, 150). At the same time, he rejects as irrational, as something that cannot be cognized, anything that lies beyond this construction.

In essence, Bogdanov argues that Reason is not the regulatory principle of the acts of the understanding exclusively, as Kant maintains, but also the organizing principle of reality itself. In this sense, as Lenin notes in his famous critique of empiriocriticism, Bogdanov is inspired by J.G. Fichte's subjective idealism (Lenin 1977: 196–199), according to which the Ego is what shapes reality itself and reality in turn bases its own existence on the limits of the Ego, on the limits of individual consciousness[1], with the result that the non-Ego, the objective world, not

1. Bogdanov replaces the Fichtean individual consciousness with the concept of collective consciousness.

only loses its priority over the world of the spirit, but also is transformed into a projection, a construct of subjective consciousness.

Hence, since reality, as a uniform and harmonious entity, is constructed by the organizational functions of consciousness, the laws that determine it do not exist independently of the subject of cognition and, therefore, any possibility of founding the truth on the objective laws of reality disappears. In other words, since there is no objective world per se, independent of the subject of cognition that provides the criterion of validity of knowledge, there can be no objective truth. On the contrary, Bogdanov argues that the objectivity of truth lies in the fact that something is valid "*not for me alone, but for everyone, and for everyone has a definite meaning, exactly as it does for me*" (Rowley 1996, 55). In other words, in line with Kant's aesthetic judgment, what he considers as objective truth is the one which constitutes a common perception in society's consciousness, which has the same meaning and significance for all people, which is confirmed by the *assent of everyone*, that which is *valid for everyone* (Kant 1987, 153; 154). "*As long as those who judge proceed by abstracting from merely individual or private conditions and participate in a common sense, their judgments do not have merely subjective validity*" (Androulidakis in *Kant* 2004, 47) but transcend it acquiring universal validity (collective consciousness).

Finally, since the role of consciousness lies in organizing and constructing reality and not in grasping its essence, the cognition of the real is for Bogdanov a category without content and its investigation is a *false hypothesis*. In this context, Bogdanov rejects materialism as a metaphysical theory, as a theory which presupposes that objective reality exists beyond and outside consciousness and must be known by consciousness.

In conclusion, we could claim that Bogdanov, in order to assign to consciousness a more active role than that attributed to it by the leading theorists of the Second International, K. Kautsky and G. Plekhanov, who regarded consciousness as a direct, unmediated reflection of reality, or in other words, in his attempt to raise an opposition against "*the mechanistic materialism of Kautsky and Plekhanov and their opportunistic tactics, ends up to the glorification of will and consciousness and, therefore, moves away from materialism*" (Лифшиц).

II. Bogdanov presents the history of humanity as a logical process of development of its organizational capacities, as the course of evolution of the cognitive systems of organization of reality. This process develops according to Darwin's theory of *natural selection*, since, as Bogdanov

claims, the cognitive systems that prevail are these whose *specific* principles best correspond to the *general* principles of organization. The more the *specific* principles of a system satisfy the *general* principles of organization, the more unified that system becomes and, therefore, the more harmoniously it organizes reality, and, consequently, it replaces the previous cognitive system of organization. Hence, in order to become dominant, a class must create a new cognitive system which, by satisfying the general organizational principles to a greater extent than the previous dominant one, it be will be able to arrange reality in a more harmonious way, fulfilling more uniformly the "*grandiose task* [...] *the triple organization—of things, people, and ideas*" (Bogdanov in Poustilnik 2016, 9). Of course, the *general* principles of organization are fulfilled and organize reality in a completely harmonious way only in the context of the universal culture of classless society.

Proletarian culture as the matrix of socialism

I. Culture is the highest cognitive organizational system, the most important form of systematization of human experience and, consequently, the most critical factor in the construction of reality. At the same time, culture is a means of social recognition of a class and a sign of its political maturity and autonomy. Therefore, if the proletariat wants to become a self-sufficient political force capable of challenging bourgeois reality and constructing a new one, it must constitute its own culture. So, the task that Bogdanov assigns to the proletariat is the rejection of bourgeois culture and the elaboration, formation, and dissemination of a new, proletarian culture (Bogdanov 1918), a culture "*formulated, understood and expounded from the working-class outlook; […] competent to enable the working class to realize its own aims; […] which organizes forces for the victory of communion*" (Paul 1921, 95), a culture that will organize social life according to its own principles.

For Bogdanov, the *specific* principles of proletarian culture are: (a) The principle of comradeship as mutual understanding and sympathy among people, which satisfies to a greater extent than individualism (the *specific* principle of bourgeois culture) the *general* principle of human collectivity, (b) monism as the fusion of the individual with the collective experience of the working class and, subsequently, with that of the whole of humanity, which satisfies to a greater extent than competition (a specific principle of bourgeois culture) the *general principle* of equilibrium, and (c) technological labor causality as the abolition of the division between intellectual and manual labor, which satisfies the *general* principle of economy of effort to a greater extent than specialization

(a *special* principle of bourgeois culture). The rejection of individual property, the recognition of the importance of labor, "*the replacement of fetishisms by a "reign of science" —that is, "the purity and clearness of knowledge and the emancipation of the mind from all the fruits of mysticism and metaphysics,"* [...] *the gradual abolition of all standards of compulsion as well as of the state*" (Sochor 1988, 194), the challenge of every eternal truth and absolute rule, the rejection of any compromise that would stray proletariat from achieving its ultimate goal, are some of the secondary *specific* principles of proletarian culture. Thus, since the *specific* principles of proletarian culture correspond more comprehensively, in comparison to those of bourgeois culture, to the *general* principles of organization, satisfying to a greater extent people's desire —especially of those who are ruled[2]—for an increasingly unified and harmonious organization of reality, proletarian culture, as the most harmonious and unified class culture, will replace, according to Bogdanov, bourgeois culture.

A crucial step in the constitution of proletarian culture is the creation, similarly to the *Encyclopedia* of Diderot and d'Alembert, of a *New Encyclopedia,* which would undertake the role of setting the aforementioned *specific* principles, unifying them into a harmonious whole and disseminating them in a *simple and popular manner*. In other words, just as the bourgeoisie developed its own worldview, "*created and adopted its new world outlook*" (Sochor 1988, 126) before the French Revolution, systematizing it and crystallizing it in the *Encyclopedia*, so too must the proletariat, before taking over the governance of society, to compile its own encyclopedia and establish its own universities, which will serve as centers for the processing of its culture.

According to Bogdanov, proletarian culture includes science and philosophy as well as artistic creation. A distinctive feature of the "*incomparably better structured and more lively*" (Bogdanov 2014, 80) proletarian science is its simplicity, comprehensibility, and unity, in contrast to the overly specialized, complex, and fragmented character of bourgeois science. Also, Bogdanov assigns to philosophy the role of organizing and unifying the proletarian science. It is philosophy that undertakes the

2. According to Bogdanov, there are two classes in bourgeois society: the rulers, the organizers, those who possess knowledge and organize production, and the ruled, the implementers, those who are subjected to the organizational capacities of the rulers. (Bogdanov 2020, 387) Classes, i.e., are formed on the basis of their appropriation of the cognitive systems of organization and, by extension, of their access to the means of constructing reality.

task of creating a unified and unifying science; a task that is fulfilled by grounding science in the minimum and simplest laws possible.

Art too is "*an organizational form of a class life,* [...] [as well as] *a sign of political maturity and autonomy*" (Soboleva 2016, 11). For this reason, the proletariat is called upon to create in the context of proletarian culture its own art: an art that highlights and cultivates the sentiments of cooperation, solidarity, and brotherhood; sentiments that stem from the *specific* principles of proletarian culture and which art processes aesthetically, that is, through the creation of poetic-artistic images. According to Bogdanov, proletarian art must be "*simple in form but enormous in content*" (Mally 1990, 146); a condition achieved through the harmonization of both its content and form with the *specific* principles of proletarian culture. The content is harmonized with the principles of proletarian culture by expressing the above sentiments. For its part, the form is harmonized with the principle of monism by being simple and comprehensible, and it is harmonized with the principle of equilibrium by radiating "*a majestic tranquility, a serene harmony, an absence of tension*" (Bogdanov 1984b, 76).

II. The fact that bourgeois culture is characterized by *specific* principles that are entirely opposed to those of proletarian culture means that bourgeois culture and, by extension, the civilization of the bourgeoisie is trivial for the development of proletarian culture. In other words, Bogdanov claims that the a priori *specific* principles on which bourgeois culture is based are completely incompatible with the *specific* principles of proletarian culture, and therefore the cultural creations of bourgeois culture are considered inappropriate and harmful for the new culture. In this light, Bogdanov rejects the past bourgeois culture and its cultural products, or, more correctly, the necessity of their critical assimilation by the proletariat, considering it as a process in which the *legacy* tends to dominate *the heir,* and having as a result the latter, under the weight of the legacy, to be unable to cultivate its own culture and civilization. However, although Bogdanov rejects bourgeois culture and civilization, he recognizes that certain latent elements could be harmonized with the *specific* principles of proletarian culture; hidden elements that need to be discovered by the proletariat and be appropriated, i.e., be transformed into a useful weapon in its struggle against the old world and its culture.[3] Therefore, the critical assimilation of the bourgeois cultural heritage by the proletariat is of minor importance, since

3. Following Bogdanov's thought, we suggest that the use of plural form in Hugo's literature titles (Les Misérables, Toilers of the Sea), which reveals the existence of a collective

Bogdanov gives it meaning only to the extent that it aims to reveal and incorporate those elements of bourgeois culture—concealed in it—that could be harmonized with the *specific* principles of proletarian culture.

Since the assimilation of bourgeois cultural heritage is not a necessary and inevitable task for the proletariat in its effort to form its own culture, the role of bourgeois specialists, people who possess bourgeois science, philosophy and art, the representatives and bearers of bourgeois culture, is limited to matters of economic and political struggle. The bourgeois intelligentsia is called upon to assist the proletariat only in organizing its everyday struggle and not to the constitution of its culture. This is due both to the inability of bourgeois intellectuals to adapt to the *specific* principles of proletarian culture or, else, to their constant reproduction of individualism, competition, authoritarianism, and overspecialization. Hence, the bourgeois intelligentsia cannot support or guide the proletariat in the process of forming proletarian culture. On the contrary, this task is assigned to the industrial proletariat, since only it is the wholly ruled class and, as such, only it can be inspired by the *specific* principles governing the new culture and develop them further. For their part, peasants, as bearers of a culture that is opposed to that of the proletariat and dominated by individualism, patriarchy, religiosity, and prejudice, bring ideas and sentiments which place them closer to bourgeoisie and, consequently, could not act as agents of proletarian culture (Mally 1990, 64–65).

The ex-nihilo proletarian culture

In summary, we could argue that Bogdanov's view, according to which the constitution of proletarian culture is an indispensable prerequisite for the transition to socialism, is based on the fact that he applies faithfully in the political sphere his epistemological views about the priority of cognition over matter, of consciousness over social being. The realm of consciousness, according to both Bogdanov and the epistemology of subjective idealism he adopts, is presented as self-existent and as the creator of objective reality or, conversely, reality itself is presented as a projection of consciousness. Consciousness does not arise from the contradictory nature of reality, it is not a mediated reflection of it, but is constructed on the basis of some transcendental, a priori principles and appears as the formative factor of reality. Therefore, Bogdanov constructs proletarian consciousness or culture on the basis of certain, a

subject, is an element compatible with the special principles of proletarian culture and, consequently, an element that could be appropriated by the proletariat.

priori principles and not on the basis of the objective—particular and contradictory—characteristics of the working class, its real needs and potentialities.[4] This has the consequence that proletarian culture constitutes an arbitrary, subjective mental construct, a construct that expresses—in reference to Trotsky's critique on avant-garde artists - nothing other than the ego of its creator (Trotsky 1924), the desires and hopes of Bogdanov. As a result, proletarian culture constitutes a moral ideal, a moral imperative, which Bogdanov has arbitrarily constructed, has arbitrarily presented as commonly acceptable, and has arbitrarily imposed on the proletariat.

Furthermore, proletarian culture is exposed by Bogdanov as rejecting all previous cultures and prevails because of its better adaptation to the will and desire of people for a more unified and harmonious organization of reality. In other words, the creation of proletarian culture is not a process in which the new dialectically overcomes the old, transforming it into a moment of itself, in which the new critically assimilates some elements of the old and discards others, but, on the contrary, it is an autonomous process, whose starting point and end are found in its *specific* a priori principles. This means that proletarian culture arises from nothing, that its creation is conceived by Bogdanov as a process from nothingness, as a *parthenogenesis*.

Since proletarian culture is a moral imperative, a subjective construct and not an objective necessity, a theory which—according to the aphorism addressed by Karl Marx to the bourgeois economists of his time—"*appeared in reality through books, rather than being recorded in books by reality"* (Lukacs 1973, 81), or, in other words, since proletarian culture is not based either on the objective state of the proletariat or on the critical assimilation of cultural heritage, we could argue that it is an artifact, an ex nihilo creation, a political and cultural utopia.

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4. In this context, proletarian science, philosophy and art are presented by Bogdanov as rational organizing tools of human experience and not as means of understanding the contradictions that govern reality itself, or, in other words, they are presented as relating exclusively to the processes of the mind and its progress towards absolute equilibrium.

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Biography

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