



BOGDANOV'S SOCIOLOGY OF THE ARTS

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Whereas in his general theory of social consciousness Bogdanov acknowledged his indebtedness to Marx, in his theory of the social function of the arts, which he considered to be part of the social consciousness, he differed from Marx, who, in his opinion, had regarded the arts as a mere 'embellishment of life'. Bogdanov emphasized their organizing function and integrated the arts into his general theory of the evolution of social formations. Bogdanov saw proletarian culture as being a transitional culture that corresponded to the backwardness of both the Russian and the European working classes. It would be followed by socialist, collectivist, or 'all-human' culture, the values of which he enunciated in his article "New ethical norms" (*Zakony novoi sovesti*) (Bogdanov 1924/1925). Bogdanov also drafted a new collectivist aesthetics, the latent didacticism of which antagonized a number of 'proletarian writers' in the Proletkult.

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Bogdanov, Marx, and the social function of the arts¹

Writing on the relationship between thinking and economic activity, Friedrich Engels, in a letter to Joseph Bloch of 1890, pointed out that Marx's understanding of this relationship was not to be understood as a form of uni-directional determinism. "The economic situation", he wrote, "is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure ... political, juristic, philosophical theories, religious views, and their further development into systems of dogmas - also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their form."² We do not know whether Bogdanov had read this letter, but Engels's clarification was in any case consistent with Bogdanov's own understanding of Marx, as he made clear in a number of his philosophical writings. For example in *The Philosophy of Living Experience* (Bogdanov 1923, Chapters 1 and 5) Bogdanov cited Marx's third 'Thesis on Feuerbach' (1845) (Feuer 1959) where Marx had asserted that "it is human beings who change circumstances, and ...the educator also needs educating". Society was not divided into two parts: "The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionizing practice."³ Bogdanov, who insisted that he was an "historical materialist" (Bogdanov 1923a),⁴ at the same time considered Marx to have been "a great forerunner" of his own organization science (Bogdanov 1996: 104). However, when it came to the social function of the arts he disagreed with Marx, who, he alleged, had viewed art as a mere "embellishment of life".⁵

¹ In this paper, individual terms used by Bogdanov, as well as quotations from his works, are indicated by double inverted commas.

² Engels to Joseph Bloch, London, 21–22 September 1890. The letter was first published in *Der sozialistische Akademiker*, 19 (Berlin, 1895). See Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels 2001: 33–37. I am obliged to James D. White for this reference.

³ Georgii Gloveli has pointed out that M. Filippov, the editor of *Nauchnoe Obozrenie*, had noted the 'sociological' as distinct from 'economistic' determinism of Marx as early as 1897. See Gloveli 2009: 54–57.

⁴ Thesis No. XI of Bogdanov 1923a, in Bogdanov 2003: 461–462.

⁵ Bogdanov summarized what he considered to be the shortcomings of Marxist theory, and his own innovations, in Part I of *Tektology*. He explicitly rejected Marx's understanding of art as a mere "embellishment of life" ("*iskusstvo schital prostym ukrasheniem zhizni*"). See Bogdanov 2003: 80–81. Whether his understanding of Marx on this point was correct is a question that need not concern us here. See, on this question, Rose 1994. Bogdanov had been General Editor of a new translation by V.A. Bazarov and I.I. Skvortsov-Stepanov of Marx's *Capital*, published in 1907 and 1909. However, many of Marx's works did not become available until after Bogdanov's death; for example the *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* was not published in the Soviet Union until 1939.



By the eve of the First World War, Bogdanov had developed a sociology of ideas that was grounded in his ‘empirionomist’ epistemology⁶, in an evolutionist history of social formations and in a general theory of the dynamics of organization, equilibrium and change in nature, thinking and society. In works written before 1917, when he came to deal with the function of ideology in society, he would frequently draw examples from the history of the arts. He considered that the slogan of ‘proletarian culture’ had first been introduced into socialist theory at the Social-Democratic Party School organized by the Vpered group on the island of Capri in 1909, and in 1914 he had written in an article intended for the journal *Nasha zarya* that “art was one of the ideologies of a class – an element of its class consciousness”.⁷ However, this article was not published and it was not until the founding of the Proletkult in September 1917 that Bogdanov began to produce a body of work that focused specifically upon the social function of the arts.⁸ The present paper will draw upon two of Bogdanov’s works on ideology that were published before the First World War, *The Philosophy of Living Experience. A Popular Outline* (Bogdanov 1923b);⁹ and *The Science of Social Consciousness. A Short Course in Ideological Science in Questions and Answers* (Bogdanov 1914).¹⁰ It will also make use of the articles that Bogdanov gathered for the anthology *On Proletarian Culture 1904-1924* (Bogdanov 1924/1925) most of which were written during the Proletkult period. Bogdanov’s utopian novel *Red Star* (Bogdanov 1908) and his *Tektology. A General Organizational Science*, the first part of which was published in 1913, also provide insight into his understanding of the arts.¹¹

⁶ See “Poznanie s istoricheskoy tochki zreniya” (1900) in Bogdanov 1904 and Bogdanov 1904–1906. For a review of works on Bogdanov’s philosophy, see Steila 1996 and 2013

⁷ See “Vozmozhno li proletarskoe iskusstvo?” (1914), in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 204–216. Bogdanov here does not mention that he disagrees with Marx. The article formed part of a polemic with A.N.Potresov and G.A.Aleksinskiy. Potresov had argued in *Nasha zarya* (1913) that art was an indulgence of the leisure class.

⁸ On the Proletkult, see Sochor 1988, Chapter 6, “School of Socialism: Proletkult”; and Mally 1990.

⁹ The first edition was published in 1913. The third edition included the Appendix “From religious to scientific monism”, a concise version of a lecture Bogdanov had delivered to the Institute of Scientific Philosophy in February 1923.

¹⁰ The author’s preface is dated 16 November 1913. I have used the edition republished in Bogdanov 1999: 261-470.

¹¹ See Bogdanov 1913. The author’s preface to this first part is dated 15/28 December 1912.



History as the evolution of ideologies

In *The Philosophy of Living Experience* and in *The Science of Social Consciousness*, Bogdanov provided a concise outline of the evolutionary progression of social formations and world views, from “authoritarian ideologies”, through “individualistic ideologies”, to “collectivism”. In the latter work, inverting what would have been the usual explanatory structure for a Marxist social or economic historian, he characterized each period in terms of its predominant “world view” (*mirovozzrenië*) or “ideology” and only then went on to describe the technical, economic and social conditions that corresponded to each of these ideologies. The earliest period was that of “primeval ideologies” (*pervobytnye ideologii*). This was the period of hunter-gatherer societies when humans first acquired speech and which were characterized by a primitive, inchoate and conservative collectivism, which Bogdanov hesitated to qualify as a “world-view”. Next came the period of “authoritarian ideologies”, which was divided into successive sub-periods of “patriarchal ideology”, corresponding to the early development of agriculture and nomadic livestock husbandry; and “feudalism”, characterized by settled agriculture and livestock farming, the development of implements and the growth of trade. Then came “individualistic ideologies”, typical of societies of small producers practicing commodity exchange but also of such transitional forms as i) the slave-owning societies of the classical world, ii) serfdom, iii) craft-workshop economies and iv) commercial capitalism. The ultimate (and emergent) ideology, Bogdanov argued, would be “Collectivism” (Bogdanov 1914, *passim*). As he put it, very concisely, in 1918: “The spirit of authoritarianism, the spirit of individualism, the spirit of comradely solidarity (*tovarishchestvo*) - these are the three types of culture.”¹² This linear-evolutionist interpretation of history was fundamental to Bogdanov’s understanding of proletarian culture in general and of the arts in particular.

For Bogdanov, the special function of the arts (viewed as one of a number of expressions of the ideology of any given social formation), was that of cognition in the realm of sensory experience. In ancient times people had acquired their understanding of the world in the form of myths. With the development of philosophy and science, cognition had acquired instruments suited to dealing with abstract thought, but art had retained the function of contributing to a world view through the organization of the feelings. As with other modes of cognition, the social function of the arts was not passive; on the contrary, they

¹² “Chto takoe proletarskaya poeziya?” (1918), in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 137.



provided “social education”: whereas, in the past, this function had been performed by cave drawings, epic poetry or religious myths,¹³ in more recent times, *belles lettres* (the novel, drama, poetry) and the visual and plastic arts all served as a “schooling in life”.¹⁴

Art in the age of Collectivism¹⁵

It was the advent of machine production that had provided the pre-conditions for the formation of a collectivist world view:

“The gathering of the proletariat in the cities and factories has a great and complicated influence upon the proletarian psyché. It gives rise to the realization that in labour, in the struggle with the elements for existence, the individual is only a link in a great chain... The individual ‘Ego’ is cut down to size and put in its place.” No less importantly, since machine work required the exercise of both hand and brain, the functions of ‘management’ and ‘implementation’, hitherto separate, and mediated through relations of authority and subordination, were now combined in “a fellowship of cooperation (*sotrudnichestvo*), which is the principle upon which the proletariat constructs its organization.”¹⁶

However, whilst collectivism would be the world-view of all humanity in the future, it was not yet the outlook of a working class which, for all its political and economic progress in both Western Europe and Russia, still remained culturally backward. This conception of the cultural backwardness of the working class was central to Bogdanov’s theory, and he only ever spoke of embryonic “elements” of proletarian culture in the art and literature of his day.¹⁷ In 1914 he cited

¹³ Among Bogdanov’s favourite examples were the Mahabharata; the works of Homer and Hesiod and the Hebrew Bible. In architecture, the Coliseum in Rome was a metaphor for the pride and cruelty of an imperial people; the Gothic cathedral, a metaphor for the world view of the Middle Ages – the rejection of this earth and striving towards the after-life. See Bogdanov 1911, 14–18; and “Proletariat i iskusstvo” (Speech to the First All-Russian Conference of the Proletkult, 20 September 1918), in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 117–118.

¹⁴ See “Sotsial’no-organizatsionnoe znachenie iskusstva” - Theses for a lecture delivered by Alexander Bogdanov to the Russian Academy of Artistic Sciences, 29 October 1921”, RGALI, f.941, op.1., ed. khr.3, in Bogdanov 2004: 5–9.

¹⁵ On ‘Collectivism’, see Sochor 1988: 136–138.

¹⁶ “Chto takoe proletarskaya poeziya?” (1918) in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 136. See also the section “Tekhnicheskie i ekonomicheskie osnovy kollektivizma” in *Nauka ob obshchestvennom soznanii* (1914) in Bogdanov 1999: 446–452.

¹⁷ For Bogdanov, the capitulation of the working classes to the bourgeoisie during the World War had amply demonstrated the “immaturity” of its outlook. See “1918”, in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 101; and “O khudozhestvennom nasledstve” (1918), Bogdanov 1924/1924: 144–145. On this point, see Sochor 1988: 95 and White 2013: 52–70.



the poem of Aleksey Mashirov-Samobytnik, “To a new comrade” (*Novomu tovarishchu*), and in 1918 his “To my fellow brethren” (*Moim sobrat'yam*), as examples of “emerging” collectivism.¹⁸ By contrast, he found only “elements” of proletarian culture in the work of Aleksey Gastev, “Factory sirens” (*Gudi*) and Vladimir Kirillov, “To the times that lie ahead” (*Gryadushchemu*).¹⁹ Most disparagingly, he considered Maksim Gorkiy, from whom he had been estranged since 1910, to be merely “close to us in spirit and artistically stable (*ustoychivyy*)”.²⁰

Criticism as selection and feed-back

Given the backwardness of the working class, how would proletarian art evolve? It was incumbent upon both the artist and the critic to select and utilize from the art of the past and of the present day that which could be of benefit to the proletariat and to reject that which was potentially harmful.²¹ In July of 1918 Bogdanov seemed to suggest that this evolution would be a natural, self-regulating, organic process, akin to natural selection: “the artist can give the most harmonious arrangement to his living images when he does so freely, without compulsion or direction ... The content of art is life without restrictions or prohibitions.”²² However, this did not mean that the artist functioned as an individual in opposition to society. In August 1918, he described the incorporation of art into ideology as a feed-back mechanism (*vzaimnaya svyaz'*, literally, ‘reciprocal link’):²³ the artist’s selection of images was regulated in the first instance by self-criticism, as the artist strove to eliminate from a work everything that was not in harmony

¹⁸ See “Vozmozhno li proletarskoe iskusstvo?” (1914) and “Proletariat i iskusstvo” (1918) in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 111–112 & 119.

¹⁹ The poems of Gastev and Kirillov are cited in “Chto takoe proletarskaya poeziya?” (1918), in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 139–140.

²⁰ “Kritika proletarskogo iskusstva” (1918) in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 170. Gorky never participated in the Proletkult.

²¹ “1918” (“Ot redaktsii”), *Proletarskaya kul'tura*, No.1 (July 1918), in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 102. See also Bogdanov 1920: 14.

²² “Chto takoe Proletarskaya poeziya?”, *Proletarskaya kul'tura*, No.1 (July, 1918), in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 129.

²³ See also Bogdanov’s explanation of how a critique of religion would reveal the feedback mechanism that linked ideology and social development, in “O khudozhestvennom nasledstve”, *Proletarskaya kul'tura*, No.2 (July, 1918), and Bogdanov 1924/1925: 149. See also “Puti proletarskogo tvorchestva. Tezisy” (1920), in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 199. These theses, prepared for the First All-Russian Congress of the Proletkults, were originally published in *Proletarskaya kul'tura*, Nr.13/14 (January-March) and Nr.15/16 (April-July) 1920. Further theses on artistic technique, from a lecture that had been delivered in May 1920 to a Conference of Proletarian Writers, were included in the anthology Bogdanov 1924/1925.



with its central idea; there followed a process of spontaneous selection or regulation (*regulirovanie*) by society, through the explicit, conscious criticism of the work of art from a class point of view.²⁴ He made this point concisely in his speech to the First All-Russian Conference of the Proletkult on 20 September 1918: “The artistic talent is individual, but creation is a social phenomenon: it emerges out of the collective and returns to the collective, serving its vital purposes.”²⁵

The paradox of “tektological selection”

It would be a mistake, however, to infer that Bogdanov’s theory of the evolution of ideologies was a mere application of Darwin’s theory of natural selection to the social sphere. Bogdanov was not an ‘evolutionary’ socialist, in the sense of assuming that the development of the forces of production, or the process of class struggle, would lead, without some assistance, to the political, economic and cultural ascendancy of the proletariat. As we know, Bogdanov considered that evolutionary biology was mistaken in distinguishing rigidly between natural selection (*otbor*) and artificial selection. This distinction, he tells us, disguised the existence of an overarching tektological selection mechanism (*podbor*) which was also at work in economic, social and intellectual activity.²⁶ “Natural selection” (Bogdanov places the term in inverted commas), did not always operate in isolation: for many thousands of years before “natural selection” had been discovered, it had been assisted in human societies by the practice of artificial selection.²⁷

“As concerns the adjective ‘natural’, we shall discard it, for in tektology the difference between ‘natural’ and ‘artificial’ processes is not important.All production, all social struggle, all the work of thinking, proceeds constantly and steadfastly by means of selection (*podbor*): by systematic support of the complexes corresponding to vital human goals, and the elimination of those which contradict them.”²⁸

How then, during the transition period, would the ‘work of thinking’, obtain ‘systematic support’? Bogdanov’s answer was that it

²⁴ “Kritika proletarskogo iskusstva”, *Proletarskaya kul'tura*, Nr.3 (August, 1918), in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 158.

²⁵ “Proletariat i iskusstvo” (Speech to the First All-Russian Conference of the Proletkult, 20 September 1918), in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 123.

²⁶ For the explanation in *Tektology* of “selection” (*podbor*) as a “tektological” process, see Bogdanov 1996, Chapter 3: Basic Organizational Mechanisms. I have here also used Bogdanov, 1922. On this subject, see Poustilnik 2009, especially 125–129.

²⁷ Bogdanov 1996, Chapter 3: Basic Organizational Mechanisms, 179.

²⁸ Bogdanov 1996, Chapter 3: Basic Organizational Mechanisms, 175.



would be provided by educational institutions that functioned alongside the state educational system, namely the Proletarian Workers' Cultural-Educational Organization (*Proletkul't*) and the Proletarian University. The function of these institutions would differ from that of traditional pedagogy in which "the entire meaning of the educator's activities [was] to support and strengthen some elements of a child's *psyché* and to destroy or inhibit others".²⁹ A "collectivist education" would develop in the *psyché* of the individual a "discipline of comradely relations" and a "conscious acceptance of common interests and aims."³⁰

Bogdanov's conception of the social function of the arts and of art criticism is analogous to his conception of the function of the new education. Art criticism, he tells us, should not be prescriptive, but this did not mean that the critic was relegated to the role of mere reporter: the critic should "monitor (*reguliruet*) the development of art", and give warning whenever "young art" succumbed to "alien influences".³¹ Clearly, this kind of mentoring is fraught with the ambiguities inherent in all forms of education. Let us ask what criteria Bogdanov wished to be applied in the course of "tektological selection"; and whether he thought that "regulation" would be carried out by proletarians themselves or by others on their behalf.

Culture as *mentalité*?

i) The social origins of the artist

In 1910 Bogdanov had written: "The proletariat needs its own, socialist art, permeated by its own feelings and aspirations and ideals."³² In 1918 he wrote that, ideally, what the proletariat needed was a "pure-class, proletarian poetry".³³ In 1920, he dismissed the Belgian, Emile Verhaeren, and the Latvian, Jānis Rainis,³⁴ as "poets of the toiling democracy or socialist intellectuals", who were "bound to the working class by a common ideal, but they cannot directly express or organize the proletarian artistic consciousness because they were reared in another world."³⁵ Such statements seem to imply an understanding of working class culture as *mentalité*, as a function of social origins and

²⁹ Bogdanov 1996, Chapter 3: Basic Organizational Mechanisms, 181–182.

³⁰ "Ideal vospitaniya" (Lecture delivered to a Teachers' Conference in Moscow, May, 1918), in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 236.

³¹ Bogdanov 1911: 87.

³² "Sotsializm v nastoyashchem" (1910), in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 98.

³³ "Chto takoe proletarskaya poeziya?" (1918), in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 131.

³⁴ Rainis had been published in 1916 an anthology *Sbornik Latyshkoy literatury*, edited by Valeriy Bryusov and Maksim Gorkiy.

³⁵ "Prostota ili utonchennost'?" (1920), in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 178–179.



social milieu. However, as we shall see, for Bogdanov working class origins or experience were necessary, but not sufficient conditions for the production of proletarian culture. Proletarian culture was also a matter of values, of “world view”.

ii) The world view of the critic

The importance that Bogdanov attached to “world view” enabled him to introduce the critic, pedagogue, or ideologue, into the feed-back loop of cultural evolution. In 1923, he explained how someone who had not been born into, or did not belong to, a working class milieu could contribute to the development of proletarian culture:

“...The position of a class in the system of social life is an objective fact, and it creates the possibility for an ideologue, even one who does not belong to that class, to adopt its position theoretically and from that position to obtain a new point of view. This is what Marx succeeded in doing.”³⁶

It was this notion of an historically appropriate world view as a kind of accreditation that qualified an individual to participate in the construction of proletarian culture that enabled Bogdanov to rationalize his own role as a critic of culture; and, following in the footsteps of Marx, to offer his General Organizational Science as a contribution to the emerging ideology of collectivism. By the same logic he would recommend that the first tutors of the Proletarian University should be drawn from “the most able theorists of revolutionary socialism” and, subsequently, from amongst graduates of the Socialist Academy.³⁷

Building collectivist values

Bogdanov’s assessment of the value of a work of art was based upon the extent to which it succeeded in its cognitive and educational functions, which he described as its “organizational task”. This task was, “firstly, to organize a particular sum of the elements of life, of “experience” (*opyt*); and, secondly, to ensure that what is created serves as an instrument for a particular collective.”³⁸ It was with this dual conception of the role of the artist and critic in mind that Bogdanov devised what one might describe as a ‘utilitarian aesthetics’, the purpose of which was to foster the development of collectivism within the proletariat. His aesthetics addressed the issues of both content and form.

³⁶ “Ot monizma religioznogo k nauchnomu”, in Bogdanov 1923: 342.

³⁷ “Proletarskiy Universitet” (1918), in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 252. See also Steinberg 2002: 60.

³⁸ “O khudozhestvennom nasledstve” (1918), in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 150.



His declared criteria of judgment were, how far and in what respects was the ‘material’ of a work of art of value to the proletariat and to the all-human (*obshchechelovecheskiy* collective in the future; how far were the ‘methods’ applied useful and appropriate (*prigodny*); and of what general significance for the higher collective was the resolution of the organizational task?³⁹ In the building of collectivist norms or values, these criteria were to be applied in selecting from the cultures of the past and in evaluating works of the present day.

i) Content: selecting from the culture of the past

In an editorial to the first issue of *Proletarskaya kul'tura* Bogdanov argued against any radical break with the culture of the past: “The proletariat is the legitimate heir of all the valuable achievements of the past, spiritual as much as material; it cannot and must not repudiate this legacy.”⁴⁰ In the third issue of the journal he deplored the “Hindenburgian” tone adopted by Vladimir Kirillov, who had proclaimed that “In the name of our tomorrow we shall burn Raphael, destroy the museums, trample upon the flowers of art”.⁴¹ Of course, this did not mean that the culture of the past should be embraced uncritically: in evaluating the art of the past, the objective should be to seek out the “hidden elements of collectivism”.⁴²

ii) Content: selecting from the culture of the present

The construction of collectivism also required an ability to identify values that were not progressive. This, in turn, required attention to the fact that all art organized the social class to which the artist belonged and articulated the point of view of that class. “Behind the individual author is hidden the collective author, the author’s class; and poetry is part of the self-awareness of this class.” In the nineteenth century, the poetry of Afanasiy Fet had expressed the world-view of the Russian nobility;⁴³ Nikolay Nekrasov, who had spoken up for the

³⁹ See especially Thesis No.4 of “Tezisy doklada A.A.Bogdanov. ‘O proletarskoy kritike’. na Vserossiyskom soveshchaniy literaturnykh otdelov i otdelov izobrazitel’nykh iskusstv proletarskikh kul’turno-prospevetitel’nykh organizatsii, 21 August 1921. RGALI, f.1230, op.1, d.457, l.8. I am obliged to Petr Plyutto for making this document available.

⁴⁰ “1918” in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 102. This had formerly been published as “Ot redaktsii”, *Proletarskaya kul'tura*, Nr.1 (July 1918).

⁴¹ “Kritika proletarskogo iskusstva” (1918), in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 173.

⁴² See “O khudozhestvennom nasledstve” (1918), in Bogdanov 1924/1925: especially, 142–145; and Thesis Nr. 16 of “Puti proletarskogo tvorchestva” (1920) in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 199.

⁴³ Afanasiy Afanas’evich Fet (1820–1892). See “Chto takoe proletarskaya poeziya?” (1918) in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 130. See also the section “Tekhnicheskie i



exploited peasantry, had at the same time articulated the aspirations, ideas and sentiments of the urban intelligentsia to which he belonged by occupation, and aspects of the psychology of the landlord estate to which he belonged by birth.⁴⁴ Indeed, the greater part of what, more recently, purported to be “democratic” poetry in fact gave expression to a “peasant-intellectual”, “worker-peasant” or “worker-peasant-intellectual” view of the world.⁴⁵

Progressive forms

i) “Simplicity” (prostota)

How, Bogdanov asked, was one to identify those writers of the past who could serve as models for the kinds of technique to be adopted by the creators of proletarian culture? In answering this question he drew upon his evolutionary interpretation of history and upon his organization theory. Every social formation and every ideology, he argued, went through a life-cycle of birth, maturation, degeneration (*vyrozhdenie*) and death. This could be observed not only in the content but also in the forms of art.⁴⁶ It was during the phase of growth and maturity that the art of a civilization attained its most consummate expression. Proletarian writers should therefore “learn the techniques of art ... from the great masters who came at the period of the rise and flowering of those classes that are now withering away - the revolutionary romantics and the classics of different times.”⁴⁷ The hallmark of art at its *apogée* was its ‘simplicity’.⁴⁸ In 1918, Bogdanov lauded the “simplicity, clarity and purity of forms” of Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol, Nekrasov and Tolstoy.⁴⁹ In 1920 (when he added Byron to this list), he wrote:

“What we find in the work of the great masters is a simplicity that is associated with content that is grandiose, developing or highly developed, but which has not yet begun to decay. Goethe and Schiller, and, in Russia, Pushkin and Lermontov, reflected the birth and growth

ekonomicheskie osnovy kollektivizma” of *Nauka ob obshchestvennom soznanii* (1914) in Bogdanov 1999: 452.

⁴⁴ Nikolay Alekseevich Nekrasov (1821–1878). See “Chto takoe proletarskaya poeziya?” (1918), in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 131.

⁴⁵ As an example, Bogdanov cites a poem by Alexei Gmyrev, *Alaya*. See “Chto takoe proletarskaya poeziya?” (1918), in Bogdanov, 1924/1925: 132–133. See also the references to Emile Verhaeren and Jānis Rainis, above.

⁴⁶ “Kritika proletarskogo iskusstva” (1918), in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 169.

⁴⁷ “Kritika proletarskogo iskusstva” (1918) in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 170.

⁴⁸ Cf. “Like most ancient Martian works of art, the most modern ones were characterized by extreme simplicity and thematic unity”. Bogdanov 1984: 76.

⁴⁹ “Kritika proletarskogo iskusstva” (1918), in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 170.



of new conditions and new forces of life, the rise of a bourgeois culture that was beginning to oust and supplant the old, feudal-aristocratic culture.”⁵⁰

ii) Rhyme and Rhythm

In his understanding of rhyme and rhythm, Bogdanov updated romanticism for the machine age: these two devices served to integrate the human community in its relationship with the rest of nature, and also in work and thought: Asked by Leonid, in *Red Star*, whether “the poetry of the socialist epoch should abandon and forget these inhibiting rules”, Enno replies:

“Regular rhythm (*pravil'noe-ritmicheskoe*) seems beautiful to us not at all because of any attachment to convention, but because it is in profound harmony with the rhythmic regularity of the processes of our life and consciousness. As for rhyme (*rifma*), whereby a series of variations end in a single accord, does it not have a profound kinship with that vital bond between people which enables them to overcome their inherent diversity and achieve unity in the pleasure of love, achieve unity from a rational objective in work, and a unity of feelings through art? There can be no artistic form without rhythm (*bez ritma*). If there is no rhythm of sounds it is all the more essential that there should be a rhythm of images or ideas. And if rhyme (*rifma*) is really of feudal origin, then so were many other good and beautiful things.”⁵¹

**Degenerate form and content: “over-elaboration”
(*utonchennost'*)**

True to his biological-evolutionary world view, Bogdanov was disparaging of the forms and content of the kind of art that was produced at the end of the life-cycle of a social formation. In 1908, in *Red Star* he had written:

“[The art of] intermediate, transitional, epochs is of quite a different character: there are impulses, passions, restless yearnings that are sometimes suppressed in the divagations of erotic or religious dreams, but which at other times erupt when tensions in the conflict between body and soul reach the point of disequilibrium.”⁵²

⁵⁰ “Prostota ili utonchennost'?” (1920), in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 176–177.

⁵¹ My translation from *Krasnaya Zvezda*, Bogdanov 1929: 97, with reference to the translation by Charles Rougle in Bogdanov 1984: 78.

⁵² My translation from *Krasnaya Zvezda*, Bogdanov 1929: 94, with reference to the translation by Charles Rougle in Bogdanov 1984: 76.



Ten years later, he explained more fully:

“...When a social class has accomplished its progressive role in the historical process and begins to decline, the content of its art, inevitably, also becomes decadent, as do, accordingly, the forms of art which adapt to this content. The decay of a ruling class is usually evident in a descent into parasitism. There is an onset of satiety, a dulling of the sense of life. Life loses its main source for new, developing content - socially creative activity. In order to fill this void, the members of the dying class pursue ever new pleasures and sensations. Art organizes this quest: in an attempt to stimulate fading sensibilities it resorts to decadent perversions; in an attempt to elaborate and refine aesthetic images it complicates and embellishes artistic forms through a mass of petty contrivances. All of this has been observed in history more than once, in the decline of various cultures - the Oriental, Classical and Feudal, and it can be observed during recent decades in the decomposition (*razlozhenie*) of bourgeois culture, in most of the new trends in decadent ‘Modernism’ and ‘Futurism’. Russian bourgeois art has dragged itself along in the wake of European art, in the image of our anemic and flabby bourgeoisie which succeeded in withering without ever having bloomed.”⁵³

Zinaida Gippius was considered by Bogdanov to be typical of those who “in periods of tranquil reaction contemplate their individual feelings, aesthetic, erotic, mystical ... become fiery patriots in wartime and are seized by the ardour of struggle during revolution, only to lapse back into eroticism and all sorts of perversion and theosophy, etc., when reaction returns.”⁵⁴ Andreev, Bal’mont and Blok were “on our side one moment and detached the next”.⁵⁵ The work of Bryusov and Belyy was “devoid of living content and devoted entirely to form”;⁵⁶ Mayakovskiy was “a posturing, self-advertising intellectual” (*krivlyayushegosya intelligenta-reklamista*); Igor Severyanin was “the ideologue of gigolos and courtesans (*kokotok*) and the talented embodiment of painted vulgarity.”⁵⁷

⁵³ “Kritika proletarskogo iskusstva” (1918) in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 169–170.

⁵⁴ “Prostota ili utonchennost’?” (1920), in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 178–179. See also 175–177.

⁵⁵ “Kritika proletarskogo iskusstva” (1918), in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 170.

⁵⁶ “Prostota ili utonchennost’?” (1920), in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 180. Here Bogdanov is criticizing Gerasimov’s poem *Mona Lisa*.

⁵⁷ “Kritika proletarskogo iskusstva” (1918), in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 170. Bogdanov did not deny the talent of either Severyanin or Mayakovskiy. See his footnote on Mayakovskiy, dated 1924, in this same article: 170. Ironically, Bogdanov’s principal adversary, Lenin, shared his antipathy for the Futurists: on 6 May 1921 Lenin rebuked Lunacharskiy for printing 5,000 copies of Mayakovskiy’s *150,000,000* and implored M.N. Pokrovskiy to help him “fight Futurism”. See Lenin to A.V. Lunacharskiy, 6 May 1921 and Lenin to M.N. Pokrovskiy, 6 May 1921, in Lenin 1970, 179–180.



There was a risk that the art of the proletariat would be contaminated by the Modernists' experimentation with rhyme and rhythm:

“In its first steps our workers' poetry manifested a tendency to regular rhythmic verse with simple rhymes. At present, it manifests a tendency to free rhythms (*svobodnye ritmy*) and complex, interweaving, new and often unexpected rhymes. This is clearly the influence of the poetry of the new intelligentsia. It is hardly to be welcomed...”⁵⁸

By contrast, the science of “physiological psychology” had shown how actions and resistances in work had a formative influence upon the nervous system. It was therefore desirable that the rhythms of poetry should correspond to the “directing rhythms” experienced by a worker who was in harmony with the machine, and to the rhythms of nature.⁵⁹ Above all, there should be no striving for effect.⁶⁰

Conscious, perhaps, that his views on culture might be considered overly conservative, Bogdanov was, on occasion, prepared to concede that “of course, new contents will inevitably work out new forms”; it was merely “necessary to take the best of the past as a starting point.”⁶¹ However, he was profoundly out of sympathy with Modernism. In 1920 he felt entitled to remonstrate with Mikhail Gerasimov (who, unlike Bogdanov, possessed genuine proletarian credentials),⁶² for having succumbed, in his poem, *Mona Lisa*, to the influence of the modern poets.⁶³ He admonished as “naïve” the Smithy (*Kuznitsa*) group of writers (Gerasimov and Vladimir Kirillov were founder-members), who, in the first issue of their journal had declared that, even if they were unable to write “proletarian poetry” (a barb directed at the Proletkult), they would dedicate themselves to developing a mastery of literary techniques.⁶⁴ These writers, Bogdanov chided,

⁵⁸ “Kritika proletarskogo iskusstva” (1918), in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 170–171.

⁵⁹ “Powerful machines and their precise movements are aesthetically pleasing to us in and of themselves...”. Enno, in Bogdanov 1984, 74.

⁶⁰ “Prostota ili utonchennost'?” (1920), Bogdanov 1924/1925: 188–9.

⁶¹ “Kritika proletarskogo iskusstva” (1918), Bogdanov 1924/1925: 170.

⁶² Mikhail Prokofevich Gerasimov (1889–1939), the son of a railwayman, had worked in the railway, metal working and mining industries. Between 1910 and 1914 he was a member, alongside Lunacharskiy, A.K. Gastev and F.I. Kalinin of the Paris-based *Liga proletarskoy kul'tury*. His works were published in Gorkiy's *Prosveshchenie* in 1913 and 1914; in an anthology edited by Il'ya Erenburg – *Vechera* (Paris, 1914); in *Sbornik proletarskikh pisateley* (1914) which had a foreword by Gorkiy; and in *Sbornik proletarskikh poetov* (1917). In 1917 a volume of his poetry, due to be published by Gorkiy's publishing house *Parus*, was banned by the censor. In March 1917 he was elected chair of the Samara Soviet of Soldiers' Deputies and from 1918 he was chair of the Samara Proletkult. See *Russkie pisateli* 1989: 540–541.

⁶³ “Prostota ili utonchennost'?” (1920), in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 180.

⁶⁴ Mikhail Gerasimov and Vladimir Kirillov were prominent in the *Kuznitsa* group who held their founding meeting in February 1920. See Brown 1971: 10–12.



should not “deck themselves out in the finery of the bourgeoisie”, but seek the content of their poetry in comradely relations, in the experience of workers’ organizations, and in the works of Marx. They should trust in the collective and in its evolutionary ideology, and amongst past writers seek out those who had “shown the way”.⁶⁵

Organizational aesthetics

Another framework that Bogdanov applied in evaluating a work of art, namely ‘degree of organization’ or ‘organized-ness (*stepen’ organizovannosti*)’,⁶⁶ derived explicitly from his *Tektology* and seems to supplement, if not replace, his binary opposition of ‘simplicity/over-elaboration’. In Part III of the full version of *Tektology* (first published in 1922), in the chapter ‘Organizational Dialectics’, he wrote:

“All of the usual human evaluations that take the form of such concepts as goodness, beauty and truth, that is, moral, aesthetic and cognitive evaluations, have one common basis: all of them are organizational evaluations. The fetishized forms of these evaluations, which conceal their true nature from individualistic consciousness, prevent the question of the degree of living-social organization (*sotsial’no-zhiznennoi organizovannosti*) from being addressed. This means that whatever raises the level of organization of collective life in the field of degressive⁶⁷ norms of human behaviour is deemed to be morally superior; whatever has this effect in perceptions of the world (*mirovospriyatia*) is deemed to be beautiful; and whatever has this effect when it comes to the systematization of experience is deemed to be ‘true’. Essentially, all such evaluations amount to a more or less crude, approximate, and vaguely defined quantitative measure of the degree of organization, in other words, to a “measurement” according to some imprecise scale or template. For this reason, these evaluations must all be subjected to scientific-organizational research and, in the course of development, be replaced by scientific-organizational evaluations.”⁶⁸

⁶⁵ “Prostota ili utonchennost’?”, (1920), in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 190–191. This article was published in *Proletarskaya kul’tura* (1920), Nr.13–14. See also Bogdanov’s review of the first issue (May, 1920) of the journal *Kuznitsa*, in *Proletarskaya kul’tura* (1920), Nr.15–16: 91–92.

⁶⁶ George Gorelik translated *organizovannost’* as ‘system-ness’. See Gorelik 1984: 279. Since Bogdanov does use the term *sistemizatsiya*, another possible translation might be ‘degree of systematization’.

⁶⁷ “Degression”, for Bogdanov, is the process that enables a particular form to sustain its structure or viability in a relationship of dynamic equilibrium with its environment. See Bogdanov 1922: Part II, Chapter VI, Section 3 – ‘Origin and significance of degression’.

⁶⁸ My translation from Bogdanov 1922: 516.



In the same year, addressing a conference of writers and artists of the Proletkult, Bogdanov made the same point, namely that appreciation of the formal side of a work of art consisted in evaluating the “degree of organization of that work as a living whole”. Acknowledging that assessments made by different collectives would vary according to their particular accumulation of organizational experience, he argued that, nevertheless, “it is the degree of organization of a work that is the measure of its profundity and of the impact that it will have upon the collective, that is, of its potential for contributing to the organizational education of the collective.”⁶⁹ The extent to which a work of art achieved a degree of organization also determined its aesthetic effect, for “truth is the presence of organization in the sphere of experience; the good is the presence of organization in the sphere of action; and beauty is the presence of organization in the sphere of the emotions.”⁷⁰

A tektological criticism of Hamlet

Disappointingly, there is only one instance (that I can think of) in which Bogdanov applies in any detail the methodology of organizational science to the intrinsic criticism of a work of art or literature, and that is in his commentary on “the great artist and tektologist”, Shakespeare.⁷¹ The divided self of Hamlet, he tells us (divided, on the one hand by his warrior upbringing and, on the other, by his passive-aesthetic temperament), formed a “complex”, the components of which were in a relationship of “disingression”, or paralysis. The processes of selection set in motion by a hostile environment could only result in the destruction of this complex (as in the “insanity”, then death, of Hamlet), or in a recombination of the elements of his *psyché* into a new “active-aesthetic” whole (the restoration of order, or “system equilibrium”, in the character of

⁶⁹ See Thesis Nr. 4 for his lecture “On proletarian literary criticism” delivered to an All-Russian Conference of Literary Departments and Departments of the Visual Arts of the Proletkult, 21 August 1921. RGALI, f.1230, op.1, d.457, l.8.

⁷⁰ Bogdanov, Unpublished notebooks, RGASPI, f.259, cited by: Iu.P. Sharapov, “Kul’turnye lyudi soznatel’no uchityvayut proshloe”. Iz zapisnykh knizhek A.A. Bogdanova”, *Istoricheskiy arkhiv* (1999), Nr. 3: 174.

⁷¹ The expression is employed in Bogdanov 1922, Part II, Chapter 5 “Divergence and convergence of forms”, Section 6: “The division and restoration of unity of the personality”, p.292. Part II of *Tektology* was first published in Moscow in 1917 (Preface dated 22 September 1916). Bogdanov also provides a commentary on *Hamlet* in “O khudozhestvennom nasledstve” (1918), in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 150–154.



Fortinbras).⁷² Hamlet, was an example of how a work of art could serve not only the dominant ideology of its time, but also the purposes of collectivism, in that Shakespeare's depiction of the struggle for harmony in a hostile environment, "provides the working class with a comprehensive lesson and a comprehensive resolution of the organizational task – and this is what is needed if the world-organizational ideal is to be achieved."⁷³

Between learning and didacticism

Bogdanov was at pains to insist that no constraints should be placed upon the creative work of the proletarian artist: there should be "initiative, criticism, originality and the all-round development of individual talents." There should be no "blind submission to authority".⁷⁴ He did not think that his own exercises in literary and artistic criticism were prescriptive, but it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that, sometimes, they were. In 1918, it is true, he rejected the civic (*grazhdanskoe*) notion according to which art should promote progressive tendencies in the struggles of life: there was "no need to attach any aims to art – they are an unnecessary and harmful constraint".⁷⁵ At the same time, he was himself of the opinion that proletarian art should express an "aspiration towards the ideal" and pointed to the example of the Venus de Milo which, he maintained, represented the harmonious unity of spiritual and physical love;⁷⁶ and to Goethe's *Faust* which depicted the human soul in its search for harmony, eventually attained in a life devoted to working for the good of society.⁷⁷ Conscious, perhaps, that these judgments could, indeed, be considered "civic", he dissociated himself from the theory "recently brought forward", according to which art must be "unflaggingly uplifting" (*zhizneradostnoe*) and "exultant" (*vostorzhennoe*). "We are sorry to

⁷² Bogdanov 1922, Part II, Chapter 5 "Divergence and convergence of forms", Section 6: "The division and restoration of unity of the personality": 290–292.

⁷³ "O khudozhestvennom nasledstve" (1918), in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 154.

⁷⁴ "Ideal vospitaniya" (Lecture delivered to a Teachers' Conference in Moscow, May, 1918), in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 236.

⁷⁵ "Chto takoe proletarskaya poeziya" (1918), in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 128–129. See also Thesis Nr. 11: "The socio-organizational role of art is its objective meaning, and this interpretation has nothing in common with the theory of civic art, whereby art is harnessed to certain specific tasks of an ethical, political or other nature", in "Sotsial'no-organizatsionnoe znachenie iskusstva" (1921) in Bogdanov 2004: 5–9.

⁷⁶ "Proletariat i iskusstvo" (Speech to the First All-Russian Conference of the Proletkult, 20 September 1918), in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 122–23.

⁷⁷ "Proletariat i iskusstvo", (Speech to the First All-Russian Conference of the Proletkult, 20 September 1918), in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 120–121; and "Prostota ili utonchennost'?" (1920), in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 178.



say that this theory is quite a favourite, especially with the younger and less experienced proletarian poets, although it can only be called childish.”⁷⁸ Even so, in some of his writings, Bogdanov’s didactic attitude is reminiscent of the philosopher of an earlier Enlightenment, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in his *Émile, ou De l’éducation* (1762).

By 1920 Bogdanov had become aware that some proletarian writers found his approach patronizing:

“Some Proletkultists have argued that artistic creation must be free, and have questioned whether criticism, however scientific, and however much it claimed to be the most proletarian, could point the way... the journal *Proletarskaya kul’tura* has been depicted as a kind of baby-sitter (“*Chto za nyan’ki!*”), constantly fretting about what is and what isn’t proletarian culture”.⁷⁹

In February 1920, exasperation with the paternalism of the Proletkult led a group of writers led by Gerasimov to withdraw from its Moscow branch and, under the auspices of the Commissariat for Education, to organize their own literary group – *Kuznitsa*, complaining that “the conditions of work in Proletkult ... for a variety of reasons, restrict the creative potential of proletarian writers.”⁸⁰ It was the *Kuznitsa* group that in October 1920 organized the First All Russian Congress of Proletarian Writers during which the All-Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (VAPP) was founded.⁸¹ In December 1920, the replacement of Pavel Lebedev-Polyanskiy by Valerian Pletnëv as Chair of the Central Committee of the Proletkult marked the beginning of the end of Bogdanov’s influence inside the Proletkult. In November 1921 he resigned from all positions in the Proletkult in order to devote himself entirely to research in blood transfusion. However, the matter did not end there: the critics of Bogdanov, in some cases acting under the instructions of Lenin, now faced the task of producing an alternative to his theory. During the later 1920s, Pletnëv, for one, ostentatiously dissociated himself from Bogdanov and played his own ignoble part in the creation of a new orthodoxy.⁸² On 9 May 1924 the Press Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party convened a conference on “The policy of the Party in artistic literature”

⁷⁸ “Kritika proletarskogo iskusstva” (1918), in Bogdanov 1924/1925: 167.

⁷⁹ Bogdanov 1920: 87. On the resentment of some writers by 1920, see Steinberg 2002: 60–61.

⁸⁰ See their letter to *Pravda*, 5 February 1920, reproduced in Gorbunov 1974: 122.

⁸¹ It was also in October 1920 that Lenin took steps to have the Proletkult subordinated to the Commissariat for Education. These institutional changes in the history of the movement for proletarian culture have been well documented by Sheshukov 1970, Brown 1971 and Eimermacher 1972.

⁸² On the role of Pletnëv in the debate over cultural policy, see Biggart and Bulgakova 2016.



and in 1925 published materials of this conference and other contributions to the debate.⁸³ In the same year Bogdanov defiantly published an anthology of his own writings on the subject.⁸⁴ He could legitimately take the view that his ‘heresies’ had set the agenda for the debate.

Conclusion

One does not look to Bogdanov for an understanding of the *mentalité* of the ‘actually existing’ working class.⁸⁵ His concern was not with working class communities but with the ‘integral proletarian’, the ideal-typical worker (Nikifor Vilonov, Fëdor Kalinin) of the future.⁸⁶ In this respect he was a utopian socialist (I do not use the term pejoratively).

Bogdanov’s insistence that a ‘non-proletarian’ could make a contribution to the development of proletarian culture clearly belongs to the vexed controversy over the ambiguous relationship between socialist intellectuals and workers by social origin.⁸⁷ His conviction that his status as a Collectivist qualified him as a builder of socialist culture is questionable. Perhaps he should be understood as a member of the ‘organizational intelligentsia’, whose ascendancy he had himself described.⁸⁸

Bogdanov’s aesthetic theories had the potential for development in a number of directions, but some led up blind alleys. His binary criterion of ‘simplicity/over-elaboration’ seems to have owed more to his paternalistic solicitude for novices in the building of proletarian culture and to his dislike of Modernism than to his organization theory. It is difficult to see of what value these categories could be to anyone in the appreciation, even, of some of the writers he approved of, for

⁸³ See *Voprosy kul'tury pri diktature proletariata* 1925. Moscow & Leningrad: Gosizdat. On this debate, see also Biggart 1992.

⁸⁴ See *O proletarskoy kul'ture 1904–1924*. This inside title page of this anthology is dated 1924 and the cover is dated 1925.

⁸⁵ In general, it appears that the Russian Social Democrats, before 1917, produced fewer social and economic studies of working class life than the agrarian socialists did of the peasantry.

⁸⁶ On Kalinin, see “Novy tip rabotnika” in Bogdanov 1920. Bogdanov quotes from an unpublished work by Vilonov in his Introduction and in Chapter 6 of *Filosofiya zhivogo opyta* 1913 and 1923. See also Scherrer 1980: 165–187; and, on Vilonov and Kalinin, Gloveli 2004, 25–48.

⁸⁷ See Biggart 1990: 265–282. On how workers and intellectuals worked together in the Proletkult, see Mally 1990: 115–121.

⁸⁸ See “Linii kul'tury XIX i XX veka” in Bogdanov 1995; in *Vestnik Mezhdunarodnogo Instituta Bogdanova* 2000 (4): 28–53; and Gloveli 2009, 47–79.



example, Gogol. By contrast, his criticism of Hamlet illustrates the analytical potential of a tektological approach. However, Bogdanov was aware of the experimental nature of his aesthetics, and he acknowledged that all such “evaluations must be subjected to scientific-organizational research and, in the course of development, be replaced by scientific-organizational evaluations.”⁸⁹ The Russian ‘language barrier’ has, until recently, denied Bogdanov’s pioneering work in cultural theory the attention that it merits outside of Russia. The translation of his works into other languages will help to make good this deficiency.

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⁸⁹ My translation from Bogdanov 2003: 392.



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