



From Proletkult to Epistemic Politics: Commentary on Bogdanov's Theses on Proletarian Science (1918)

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ABSTRACT: In September 1918, Alexander Bogdanov presented 14 theses on “Science and the Working Class” to the Proletkult movement, arguing that the institutional organization of science and the politics of knowledge cannot be separated, and that the class character of science shows in all disciplines—or in science (*nauka*) in general. This article presents a political-epistemological reading of the theses, arguing that they still have something to say to us today, even though (and because) Bogdanov works with the distinction between given bourgeois and a projected proletarian science. His diagnosis that science often separates knowledge from its basis in collective labor, fetishizes its own schemas as autonomous and neutral, and fragments into specialisms that lose sight of their social coordination concerns structural features of the organization of science we still face. His diagnosis remains productive well beyond its epistemological or metaphysical background and the Soviet context: it anticipates, and can sharpen, current debates about open science, epistemic justice, and the social orientation of the sciences, where the same tension recurs between science's claim to neutrality and the concrete interests, exclusions, and forms of ownership that shape what counts as knowledge and who gets to produce it. In other words, Bogdanov's analysis touches on basic issues of a Marxist critique of the sciences. Read this way, Bogdanov's theses contribute to our understanding not as a historical curiosity but as an unresolved question about the ideal and organization of the sciences and their social orientation.

KEYWORDS: Proletkult, social orientation of science, epistemic politics, political epistemology, scientific pluralism, class reproduction and its overcoming

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1. Introduction

In 1918, just a few months after the October Revolution, Alexander Bogdanov presented his view of the task of developing science under socialism in two texts both titled “Science and the Working Class” (see Şenalp and Bogdanov 2026). In the revolutionary context he tries to bring in his ideas on what we call today science policy and epistemic politics. In short, Bogdanov claims here that the institutional organization of science and the politics of knowledge (or epistemic politics) cannot be separated and he is calling for developing a proletarian approach to science education and organization. His argument was embedded in the project of Proletkult, which itself drew inspiration from different sources, like workers education and other earlier ideas of Bogdanov and his associates, among them the first “Commissar of Enlightenment,” Anatoly Lunacharsky, who supported Bogdanov’s ideas while trying to balance out the political tensions with Lenin and other leading Bolsheviks.

Bogdanov presented two distinct texts under the same title: a rather discursive February lecture that builds its case through an extended case study of astronomy, and the more compact September theses, which compress this argument into propositional, programmatic form. I will concentrate here on these theses, considering the February article (a good example of Bogdanov’s talent as an advocate and educator of science) rather as providing illustration and particular elaboration.

In this journal we have published translations of both texts by Bogdanov and discussed them. Now, we would like to open up the discussion to everyone. My stance is the following: while Kircz (in this issue) criticizes Bogdanov’s notion of “proletarian science” in a rhapsodic way along the lines of a critique of the idea of a “cultural revolution,” the conceived errors of empiriomonism, and Bogdanov’s shortcomings in terms of the connection of value-form and scientific knowledge, I claim that this doesn’t do justice to the content of Bogdanov’s theses, which is much more concrete and practical, or in one word Marxist. Kircz in his criticism of Bogdanov’s notion of “proletarian science” disregards this aspect and could refer to his accordance with the well-known criticisms of Lenin (in 1908 and in 1920) and Trotsky (1924),¹ but he doesn’t discuss

1. See Lenin 1972 and 1965 resp. Trotsky argues that “a distinct, fully formed proletarian culture could never exist under capitalism or during the transitional socialist phase, because the working class’s historic task is precisely to abolish class society, not to create a new class culture” (Trotsky 1924, chap. 6). While he is certainly right with his statement concerning the abolishment of class culture, his argument actually involves a gap, since the latter statement does not provide a complete reason for the

them in detail and mixes up the conceptual and practical levels involved (from metaphysics and epistemology to cultural politics and strategy) almost to the degree of misrepresentation. While Lenin and Trotsky both had some good reasons for their criticism, I fail to see the reasons in Kircz' attempt and thus have to reject it as misplaced. My argument is that Bogdanov's claims should be assessed not only in light of his philosophical works or Lenin's and Trotsky's criticisms, but first and foremost as an analysis of the ideal and the institution(s) of Science as such (capital S, in the more encompassing sense of *nauka* and *Wissenschaft*), and as part of a common Marxist tradition. I will illustrate this by drawing on several fields of contemporary debates about epistemic politics, to show that 'aitiological' readings² confine Bogdanov's ideas to their deviance in terms of the party line (a tricky thing in the Soviet context), whereas they may in fact touch upon a basic issue of emancipation beyond their context—even today. What is and how do we make accessible to everyone a truly scientific education? Is there just one way or do we necessarily need different ones? How do affirmative action and universal emancipation work together? Who educates the educators, etc.? Since I cannot cover all implications of the theses, I will concentrate on those aspects which seem to be the most virulent.

My reason to not elaborate here on counter-criticism very much is that the following is rather meant as an introduction to the arguments and context of the 14 September theses, in order to give a basis for discussion and to provide the incentive for further debate. In other words,

former claim. The claim concerning a "fully formed proletarian culture" just shows the contradiction involved in some of Proletkult's more extreme ambitions. Bogdanov can indeed be read along those lines (see Soboleva 2021). We can take it as caveat against some exaggerated ideas of Proletkult, which are in danger of creating exactly what it tries to abolish. However, it seems to me that this is precisely the all-too real contradiction involved in the whole Soviet project once the need to gain control of the state apparatus is on the agenda (where Trotsky played himself a contradictory role—as long as he was involved): education in terms of empowerment (particular) and of enlightenment (universal) at the same time.

2. Apart from Kircz see also Potamias 2026. The perceived epistemological and metaphysical shortcomings of Bogdanov's view should not automatically disqualify all that he says. In the end, we are discussing the merits and flaws of Bogdanov's analysis of science in the theses here. A different kind of criticism was that of Evald Ilyenkov, which is discussed in Lotz 2024 and Ervin 2026. The latter presents his reaction to Bogdanov's *Red Star* in the context of Ilyenkov's defense of Leninist dialectics. That reaction, I think, is important and also touches on Bogdanov's understanding of science but again aims rather at some basic and general aspect, namely technocratic ideas and the positivist image(s) of knowledge in general.

I would like to give my reading of the theses. May the readers judge for themselves and correct us!

The commentary proceeds as follows. §2 sketches the historical context and the institutional structure of Proletkult. §3 gives a short overview of Bogdanov's arguments, focusing on the fourteen theses presented to the Proletkult Congress. §4 presents the political-epistemological tensions involved and discusses the advantages and disadvantages of Bogdanov's view of science in general. §5, finally, shows its relevance—in both strengths and weaknesses—for contemporary debates on epistemic politics, such as the “Open Science” and perspectives ranging from epistemological pluralism to radical science movements (e.g., Rose and Rose 1976; Ienna and Freyberg 2023). In the end, Bogdanov's arguments and his vision of the social orientation of scientific research and organization for “Proletarian science” rests on a Marxist analysis of “bourgeois science,” an analysis which identified crucial issues and contradictions that still concern us today. Reading the theses now means to provide a transparent translation into contemporary contexts, which, I think, is valid for all socialist heritage, if we want to learn from and appropriate it in a reasonable, multidimensional, if not scientific way. In the end my argument is that we should discern the common Marxist problems³ still in effect today and not discuss in abstracto and thin air.

2. Historical and Organizational Context

The Proletkult (Proletarian Cultural and Educational Organizations) began as a loose coalition of clubs, factory committees, workers' theaters, and educational societies devoted to the cultural needs of the working class, first taking shape in Petrograd in 1917, just a few days before the October Revolution. An organizing conference of proletarian cultural-educational organizations met in the Petrograd city дума in mid-October 1917, one week before the storming of the Winter Palace, bringing together some two hundred workers and intellectuals under the chairmanship of Anatoly Lunacharsky. It was at the close of this conference that the organization's secretary, Vasilii Ignatov, coined the abbreviation “Proletkult” (Mally 1990, 27–30). The movement was

3. It should be noted that Bogdanov upheld positions which were not that uncommon among Marxists as both critics and adepts may want. Simona Poustilnik has noted that e.g. German Marxist and biologist Julius Schaxel (1887–1943) “last student of Ernst Haeckel, distinguished ‘bourgeois science’ from science as part of ‘proletarian culture.’ [...] In a manner similar to Bogdanov, he talked about science as socialist form of knowledge” (in Oittinen 2009, 133).

instrumental in literacy campaign and widely influential during the first years of the Soviet Union.⁴

By February 1918, Bogdanov had helped organize a founding conference for a Moscow Proletkult, where delegates staked out an ambitious range of competences extending from workers' hygiene to a proposed proletarian university (Mally 1990, 40–41). The First All-Russian Conference in September 1918 then marked the founding of the national organization: 330 delegates and 234 guests convened in Moscow, meeting in the auditorium of the Women's Higher Courses during one of the most difficult stages of the Civil War, only two weeks after an assassination attempt on Lenin (Mally 1990, 45–46). The conference elected Pavel Lebedev-Polianskii as the first national president, with Fedor Kalinin and Aleksei Samobytnik-Mashirov as vice-presidents and Vasili Ignatov as secretary; Bogdanov himself was chosen for the Central Committee and for the editorial board of the journal *Proletarian Culture* (Mally 1990, 49). Kalinin, a metalworker and autodidact from Bogdanov's earlier Vpered circle, simultaneously headed the Division for Proletarian Culture within the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkompros), which Lunacharsky led since 1917 (Mally 1990, 41–42).

The organizational structure of Proletkult was rather ambiguous with respect to the state. In the first half of 1918 alone, Narkompros allocated the organization a budget of more than 9,200,000 rubles—compared with 32,500,000 rubles for the Commissariat's entire Adult Education Division—yet Proletkult's leadership consistently insisted on institutional autonomy from Narkompros and, implicitly, from the Communist Party as well. Proletkult theorists compared the organization to a laboratory operating in parallel to the party: "The proletariat's cultural-educational organizations are also laboratories to realize the revolutionary-cultural program of the proletariat" (quoted in Mally 1990,

4. Proletkult with all its particularities was a crystallization of different emancipatory genealogies in tension (Marxist, socialist, industrial as well as general labour-movement, narodnik perspectives, etc.). Under extreme scarcity and civil war conditions the work done in just a few years is astonishing and had a lasting effect on Soviet culture even though it included also problematic perspectives and was officially discontinued. Needless to say that the issues Proletkult addressed in different fields did not just go away. The idea of the self-organisation of labor—a basic idea of Bogdanov—was somehow institutionalized but in effect given up. Later Yugoslavia and other socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe experimented with similar models of the self-organization of labour and production. On a smaller scale self-organization was much more common than usually is presented in the official social histories of real existing socialism.

43). This claim to autonomy (*samostoiatel'nost'*) rested on the conviction that state institutions, unlike Proletkult itself, had to serve the needs of non-proletarian classes as well and were therefore unreliable custodians of a specifically proletarian culture (Mally 1990, 37–38).

This claim to autonomy should not be mistaken for straightforward opposition to the Communist Party as such: over half the delegates at the 1918 conference, and roughly two-thirds by 1920, were party members, and Lebedev-Polianskii himself argued that Proletkult would sooner accept subordination to the party than to Narkompros (Mally 1990, 39–40, xxi). Growth was extremely rapid: the center already listed 147 local affiliates by the end of 1918, and by the autumn of 1920 the national organization counted some three hundred Proletkults across Soviet territory, claiming roughly four hundred thousand members at its peak—though provincial journals sometimes cited even larger, less reliable figures (Mally 1990, 51–52, xix).

Bogdanov's role in Proletkult must be understood against the background of the "left Bolshevik" opposition that formed after the defeat of the 1905 Revolution. Lenin argued that Social Democrats should participate in legal parliamentary channels; Bogdanov and his allies—including Anatoly Lunacharsky, Maxim Gorky, and Pavel Lebedev-Polianskii—held that the revolutionary struggle should continue underground, and, more fundamentally, that Lenin's rigid materialism gave culture and ideology too small a role in Marxist theory (Mally 1990, 3–5). In 1908, Lenin attacked this reinterpretation of Marxism in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, and shortly afterward ousted Bogdanov from the Bolshevik faction (Mally 1990, 7).

The 'left Bolsheviks' translated their critique into a concrete pedagogical project: exile schools for worker-cadres on Capri (1909) and in Bologna (1910–1911), where thirteen worker-students elected from party committees studied under teachers including Gorky, Bogdanov, Lunacharsky, and the historian Mikhail Pokrovsky. At the close of the Capri school, participants formed the *Vpered* ("Forward") circle; its founding platform, written by Bogdanov, declared: "Using the old bourgeois culture, create a new proletarian one opposed to the old and spread it to the masses. Develop a proletarian science, strengthen authentic comradely relations in the proletarian milieu, devise a proletarian philosophy, and turn art in the direction of proletarian aspirations and experience" (quoted in Mally 1990, 8).

Crucially for understanding the tension between vanguard and mass orientations, Bogdanov's prerevolutionary institutions were explicitly

conceived as cadre training rather than mass education. However, the cadres were workers returning to the production sites eventually. Bogdanov's perspective on self-organization of labour had to integrate both, but needed a plan. Mally observes that the Capri-type "proletarian universities" Bogdanov proposed "would be open to the most sophisticated representatives of the working class," who were to form a new proletarian intelligentsia and only then "begin the task of organizing the broad mass of workers"; his program, she concludes, "was essentially an exclusive one; he was not proposing methods for mass education," but rather sought to ensure that Bolshevism's vanguard came from the proletariat itself (Mally 1990, 9). This orientation persisted into the Proletkult period and stood in tension with the movement's later self-description as a mass organization of several hundred thousand members.

As we have mentioned and Mally as well as Soboleva (2007, 2021) have observed, Proletkult was far from a unified bloc with one single ideology. Instead of labeling the project "utopian" or "romantic," as Kircz does, it is much more important to see what the function of Bogdanov's interventions in Proletkult amount to, namely making an attempt of building or forming (that is developing and not prescribing) conditions to make a different kind of science and of science education possible. The real challenge, as Soboleva (2021) puts it, is that

Bogdanov moves the revolutionary problems from the field of economy into the field of ideological structure. These ideas can be evaluated as modernization of Marxism. Instead of the proletarian revolution, Bogdanov drafts in his texts on proletarian culture a programme of the proletarian evolution. To Marx, "communist consciousness" was a product of the social revolution, not its prerequisite. To Bogdanov, proletarian culture is, on the contrary, not a consequence but a condition of socialist modernization of society.

This seems to me a point worthy of translation and discussion.

At the September 1918 conference, Bogdanov expounded on "the need for a proletarian science," a topic he had already developed at length before the revolution. To realize this goal, he proposed "a special proletarian university where participants would fashion a proletarian encyclopedia, codifying working-class knowledge in the same way that the eighteenth-century French encyclopedia had done for the bourgeoisie" (Mally 1990, 47–48). Bogdanov's theses "Science and the Working Class" were closely tied to this institutional program: an earlier version of the argument had already been presented at the Moscow Proletkult's February 1918 founding conference, and it was elaborated further in the pages of the new journal *Proletarian Culture* (*Proletarskaia kul'tura*),

which served as the movement's principal theoretical organ from March 1918 onward (Mally 1990, 42).

The conference itself adopted resolutions establishing science, alongside art and everyday life, as one of the central domains of proletarian cultural construction. The demands articulated there—for a Workers' University and a Workers' Encyclopedia to codify and reorganize scientific knowledge from the standpoint of collective labor—were not abstract proposals but led directly to institutional experiments, including the founding of a Proletarian University in Moscow in the following years (Mally 1990, 47–48). Bogdanov's Central Committee membership and editorial role placed him at the intellectual center of this program even though the organization's presidency belonged to Lebedev-Polianskii (Mally 1990, 49).

3. Arguments of the Theses

3.1 Universal Class Character (Theses 1–2)

Bogdanov's first thesis makes a claim that distinguishes his position from more moderate attempts to identify ideology in science. He argues that an actually existing science may be bourgeois or proletarian “by its very ‘nature,’” in terms of its origin, point of view, and the methods by which it is elaborated and explained. Crucially, he extends this analysis beyond the social sciences: “all the sciences, not only the social sciences but all the other sciences, including mathematics and logic, may be said to have, and actually do have, a class character” (Bogdanov 1918, thesis 1).

This universalization of class character was a hot topic of the early years of the Soviet Union, where as e.g. Mikhail Lifshitz observed, ‘vulgar sociologism’ reigned, and historical materialism was often taught in the sense that the class of agents was seen as all-decisive. It is clear, that this is an extreme position and it is important to note that also the other pole was present in the Soviet debates, namely that of keeping apart class and works, or ideology and objectivity completely. This view also distinguished, e.g. between natural sciences (potentially objective) and social sciences (inherently ideological). However, Bogdanov's second thesis explains this through the concept of science as “organized, collective experience” serving as an “instrument of the organization of the life of society.” Bourgeois science has been developed primarily by representatives of the bourgeois intelligentsia, who have concentrated in it the material experience available to the bourgeois classes, understood and interpreted it from the point of view of those classes, and thereby

produced a science that “has served and continues to serve as an instrument of the bourgeois structuring of society” (Bogdanov 1918, thesis 2).

3.2 The Problem of Abstraction from Labor (Theses 3–4)

Theses 3 and 4 develop Bogdanov’s most penetrating critique of bourgeois science: its “fundamental limitation of point of view” derived from “the separation of science from its real basis: social labour.” This separation originates in the differentiation between mental and physical labor, which renders invisible, for the bourgeois classes, “the indissoluble link between practice and theory in the social process as an integral whole.” Having been educated to think in terms of private property and market competition, the bourgeois classes acquire an individualistic consciousness that makes the social nature of science incomprehensible to them (Bogdanov 1918, theses 3–4).

For bourgeois consciousness, knowledge is “something in itself, even something that is opposed to practice, something that is of an ‘ideal’ or ‘logical’ nature.” Bogdanov terms this the “abstract fetishism of knowledge”—a concept that parallels Marx’s commodity fetishism but locates it specifically in the realm of epistemology (Bogdanov 1918, thesis 4). This fetishism prevents bourgeois science from recognizing that knowledge has arisen out of practical activity and is acquired in order to be used in practical activity.

3.3 Fragmentation and the Lack of Coordination (Theses 5–6)

Theses 5 and 6 diagnose a structural problem in bourgeois science that extends beyond epistemology to organization: the tendency toward ever-increasing specialization. Science became “fragmented into branches that increased in number and diverged at the expense of vital interactions between these branches.” The individualistic separation of people accentuated this process, resulting in “a huge loss of coordination in science just as there was a loss of coordination in capitalist society” (Bogdanov 1918, thesis 5).

The consequences are severe: each specialism develops its own language, incomprehensible not only to the masses but even to scientists in other fields. Methods penetrate from one branch to another only “with much delay and difficulty,” producing a “narrow, professional outlook” that weakens creative activity (Bogdanov 1918, thesis 6). While machine production stimulated some trend toward methodological unification, Bogdanov argues this cannot succeed as long as the fundamental divide between the individual branches of science remains.

3.4 *The Barrier to Proletarian Access (Thesis 7)*

Thesis 7 addresses a problem that remains urgent today: the social barriers to scientific participation. Bourgeois science, with its “laborious, obscure and complicated professional language,” is scarcely accessible to the working class and, as a commodity in capitalist society, sells at a high price. But Bogdanov identifies a more complicated problem: even when individual proletarians manage to master a scientific field through enormous expenditure of energy, the class character of science reasserts itself. The gulf between science and collective work produces “an estrangement in their lives from the interests and mentality of the working community from which they emerged” (Bogdanov 1918, thesis 7).

3.5 *The Proletarian Task: Reinterpretation and Reorganization (Theses 8–11)*

Thesis 8 articulates the working class’s specific tasks: science must be reinterpreted from a proletarian point of view, both in content and in the form in which it is taught, and there must be “the creation of a new organization, both for the elaboration of science and for the dissemination of scientific knowledge amongst the working masses.” Importantly, Bogdanov acknowledges that in most branches of science, accomplishing these tasks will entail “a methodical assimilation of the legacy of the old world,” while some branches will need profound and far-reaching innovation (Bogdanov 1918, thesis 8).

Thesis 9 specifies what reinterpretation means: the material of science must be understood as the practical experience of humanity, and its schemas, conclusions, and formulae must be seen as tools for organizing the entire social practice of people. Bogdanov offers concrete examples: astronomy as the science of orienting work processes in time and space; physics as the science of the resistances encountered in collective labor; physiology as the science of labor power; logic as the theory of the social harmonization of ideas (Bogdanov 1918, thesis 9).

Thesis 10 announces an ambitious goal: overcoming scientific fragmentation through unity of scientific language and a convergence of methods across branches of knowledge and practice, so that “a total monistic system can be developed, comprising both domains.” This would be realized in a “universal organizational science”—Bogdanov’s *Tektology*—needed by the proletariat as the future organizer of the whole life of humanity (Bogdanov 1918, thesis 10). Thesis 11 addresses pedagogi-

cal simplification without prejudice to substance, achieved partly by discarding scholastic ballast and partly as a natural consequence of liberating science from the abstract fetishism that generated “so many pseudo-problems and unnecessary stratagems” (Bogdanov 1918, thesis 11).

3.6 Institutional Proposals: Workers’ University and Encyclopedia (Theses 12–14)

The final theses propose concrete institutional forms, to be realized through the Workers’ University and Workers’ Encyclopedia (Bogdanov 1918, thesis 12). The Workers’ University was envisioned as a system of cultural-educational institutions operating at various levels and culminating in a single center for the training and organization of scientific forces. Crucially, “the basic form of relationship between teachers and students should be comradely co-operation,” in which the competence of the former does not justify an unaccountable exercise of authority, and the trustfulness of the latter does not degenerate into passivity. The principal goal of teaching should be a mastery of methods (Bogdanov 1918, thesis 13). Thesis 14 directs the university’s publishing activity toward creating a Workers’ Encyclopedia—not a mere compilation of scientific findings, but a harmoniously organized system explaining the methods of practice and cognition and the vital links between them (Bogdanov 1918, thesis 14).

4. Critique and Political-Epistemological Tensions

The conflict between Bogdanov and Lenin ran deeper than organizational politics; it involved fundamentally incompatible epistemologies. Lenin’s 1908–1909 *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* had already attacked Bogdanov’s philosophical position, developed from the ideas of Ernst Mach and Richard Avenarius, as subjective idealism, and this dispute directly preceded Lenin’s move to expel Bogdanov from the Bolshevik faction (Lenin 1972; Mally 1990, 5–7; Bakhurst 2018; see also the essays collected in Oittinen 2009). Lenin insisted that science discovers objective realities existing independently of human consciousness or class position; Bogdanov’s claim that even mathematics and logic possess class character appeared, from this standpoint, not merely mistaken but anti-materialist.

Bogdanov’s position, by contrast, emphasized science as collective human practice. While this approach resonates with later developments in the sociology of scientific knowledge and practice-based epistemology

(Bloor 1976; Longino 1990; Pickering 1995; Rouse 1987), it raised genuine questions about whether scientific claims could be adjudicated independently of social interests.

This epistemological divide produced divergent political strategies. Lenin's position, articulated in the draft resolution he prepared for the First All-Russian Proletkult Congress in October 1920, insisted on "the development of the best models, traditions and results of the existing culture, from the point of view of the Marxist world outlook and the conditions of life and struggle of the proletariat in the period of its dictatorship." Marxism, the draft continued, had won its historic significance as the ideology of the revolutionary proletariat precisely because, "far from rejecting the most valuable achievements of the bourgeois epoch," it had assimilated and refashioned everything of value in the development of human thought and culture (Lenin 1965, 316–317). The task was critical appropriation, not reconstruction from scratch.

For Lenin, the urgency of socialist construction demanded immediate utilization of existing scientific and technical knowledge; the new Soviet state could not wait decades for a new "proletarian science" to be elaborated. Bogdanov's strategy appeared dangerously utopian from this perspective. His insistence that individual proletarians who mastered bourgeois science risked estrangement from their class implied that technical education itself could threaten revolutionary consciousness, while his vision of reconstructing all sciences from a collective labor standpoint suggested a decades-long cultural project that would divert energy from immediate material tasks.

The organizational question crystallized these deeper tensions. Proletkult's claim to *autonomy* directly challenged the Leninist principle of *party hegemony* over all aspects of revolutionary transformation. The First All-Russian Proletkult Congress, meeting in Moscow from October 5 to 12, 1920, became the site of decisive confrontation. On October 8, *Izvestia* reported that Lunacharsky, addressing the Congress, had promised Proletkult a special status and complete autonomy—a position Lenin had explicitly instructed him not to take. Lunacharsky later recalled: "Vladimir Ilyich instructed me to attend it and pointed out quite definitely that Proletcult should be subordinated to the People's Commissariat of Education... He summoned me and gave me a good talking-to" (quoted in Lenin 1965, 317 n2).

Lenin then drafted a resolution, discussed by the Politburo of the Central Committee on October 9 and 11, which the Congress adopted unanimously. It categorically rejected "all attempts to invent one's own

particular brand of culture, to remain isolated in self-contained organisations, to draw a line dividing the field of work of the People's Commissariat of Education and the Proletkult, or to set up a Proletkult 'autonomy' within establishments under the People's Commissariat of Education." Instead, all Proletkult organizations were obliged to consider themselves "auxiliary bodies of the network of establishments under the People's Commissariat of Education," fulfilling their tasks under the general guidance of the Soviet authorities and the Communist Party as part of the tasks of the proletarian dictatorship (Lenin 1965, 316–317).

Following the Politburo's decision, the Chief Committee for Political Education drafted instructions governing relations between Proletkult and Narkompros, which the Central Committee's plenary session endorsed on November 10, 1920. A further letter from the Central Committee, "On Proletkult Organizations," published in *Pravda* on December 1, 1920, gave a detailed critique of the movement's errors (Lenin 1965, 317 n1).

Bogdanov's departure from Proletkult and politics tout court occurred gradually over the following months. In a 1925 autobiographical sketch, he wrote: "In the autumn of 1921 my work in the Proletkult came to an end and I devoted myself exclusively to scientific work" (quoted in Biggart and Bulgakowa 2021, 76).

However, in the summer of 1923, Soviet secret police arrested Bogdanov on suspicion of having inspired the clandestine opposition group "Workers' Truth"; he was interrogated and released after roughly five weeks (Biggart and Bulgakowa 2021, 76). The episode appears to have confirmed, rather than caused, a withdrawal from politics that had already been underway since 1921. Bogdanov devoted his remaining years increasingly to blood transfusion research, founding the Institute for Blood Transfusion in Moscow in 1926 and dying in 1928 after a transfusion experiment on himself went fatally wrong (Krementsov 2011).

From today's view it seems to me that Bogdanov's diagnosis of the separation between science and labor as a fundamental epistemological problem anticipates sophisticated later analyses. His concept of the "abstract fetishism of knowledge" identifies a real ideological structure in which science appears autonomous from social practice—an insight developed by subsequent traditions including the sociology of scientific knowledge (Bloor 1976), feminist epistemology (Harding 1986), and science and technology studies.

Second, his analysis of scientific fragmentation and loss of coordination remains remarkably prescient given the acute hyperspecialization and disciplinary silos of contemporary science (Frodeman, Klein, and Pacheco 2017). Third, Bogdanov correctly identified social barriers to scientific participation as not merely economic but epistemological and cultural; his observation that proletarians who master bourgeois science risk estrangement from their communities anticipates contemporary discussions of epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007). Fourth, his pedagogical proposals—the emphasis on comradely cooperation rather than hierarchical authority, and on mastery of methods rather than memorization of facts—anticipate progressive educational theory. Finally, his insistence that the organization of science profoundly affects its content aligns with contemporary emphasis on research infrastructures and institutional design (Edwards 2010).

Bogdanov's extension of class character to all sciences, including mathematics and logic, raises serious philosophical problems. The claim that mathematical truths themselves are class-specific is difficult to sustain and made the argument vulnerable to *reductio ad absurdum*. Also, the strategy of comprehensive reconstruction rather than critical appropriation was strategically questionable: Bogdanov's own acknowledgment that "in most branches" the task would be methodical assimilation of the old world's legacy (Bogdanov 1918, thesis 8) sits uneasily with his more radical universal claims.

The vision of a "universal organizational science" creating a "total monistic system" (Bogdanov 1918, thesis 10) is epistemologically questionable (as also Kircz notes), especially when we see it in the light of the emphasis contemporary philosophy of science places on scientific and theoretical pluralism (Kellert, Longino, and Waters 2006). Bogdanov's institutional proposals, while innovative, provided no clear mechanisms for addressing disagreement or preventing new hierarchies from emerging within nominally egalitarian structures, as the later history of Soviet institutions would demonstrate (Fitzpatrick 1999; on Ilyenkov's critique see Lotz 2024). Perhaps most importantly, the very notion of "proletarian science" risked essentializing class identity in ways that could be, and later were, weaponized for political persecution under Stalin (Graham 1993)—a possibility Mally notes was already latent in the movement's own internal debates over how expansively or exclusively to define its proletarian constituency (Mally 1990, xxvi).

A critical limitation in Bogdanov's theses is their apparent focus on industrial labor. His references to "collective labor," "the working class,"

and the “proletarian standpoint” evoke primarily the factory worker engaged in material production—though it is worth noting that Mally shows Proletkult members themselves never agreed on this point: some understood the proletariat narrowly as the industrial working class, while others, echoing the Populist tradition, extended it to the whole laboring *narod*, welcoming typists, house painters, and peasants without any sense of contradiction (Mally 1990, xxv). Yet as Engels noted in his 1888 footnote to the Communist Manifesto, “By proletariat is meant the class of modern wage-labourers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labour-power in order to live” (Marx and Engels 1998, 34). This definition encompasses far more than industrial workers: it includes all who must sell their labor power—service workers, care workers, knowledge workers, precarious gig workers, the growing multitude of waged masses under contemporary capitalism.

If we take this expanded definition seriously, what becomes of “proletarian science”? The answer shifts the emphasis from a specific class location (the factory) to a fundamental social relationship: the separation of the producers from control over the conditions and products of their labor. Proletarian science, in this expanded sense, would not be science specifically oriented toward industrial production but science oriented toward collective self-organization against the alienation inherent in wage labor itself. The “proletarian standpoint” is not the viewpoint of a particular occupation but the perspective of those who experience the separation of knowledge from collective control, the expropriation of social intelligence, the transformation of human capacities into means serving purposes determined elsewhere.

This reformulation helps clarify what is at stake in Bogdanov’s argument. The core issue is not whether scientists come from working-class backgrounds or whether research serves industrial productivity. Rather, it concerns the social orientation of science: Does scientific practice serve to consolidate the separation between those who know and those who labor, between conception and execution, between expert authority and collective experience? Or does it work to overcome these separations by making methodological literacy accessible, by democratizing participation in knowledge production, by reconnecting abstract schemas to the practical experience from which they arose? Understood this way, “proletarian science” names not a class-essentialist epistemology but a mode of organizing scientific practice that resists the fetishization and privatization of collective intelligence.

This reading gets significant when we recognize that contemporary capitalism has generalized the proletarian condition far beyond the factory. Knowledge work, affective labor, digital labor, platform labor—all share the fundamental structure of selling labor power while remaining separated from control over the broader systems within which that labor is embedded. Teachers implement curricula they did not design; programmers execute specifications they did not determine; care workers follow protocols they cannot revise; platform workers are coordinated by algorithms they cannot inspect. Bogdanov’s insistence on overcoming the separation between science and collective labor thus speaks directly to these contemporary conditions. The question is not only who has access to scientific careers but who controls the organizational schemas—the models, protocols, algorithms, standards—that structure social practice across all domains of wage labor.

5. Contemporary Connections

5.1 *Artificial Intelligence and the Technosphere*

Bogdanov’s conception of science acquires striking contemporary relevance once we recognize that modern technoscience—particularly data-driven modeling, algorithmic systems, and artificial intelligence—operates (seemingly) as he described: as organized collective experience serving as an instrument for organizing social life. Machine-learning models, economic simulations, and algorithmic decision systems could be seen as condensations of collective social experience and practice—language, behavior, judgment—translated into operational schemas that orient and reorganize society (cf. Pasquinelli 2023 on the “general intellect” and the machinic organization of collective labor). The decisive question is therefore not whether these systems are “true” or “accurate” in some abstract sense, but how, by whom, and for what purposes collective experience is being organized.

His claim that science may be “bourgeois or proletarian by its very ‘nature’... in terms of its origin, its point of view, and the methods by which it is elaborated” (Bogdanov 1918, thesis 1) applies directly to contemporary AI and economic modeling. The class character does not lie primarily in biased results or discriminatory outputs but in problem selection, data ownership, methodological priorities, and institutional control (Noble 2018; O’Neil 2016). What today appears as the neutrality of “the model” or “the algorithm” exemplifies precisely what Bogdanov called the “abstract fetishism of knowledge”—the tendency to treat schemas as autonomous entities standing above practice rather than as tools

arising from and for practice (cf. the Mertonian norm of disinterestedness in Merton 1942/1973). This fetishism intensifies under digital capitalism, where collective social intelligence is expropriated, formalized, and returned to society as an apparently objective and authoritative force governing work, markets, and administration (Pasquale 2015; Zuboff 2019).

5.2 The Praxeological Character of Bogdanov's Theses

A decisive feature of Bogdanov's theses, often underestimated in later receptions, is their explicitly praxeological character. Science is not merely about practice; it is itself a mode of practice, a specific form of social labor whose products intervene back into the organization of collective life. His call for the Workers' University and Workers' Encyclopedia were not merely pedagogical projects but organizational technologies designed to restructure how knowledge is produced, shared, and coordinated (Bogdanov 1918, theses 12–14; Mally 1990, 47–48).

From a contemporary standpoint, this praxeological thrust becomes particularly salient in relation to data-driven science, AI, and economic modeling. Today, Bogdanov's concrete measures would translate into several interrelated interventions: public and collective infrastructures for model-building and data governance, built through participatory processes accountable to those whose experience they formalize (Costanza-Chock 2020); participatory forms of scientific and technological design, in which those whose labor is coordinated by algorithms help design the systems that organize their work; open and revisable model repositories that make computational models, training datasets, and algorithmic systems transparent and subject to collective revision (Gebru et al. 2021); and educational institutions oriented toward methodological literacy rather than proprietary expertise.

Bogdanov's praxeology offers neither technophobic rejection of modern science nor naive solutionism. The problem is not models, algorithms, or automation as such but their social form: whether they remain fetishized instruments of alien administration or become conscious tools of collective self-organization. Many current reform proposals accept the existing separation between technical development and social use, seeking only to make systems "fairer" or more "transparent" while leaving intact the fundamental structure in which collective intelligence is expropriated and returned as external authority (Moro-

zov 2013). Bogdanov's theses suggest a more fundamental transformation: reconnecting the production of organizational schemas to collective practice.

5.3 *Open Science and Epistemic Justice*

Sabina Leonelli's 2023 critique of open science reveals striking parallels with Bogdanov's 1918 analysis. Leonelli shows that "despite the good intentions and the vast efforts committed to their actualization, OS initiatives are fraught with difficulties" (Leonelli 2023, 4), not least because they operate within a research system shaped by commodification (Leonelli 2023, 14; 48) and the political economy of publishing. She argues that the interpretation of "openness as sharing" rests on an "object-oriented view of science" (43–44), and that the standardization demanded by some OS initiatives "threatens to blindly privilege specific ways of knowing, thus potentially disrupting sophisticated methodologies, inadvertently dismissing well-established research traditions, and exacerbating the already large epistemic and social divides separating research domains and locations" (5). She proposes instead "a conception of openness as judicious connection, which is grounded in a process-oriented epistemology of science that recognizes the situated, embodied and goal-directed nature of communication and collaboration among researchers" (8). Moreover, Leonelli identifies how open science initiatives can reinforce existing inequalities. Data-sharing regimes premised on high-tech infrastructure can result in "the exclusion from data sharing initiatives of researchers who are not based at prestigious academic institutions" (22), and author-pays models of Open Access are "likely to exasperate existing vulnerabilities and divides among prospective authors" (69). At the same time, "commercial innovation is among the favoured outcomes of the free use of research components facilitated by OS," with OS encouraged "particularly within publicly funded research, with the expectation that downstream application of the resulting solutions may well be patented and commercialized for exclusive use of specific providers" (16). This dynamic, public goods privatized for profit, represents a contemporary form of what Bogdanov analyzed as science serving as an instrument of bourgeois structuring. The "openness" is more often than not purely formal, while, as Leonelli points out, the purpose of sharing objects "is not simply to convey information, but rather to facilitate human agency" (52).

5.4 Epistemic Justice and Participatory Research

Bogdanov's Thesis 7—warning that proletarians who master bourgeois science become estranged from their communities—anticipates contemporary discussions of epistemic injustice. Miranda Fricker's influential framework distinguishes testimonial injustice (credibility deficits due to prejudice) from hermeneutical injustice (lack of conceptual resources to articulate one's experience) (Fricker 2007). Community-Based Participatory Research attempts to address such questions by involving community members throughout the research process (Wallerstein and Duran 2006), though it also reveals tensions Bogdanov did not fully resolve: power imbalances persist even in ostensibly participatory structures, and academic partners often retain ultimate control over research design and publication.

5.5 Scientific Fragmentation and the Need for Integration

Bogdanov's diagnosis of scientific fragmentation has only intensified under conditions of exponential growth in specialized subdisciplines (Frodeman, Klein, and Pacheco 2017). However, his proposed solution—a universal organizational science creating a monistic system—now appears problematic. Contemporary philosophy of science generally embraces theoretical pluralism, recognizing that different explanatory frameworks may be appropriate for different phenomena (Kellert, Longino, and Waters 2006). Nevertheless, his point about disintegration remains valid, given that the capilist setting is necessarily constraining and hindering certain epistemic values (as e.g. in open access, or as Merton put it “the communism of science”) and self-reflection to become consequential (see also Sheehan 2026).

5.6 Global Inequalities, Colonial Legacies, Commodification

Bogdanov's framework focused on class, but contemporary debates about epistemic justice necessarily engage race, gender, colonialism, and global inequality. Bibliometric research evaluation systems produce geopolitical knowledge inequality, with continued Euro-American dominance in scientific content reproducing old North/South and West/East hierarchies (Chavarro, Tang, and Ràfols 2017). Indigenous knowledge systems face systematic marginalization in supposedly universal science (Smith 2012). These intersecting forms of epistemic injustice suggest that Bogdanov's analysis, while pioneering, was too narrow: a truly democratic science must address not only class but colonial legacies, racial hierarchies, and gender exclusions.

Bogdanov's observation that science had become a commodity in capitalist society remains profoundly relevant. Contemporary academic science is increasingly shaped by market logics, with knowledge patented and commercialized and pharmaceutical companies controlling access to life-saving medicines through intellectual property regimes (Mirowski 2011; Radder 2010, 2019). The corporate capture of scientific research extends beyond direct funding to shape research agendas and suppress unfavorable findings (Oreskes and Conway 2010), vindicating Bogdanov's core insight that one cannot separate science's epistemic content from the social interests it serves. It has to be noted, of course, that all the contemporary connections mentioned are embedded in a completely different setting from that of Bogdanov, which was in context, aim and scope revolutionary. The aim here was to discuss what we can learn from that story.

6. Conclusion

So, what practical lessons can contemporary movements for epistemic justice and radical science draw from Bogdanov's theses and the historical experience of Proletkult? First, institutional autonomy matters, but autonomy alone is insufficient without mechanisms for internal democracy and accountability—a lesson underscored by Proletkult's own difficulty translating its formal claims to autonomy into consistent local practice (Mally 1990, 50). Second, the tension between appropriation and reconstruction remains unresolved. Third, universalizing frameworks risk creating new exclusions even while claiming to overcome old ones; respect for epistemic diversity may be more important than theoretical unification. Finally, the relationship between reform and revolution cannot be avoided: Leonelli's analysis suggests that well-intentioned reforms can worsen inequalities, yet Bogdanov's revolutionary alternative led to authoritarian control. Perhaps the answer lies not in choosing between reform and revolution but in sustaining experimental spaces for alternative practices that prefigure more democratic futures.

Taking seriously the criticisms of Bogdanov's work (including, for instance, Ilyenkov's; see Maidansky and Oittinen 2020; Oittinen 2024) I argue that we can learn from both sides also in terms of the Lenin-Bogdanov debate (cf. Freyberg and Kobakhidze 2025), but that it is not sufficient to confine the contemporary analysis to a single level (e.g., the idea of cultural revolution, or Bogdanov's Machist background, "idealism" etc.). Dialectically speaking, these criticisms remain valid but one-

sided once we assess the arguments and ideas involved in a wholly different context, namely our own, which offers no direct prospect of political realization. While the various levels of that debate could not all be presented here, I hope this commentary at least indicates a way of assessing Bolshevik ideas and the socialist heritage more comprehensively, and encourages readers to take Bogdanov's ideas seriously, at least in the fields to which I pointed.

What I tried to show is that Alexander Bogdanov's theses are a systematic attempt to theorize the relationship between class, knowledge, and scientific organization that anticipated many contemporary debates in epistemology and science studies. His diagnosis of bourgeois science's fundamental limitations—its separation from labor, its abstract fetishism, its fragmentation through specialization, and its barriers to working-class participation—identified real structural problems that persist today. Yet his solutions—comprehensive reconstruction of all sciences from a proletarian standpoint, unification through a universal organizational science, autonomous cultural organizations independent of political direction—proved problematic both theoretically and practically, and his institutional model of an autonomous Proletkult challenged the Leninist principle of party hegemony in ways that made conflict all but inevitable, culminating in the movement's subordination in October 1920 (Lenin 1965, 316–317) and Bogdanov's own gradual withdrawal from political activity by 1921–1923 (Biggart and Bulgakowa 2021, 76).

When we understand “proletarian science” as Science oriented toward overcoming the alienation inherent in all wage labor—in the sense Engels gave the term proletariat (Marx and Engels 1998, 34), Bogdanov's framework gains new relevance. The question becomes whether scientific practice consolidates or challenges the separation between expert knowledge and collective control. In an era where knowledge work, care work, platform labor, and digital labor have generalized the proletarian condition far beyond the factory, this question applies across all domains where individual expertise is mobilized within opaque organizational frameworks.

Most strikingly, Bogdanov's analysis of science as organized collective experience applies with uncanny precision to contemporary artificial intelligence, algorithmic systems, and data-driven modeling. The abstraction of collective intelligence into apparently autonomous technical systems that govern work, markets, and administration represents exactly the “abstract fetishism of knowledge” that Bogdanov diagnosed. The question he raised (whose experience is organized, by

whom, and for what purposes) has never been more urgently discussed—though we have to see that this has mostly had consequences in words and not in actions. The praxeological character of Bogdanov's theses remains an important legacy: because science is itself a form of social practice, its transformation requires concrete institutional, educational, and organizational measures, not merely theoretical critique.

Bogdanov's theses thus remain productive not as a blueprint to follow but as a provocation to think critically about the relationship between knowledge and power, between scientific organization and social justice. His insistence that we cannot separate epistemological questions from political and organizational ones—that the form of science matters as much as its content—continues to challenge facile assumptions about scientific neutrality and accessibility. In an era of intensifying global inequality, corporate control of research, epistemic injustice along multiple dimensions, and the emergence of algorithmic governance, Bogdanov's century-old questions remain urgent: Whose science? For what purposes? Organized how? (cf. Böhme et al. 1983; Longino 2001; Stengers 1997/1998, 2018). These are questions that must be answered anew, learning from both the insights and the failures of those who struggled with them before.

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