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The Subject and the Ideal

A Critical Discussion among Russian Marxists before the Revolution

by Daniela Steila

Abstract

At the beginning of the 20th century, criticism of both the classical positivist materialism of the orthodox Marxists and the idealist tendencies of the "legal Marxists" was voiced by some important figures in Russian Marxism, whose positions on this aspect anticipated later critical theory. Thinkers such as A. A. Bogdanov and A. V. Lunacharskii interpreted the ideal as an essential dimension for the development of a critical reflection on the present, as a "different" standpoint from which to view and judge the world as it is. For both, such an Archimedean standpoint was neither given by historical determinism nor by transcendent values. Their "realism," which was not a mere recognition of the dynamics of social, economic and political reality, expressed an emotional affirmation of the creative life of humanity and a strong belief in its power. In this perspective, "critical" Marxism represented an alternative to orthodox Marxism. In contrast to contemporary "critical theory," however, it did not question the idea of a powerful human subject that conquers nature and history.



Keywords: Marxism, science, free will, determinism, ideals, critical theory, collectivism, individualism



The Subject and the Ideal

A Critical Discussion among Russian Marxists before the Revolution

Daniela Steila

At the turn of the twentieth century, Russian Marxism experienced a period of profound internal conflict and remarkable creativity. From the 1890s onwards, the "orthodox" interpretation of Marx's and Engels' views on nature and history, represented by G. V. Plekhanov, was confronted with the emergence of "legal Marxism," which was more interested in the development of capitalism and the pursuit of constitutional freedom than in the prospect of socialist revolution, which was postponed to a distant future.¹ At the beginning of the 20th century, the newly formed Social-Democratic Party split into two factions with different ideas about political work and revolutionary goals. The Bolsheviks advocated a more aggressive program of action, whereas the Mensheviks supported the development of capitalism in Russia as a prerequisite for socialism itself. The philosophical controversies that emerged further complicated the landscape. Both the "orthodox" views, which were inspired by Plekhanov's interpretation of historical and dialectical materialism, and the "critical" views, which sought to combine Marxism with contemporary epistemology, were to be found in both political factions.

This article will focus on what can be called "critical Marxism," that is the diverse group of thinkers who took a common "critical" stance toward the principles of "orthodox" materialism. It is important to note that the term "critical Marxists" has sometimes been used to define legal Marxists because of their interest in Kantianism.² In this article, the term "critical" is used in a different way, more in line with the contemporary notion of "critical theory." In his synthesis, Stephen Bronner asserts that "critically" oriented Marxists in the West "were from the start dismissive of economic determinism, the stage theory of history,

1. See A. Walicki, "Russian Marxism," in *A History of Russian Philosophy. 1830–1930. Faith, Reason, and the Defense of Human Dignity*, ed. G. M. Hamburg and R. A. Poole (New York: Cambridge UP, 2010), 305–308.

2. See C. Henry, "Sergii Bulgakov's Early Marxism: A Narrative of Development," in *Building the House of Wisdom. Sergii Bulgakov and Contemporary Theology: New Approaches and Interpretations*, ed. B. Hallensleben, R. Zwahlen, A. Papanikolaou, P. Kalaitzidis (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2024), 351–352.

and any fatalistic belief in the 'inevitable' triumph of socialism. They were concerned less with what Marx called the economic 'base' than the political and cultural 'superstructure' of society," emphasizing the "utopian moment" and "the role of ideology" in Marxism.³ The aim of this article is precisely to show such a "critical" approach of Russian Marxists in their attitude towards the "ideal." This is manifested in their distancing themselves both from the classical materialism of orthodox Marxists and from the tendencies of legal Marxists towards "idealism."

"Critical" Marxism, which differs markedly from the orthodox theory espoused and developed by Plekhanov or Lenin and subsequently developed in the Soviet Dialectical Materialism ("Diamat"), has attracted particular interest among Western scholars since the late 1960s. Jutta Scherrer, who has written extensively on the subject, acknowledged that "a new generation of historians, partly influenced by the spirit of 1968 and the search for a 'non-Soviet', 'human-faced' Marxism, sought to liberate the historiography of social democracy and Russian Marxism from its unambiguous fixation on Lenin. Bogdanov's collectivist thought was 'discovered' as an alternative to Leninism, and the group around Bogdanov became known as the 'other Bolsheviks', as described by Robert C. Williams."⁴ In the Soviet Union, Lenin's "rivals" enjoyed a brief period of popularity during the *perestroika* era for similar reasons. However, the denunciation of Marxism in general soon erased all ideological differences, and Marxism as a whole was generally disregarded as a subject of reflection and interest.

In the historical context, "critical" Marxism did represent an alternative to orthodox Marxism, which became the official Soviet ideology. However, it would be wrong to consider it as a complete alternative concept of socialism. In my conclusions, I will argue that, unlike contemporary "critical theory," which questions the legacy of the Enlightenment and modernity, early 20th century Russian "critical" Marxists could not challenge the idea of a powerful human subject conquering nature and history. This is the fundamental limitation of their critical perspective.

Marxism as a Science

Once the "materialist conception of history"—as Marxism was often called to avoid censorship—took hold in Russia, both in academic discussions of political economy and among revolutionaries disillusioned with Populism, one of the features that contributed to its success was an understanding of the internal dynamics of history according to principles that were as necessary as the laws of nature. One of the reasons why many revolutionaries,

3. S. E. Bronner, *Critical Theory. A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford UP, 2011), 2.

4. J. Scherrer, "Ortodossia o eresia? Alla ricerca di una cultura politica del bolscevismo," in *Gor'kij-Bogdanov e la scuola di Capri. Una corrispondenza inedita (1908-1911)*, ed. J. Scherrer and D. Steila (Rome: Carocci, 2017), 37. The reference is to R. C. Williams, *The Other Bolsheviks: Lenin and His Critics 1904-1914* (Bloomington-Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1986).

including Georgii Valentinovich Plekhanov, the so-called "father of Russian Marxism," abandoned Populism and turned to Marxism was that it appeared to be a concrete and "scientific" theory, in contrast to Populism, which relied on human subjects and their personal decisions. Instead of trying to understand the laws of history and directing "their revolutionary activity accordingly," Plekhanov wrote, a typical populist Blanquist "merely substitutes their conspiratorial skill for historical development."⁵ But only a rigorous scientific explanation of history can lead to successful practice. In Plekhanov's words: "To discover the laws, under the influence of which the historical development of humankind takes place, means to acquire the possibility of consciously influencing the process of this development; it means to cease being a powerless plaything of 'chance' and to become its master."⁶

In Russia, Marxism attracted revolutionary youth because of its "scientific" form. Many years later, tracing his own philosophical path, Semyon Frank emphasized that Marxism initially appealed to him as a "scientific" worldview. He described it as the "idea that the life of human society could be known in its regularity by studying it, as the natural sciences study nature."⁷ In 1922, the poet Vladimir Maiakovsky observed: "All my life I have been amazed by how Socialists can disentangle facts and systematize the world."⁸ Marxism was conceived as a science that would provide its adherents with a supposedly correct understanding of the laws of history and enable them to act accordingly within history, thereby guaranteeing the ultimate success of their political actions. In this sense, Lenin claimed in 1913 that "the Marxist doctrine is omnipotent because it is true."⁹

The "truth" of the doctrine gave its adherents both the assurance of their ultimate triumph and the moral justification to do whatever was necessary to pursue a goal that was both the culmination of history and their own. This type of conviction had deep roots in the nineteenth-century intelligentsia. One cannot help but recall the words of V. G. Belinskii in his letter to V. P. Botkin dated September 8, 1841: people "are so witless that they must be forcibly led to happiness."¹⁰ Those who possessed the truth were given the authority to lead or force others to follow when they were unable to perceive and understand their genuine interests. Marxism as a science could provide the "true" vision to lead all humanity to its "true" happiness.

However, viewing Marxism as a science has implications not only for the justification of the means to be used to achieve the "objective" supreme goal of history, but also for the role of the individual in history and their freedom of action. This was a familiar theme in

5. G. V. Plekhanov, *Izbrannye filosofskie proizvedeniia* (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1956–1958), vol. 1: 127.

6. *Ibid.*, vol. 4: 425.

7. S. L. Frank, "Predsmertnoe (Vospominaniia i mysli)," in *Vestnik Russkogo Khristianskogo Dvizheniia*, I, no. 146 (1986): 110–111.

8. V. Mayakovskii, *Mayakovsky and His Poetry*, trans. H. Marshall (London: The Pilot Press, 1942), 15.

9. V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972–1978), vol. 19: 23.

10. V. G. Belinskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: AN SSSR, 1956), vol. 12: 71; trans. in *Russian Philosophy*, ed. J. M. Edie, J. P. Scanlan, M.-B. Zeldin, G. L. Kline, 3 vols. (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1965), vol. 1: 311.

the history of Russian thought. As early as the 1860s, the debate between positivists and anti-positivists had already made it clear that a deterministic worldview would ultimately lead to the surrender of individual freedom. It can be argued that only if human behavior is understood as determined by natural laws, by the physiological constitution of the human body, and by "rational egoism," is it possible to develop a "human science" that is just as well-founded as the natural sciences. In Turgenev's *Fathers and Children*, Bazarov states: "What's important is that twice two is four and all the rest's nonsense."¹¹ But when determinism pervades all aspects of human life, the notion of human free will is reduced to a trifle, with profound ethical consequences. As Dostoevsky observed in his *Notes from Underground*, a world governed entirely by deterministic principles would reduce human beings to nothing more than the keys of a piano or the pipes of an organ played by someone else's hands, whereas human beings value their freedom above all else. In order to assert themselves and their freedom, they are willing to renounce any rational calculation and do something irrational or crazy, even to the point of denying their own well-being, in order to disrupt the perfect mechanism of the necessary laws of science and retain a modicum of unpredictable irrationality.¹²

At the end of the nineteenth century, the German philosopher Rudolf Stammler, in his polemic against Marxism, reiterated the contradiction between human free will and historical determinism. His essay *Wirtschaft und Recht* had a great influence on the Russian progressive intelligentsia, both among Populists and Marxists. The text was first translated and published in the journal *Severnnyi Vestnik* in 1898, then as a separate book in 1899 and again in two volumes in 1907.¹³ Stammler criticized Marx's efforts to reduce history to the laws of economics and thus provide a scientific explanation for historical facts that turned out to be inevitable and completely independent of human will. Stammler argued that such a wholly consistent determinism would lead to the abandonment of all struggle and would in no way inspire revolutionary enthusiasm. Marx identified historical dynamics that would have unfolded independently of human agency and commitment. But, as Stammler's most famous illustration shows, no one would consider forming a political party or revolutionary movement with the goal of achieving a lunar eclipse, since this phenomenon depends solely on astronomical laws that are completely indifferent to human action. If socialism is the inevitable result of the laws of history, why bother to fight for it? For Stammler, the fact that

11. I. S. Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*, trans. R. Freeborn (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991), 44.

12. F. M. Dostoevskii, *Notes from Underground*, trans. M. Ginsburg (New York: Bantam Books, 1974), 26–28; D. O. Thompson, "Dostoevsky and Science," in *The Cambridge Companion to Dostoevskii*, ed. W. J. Leatherbarrow (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 191–211.

13. R. Stammler, *Khoziaistvo i pravo s tochki zreniia materialisticheskogo ponimaniia istorii*, Prilozhenie k *Severnomu Vestniku* 1, 10/12 (1898) (St. Petersburg: N. Berezin i M. Semenov, 1899; 2-oe izd. St. Petersburg: Nachalo, 1907).

the Marxists called people to action indicated that they themselves, more or less consciously, regarded human effort toward a goal as a condition for the realization of the goal itself.¹⁴

In Russia, Pavel Novgorodtsev, a liberal philosopher with neo-Kantian sympathies, succinctly summed up the central issue as follows: "It is difficult to exaggerate the combination of fatalism and pragmatism inherent in Marx's teachings. The fatalistic certainty of the inevitable affirmation of the perfect condition actually reduces human action to the level of a simple reflex in the objective course of events. What is the point of calls to action and struggle if everything is ultimately determined by the inescapable laws of history?"¹⁵ This question gave rise to a great deal of lively debate among Russian Marxists, not only in terms of its philosophical significance, but also in terms of its practical implications. On the one hand, by providing solid guarantees for the realization of the ideal, scientific socialism avoided the danger of dissolving into a mere utopian fantasy. On the other hand, it was susceptible to the potential pitfall of becoming a mere form of fatalism that could lead to indifference and passivity.

The "Idealism" of Legal Marxists and Their Orthodox Critics

Following the publication of Stammler's book, it became, as one contemporary ironically observed, "impossible to be a Marxist writer without having one's own philosophy, at least for domestic use."¹⁶ The interest in philosophy, well documented among Russian Marxists since their early critique of Populism, was now focused on the relationship between historical necessity and political action.

In particular, the so-called "legal Marxists" sought to understand the meaning of political action not in its conformity to the supposedly necessary laws of history, but in its connection to social ethical values. Sergii Bulgakov traced his intellectual path from Marxism to Idealism in precisely this way: "The question of the social ideal, which for me had previously been posed and completely resolved in the field of positive Marxist sociology, gradually emerged from it and was formulated more and more clearly as a religious and metaphysical problem."¹⁷ In the process, he credited Stammler with shattering the supposed scientific certainty of Marxism: "As a result of the polemic with Stammler [...] it had to be recognized beyond doubt that the actual ideal of Marxism is not provided by science, but by 'life', therefore it is *outside* the purview of science or it is *non-scientific*."¹⁸ Bulgakov himself and other Russian Marxists of the

14. R. Stammler, *Wirtschaft und Recht nach der Materialistischen Geschichtsauffassung. Eine sozial-politische Untersuchung* (Leipzig: Veit, 1896), 432–433.

15. Quoted in M. Kolerov, *Idealismus militans: istoriia i obshchestvennyi smysl' sbornika "Problemy idealizma," in Problemy idealizma. Sbornik statei* (Moscow: Tri kvadrata, 2002), 87.

16. L. Gavrilovich, "Noveishie russkie metafiziki," in *Voprosy filosofii i psikhologii* 75 (5) (1904): 647.

17. S. N. Bulgakov, *Ot marksizma k idealizmu. Stat'i i retsenzii 1893-1903* (St. Petersburg: Obshchestvennaia pol'za, 1903), xvi. On the question of the ideal in Bulgakov's early works, see Caleb Henry, *op. cit.*, 356–357.

18. Bulgakov, *Ot marksizma k idealizmu*, ix.

time attempted to re-found the "social ideals" on a moral basis. They did not reject the social ideals themselves; rather, they sought to give these ideals a new and more solid foundation. As Bulgakov himself stated: "Idealism aspires to perform for social ideals the same function that economic materialism plays for Marxism: it is a kind of new foundation laid under the old edifice."¹⁹

In a letter to Petr Struve, Nikolai Berdiaev expressed a similar intention: "My greatest wish is to raise Marxism to the heights of heaven, to give it an ultimately idealistic character."²⁰ In 1901, he published an essay that would have a profound impact on his intellectual development and that of his contemporaries, titled "The Struggle for Idealism." Berdiaev identified himself as a "dissident Marxist" and asserted that "the melody of positivism, naturalism, and hedonism has been sung."²¹ Although he conceded that some positivist claims were unavoidable in the field of natural science, he rejected them outright in the field of philosophy and ethics. As for history, Berdiaev later recalled in his autobiography that he never fully embraced the Marxist view: "I accepted a materialist conception of history, but I refused to ascribe a metaphysical meaning to it and to link it to general philosophical materialism."²² In his letters to Struve, he summarized the main points of his "Struggle for Idealism" as follows: "It is we, the representatives of the progressive social aspirations of modern times, who must declare the struggle for (social-moral, philosophical-religious, aesthetic) idealism. We must deny the reactionary forces their right to idealism, those dark forces that boast in the mud. We are the only ones who aspire upwards in all respects."²³ In his essay, Berdiaev proposed uniting practical and theoretical idealism in order to "fight together against the social and cultural bourgeois spirit (*burzhuaznost'*) and prepare the human soul for the future of society."²⁴ In contrast to Bernstein's quietism, Berdiaev emphasized the profound emotional dimension inherent in his own ideas. He wrote: "We need breathtaking emotions to transcend the ugly vulgarity of the ordinary gray life, to seize the enthusiasm without which nothing great has ever been done in history."²⁵ Political activists and committed intellectuals should consider "the ideal goals that transcend the material means of struggle."²⁶ According to Berdiaev, the "great task" of his time was "to introduce a moral content into the social forms that the progressive forces of society carry within themselves."²⁷ In essence, Berdiaev considered

19. Ibid., vi.

20. M. A. Kolerov, "N. A. Berdiaev v nachale puti (pis'ma k P. B. i N. A. Struve)," in *Litso: Biograficheskii al'manakh*, 3 (Moscow-St Petersburg: Feniks-Atheneum, 1993), 127.

21. N. A. Berdiaev, "Bor'ba za idealizm," in *Mir bozhii*, 6 (1901): 2.

22. N. A. Berdiaev, *Samopoznanie. Opyt filosofskoi avtobiografii* (Moscow: Kniga, 1991), 123.

23. Kolerov, "N. A. Berdiaev v nachale puti," 134.

24. Berdiaev, "Bor'ba za idealizm," 14.

25. Ibid., 34.

26. Ibid., 23.

27. Ibid., 31.

himself as a "realist" in his analysis of contemporary economic processes. However, when he addressed the subject of revolution and socialism, he did not imply that history would unfold independently. Here, the intelligentsia was called upon to play a decisive role in guiding the social movement through actions consistent with ideals.

As a result of his embrace of "idealism," Berdiaev contributed to the remarkable success of the collection that appeared in late 1902 (officially dated 1903) under the title *Problems of Idealism*. Under the auspices of the Moscow Psychological Society, twelve authors of varying renown compiled a collection of essays. They did not always take the same positions, but shared a common interest in important philosophical problems, especially ethics, that positivism seemed to have neglected. In his preface, the editor, Pavel Novgorodtsev, explained the failure of positivism "in the face of the complex and ineradicable problems of moral consciousness, philosophical inquiry, and living creativity. The light of philosophical idealism," he concluded, "is necessary to meet these new challenges."²⁸

For the authors of the collection, the term "idealism" was not used in the context of abstract theoretical speculation. Their use of the word had nothing to do with the metaphysical foundations of Hegelianism. Rather, they regarded Kantianism as the basis for the moral ideals of the individual and their efforts to realize those ideals in the world. Instead of the certainty about the ultimate outcomes of history implied by the fatalistic results of Marxist historical determinism, the Russian "Idealists" held that individual ethical choices are of paramount importance in all human action. In Caryl Emerson's summary: "Idealism is completely alien to those sorts of naïveté that counsel us to await a change in environment that will then bring about (for the most part automatically) a change in the self. Such mechanical solutions are castles in the air. In contrast, living by ideals is supremely realistic, since coherence or justice is at no point expected from the outside world or imposed upon it."²⁹ In such a perspective, every social and political commitment must be based on the moral choices of the individual. Sergii Bulgakov observed that interpreting social struggle "not merely as a confrontation of hostile interests, but as the realization and development of a moral idea" does not diminish the idealistic drive for political action, but rather strengthens it. He continued: "Our participation in it will be motivated not by egoistic class interest, but by religious duty, by an absolute order of the moral law, by a dictate of God."³⁰ When political commitment is based on ethics and not on historical materialism, it will be even stronger and more powerful.

In the context of Russian Marxism, a number of highly respected figures spoke out against the "idealist turn" of the authors of *Problems of Idealism*, especially those who distanced themselves from their own earlier Marxist positions. Both Georgii Plekhanov

28. *Problems of Idealism. Essays in Russian Social Philosophy*, trans. and ed. R. A. Poole (New Haven & London: Yale UP, 2003), 83.

29. C. Emerson, "Foreword," in *Problems of Idealism*, xii.

30. *Problems of Idealism*, 118.

and his follower Liubov' Aksel'rod proposed a classical, Hegelian, and Spinozian solution to the contradiction between determinism and freedom by identifying freedom with the consciousness of necessity. In his 1898 essay on *The Role of the Individual in History*, Plekhanov was primarily addressing the Populists, but he also made some remarks about Stammler. Plekhanov conceded that "a party to facilitate a lunar eclipse could only exist in a lunatic asylum," because "human action is not and cannot be among the conditions whose conjunction is necessary for a lunar eclipse." However, Plekhanov notes:

[I]n order for the example of the lunar eclipse to cease to be meaningless [...], one would have to assume that the moon is endowed with a mind, and that the position in celestial space that causes its eclipse is perceived by the moon as the result of the self-determination of its own will, and not only gives the moon enormous pleasure, but is essential to its moral calmness, leading it constantly to strive to occupy that position. Having considered all this, one must ask how the moon would feel if it finally realized that its motion in the celestial space is not determined by its own will or "ideals," but rather that its motion determines its own will and "ideals."³¹

If Stammler's hypothesis were correct, the moon would be paralyzed. According to Plekhanov, in contrast, the most energetic practical action can arise from the awareness of the necessity of a certain process. Plekhanov adopted Spinoza's identification of freedom and necessity:

When the consciousness of the non-freedom of the will takes the form of the complete subjective and objective impossibility of behaving otherwise than one is currently doing, and when at the same time the given actions are those that one considers the most desirable of all possible actions, then necessity is identified in the mind with freedom, and freedom with necessity. In this case, one is not free only in the sense that one cannot overturn this identity of freedom and necessity; one cannot oppose them; one cannot feel the constraint of necessity. Conversely, such an absence of freedom is at the same time its fullest manifestation.³²

From the perspective of the human subject in history, "the consciousness of the absolute necessity of a given phenomenon can only intensify one's own energy if one is in sympathy with that phenomenon and considers oneself as one of the forces that brought it about."³³ It is in this sense that Marxism should be considered deterministic. In contrast to the voluntarism of Populism, Plekhanov adhered to the scientific basis of Marxism and its implications for individual action and the general philosophy of history.

31. G. V. Plekhanov, *Izbrannye filosofskie proizvedeniia*, vol. 2: 303.

32. *Ibid.*, 304–307.

33. *Ibid.*, 308.

It was Plekhanov's follower Liubov' Aksel'rod who first attacked "legal Marxists" from the standpoint of orthodox Marxism. She had been concerned about the success of Kantian ideas in Russia since the late 1890s. In a letter to her mentor Plekhanov, while both were living as émigrés in Switzerland, she expressed her concern: "Those who have recently returned from Petersburg have informed me that the younger generation there has simply gone mad over Kant. A considerable number of clubs have been formed with the specific aim of studying the *Critique*. I can easily imagine the confusion and disorder that must reign in their minds!"³⁴ As a philosophy student, she was assigned by Plekhanov himself the task of criticizing the new currents that were becoming so popular in Russia. In Plekhanov's words, Aksel'rod could "use the philosophical information that [she] had acquired and do socialism a great service by ridding it of neo-Kantian vulgarities" by publishing in both revolutionary journals abroad and legal journals in Russia.³⁵

Aksel'rod was convinced that materialism could "explain the real world in terms of its inherent internal regularity, that is, in terms of mechanical causation,"³⁶ and could be applied to both natural and social sciences. However, the claim that every phenomenon can be explained in terms of objective mechanical causation does not preclude the possibility of ethical judgment and evaluation. When Bulgakov observed that "from the perspective of mechanical causality, one set of phenomena is no different from another,"³⁷ Aksel'rod responded: "We [materialists] consider all phenomena that contribute to the self-preservation of both individuals and society as progressive, and all phenomena that delay or hinder such self-preservation as regressive, although both types occur according to necessary causal laws."³⁸ Aksel'rod maintains that well-founded ethical principles can be established within a materialist worldview, since it is perfectly understandable that human beings develop moral ideals and concepts throughout history as a result of historical conditions. She gave several illustrative examples:

The pursuit of an ideal is the movement toward a specific, concrete, more perfect future, the realization of which must take place here on earth, within history. Morality means solidarity with one's fellow human beings, the ability and willingness to sacrifice personal interests and oneself for the benefit of society and future generations. Spiritual improvement can be defined as the expansion and deepening of one's spiritual personality to the point of merging one's life, suffering and triumph with the life, suffering and triumph of the whole of humanity.³⁹

34. *Literaturnoe nasledie G. V. Plekhanova* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe social'no-ekonomicheskoe izdatel'stvo, 1934), sb. 1: 297.

35. *Ibid.*, 283.

36. L. I. Aksel'rod, *O "Problemakh idealizma"* (Odessa: Kommercheskaia, 1905), 46.

37. *Ibid.*, 47.

38. *Ibid.*, 48–49.

39. *Ibid.*, 7–8.

In Liubov' Aksel'rod's view, socialism did not need a moral foundation in Kant's imperative in order to develop "ideals."

"Critical" Marxism

The "orthodox" positions of Plekhanov and Aksel'rod were not the only responses to the challenges of the new discussions on the "ideal" and "idealism." Between 1899 and 1902, a particularly remarkable and innovative group of exiled Marxists met first in Kaluga and then in Vologda. Later, A. V. Lunacharskii recalled that

at that time there were few towns in Russia where such a circle of Marxist forces could be observed. Besides, we were all united by a certain original inclination. We were all deeply interested in the philosophical aspect of Marxism, and at the same time we were eager to strengthen its epistemological, ethical and aesthetic sides. This was done, on the one hand, independently of Kantianism, to which a tendency had already begun to develop—recently so noticeable both in Germany and in Russia (Berdiaev, Bulgakov)—and, on the other hand, without capitulating to the narrow orthodoxy of the French encyclopedists, on which Plekhanov tried to base the whole of Marxism.⁴⁰

The most original and creative thinker among these "unorthodox" Marxists was Aleksandr Bogdanov, already known at the time as the author of a very popular *Short Course in Political Economy* and of a philosophical essay, *Basic Elements of the Historical View of Nature*, which were intended "to respond to the extensive demands of our workers for a general worldview."⁴¹

When Berdiaev, exiled in Vologda with Bogdanov, Lunacharskii and others, published his first "idealist" article in 1901, both Bogdanov and Lunacharskii attacked him as a traitor in lively debates that inflamed the colony of exiled activists. As a psychiatrist, Bogdanov visited Berdiaev for some time to examine his psychological condition, postulating that Berdiaev's idealistic conversion could be explained by a psycho-physical disorder.⁴² After the group of exiled political activists left Vologda, their polemics continued in the press.

In particular, Bogdanov and Lunacharskii developed a worldview that sought to offer an alternative to both orthodox Marxism and "idealistic" Kantian revisionism. In their view, revolutionary values could be grounded neither in the transcendental world of ethics nor in the necessary laws of history. However, it was precisely these values that required a solid foundation, since only a robust and reliable basis could allow for a critique of reality and the successful implementation of political and social action. Once both the ethical foundation of idealist values and the fatalistic outlook of orthodox Marxists were rejected, the question

40. A. V. Lunacharskii, *Vospominaniia i vpechatleniia* (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1968), 26.

41. *Deiateli SSSR i revoliutsionnogo dvizheniia v Rossii* (Moscow: Sovetskaia entsiklopediia, 1989), 361.

42. Berdiaev, *Samopoznanie*, 127.

remained: how to formulate the project of the future in such a way that it would not become a futile aspiration, but rather a desirable, compelling goal that would inspire successful action.

After the publication of *Problems of Idealism*, such a question became unavoidable. In February 1903, Lunacharskii intervened in the discussion with a commentary on the recently published collection of essays titled "*Problems of Idealism from the Standpoint of Critical Realism*." In this context, he explicitly asserted the necessity of a "critical" standpoint, situated outside of existing reality, in order to engage in criticism of reality itself. He wrote: "In order to oppose reality, one obviously needs a point outside of it, an Archimedean point on which to rely."⁴³ But he thought that the "Idealists" went too far in putting it in some metaphysical sphere, ultimately—according to Lunacharskii—because they lacked courage and could not face the uncertainty of reality itself. Consequently, they imagined a realm of absolute values. In contrast, Lunacharskii, Bogdanov, and others sought to establish their ideals on a realistic and "scientific" basis, while at the same time avoiding any form of "fatalism." This position was called "realism," and it was the common ground of a collection of essays that appeared in 1903 in response to *Problems of Idealism: Essays on a Realistic Worldview*. The broad first section included three philosophical essays by Suvorov, Lunacharskii and Bazarov, all of whom were very active participants in the discussions within the exile community in Vologda. The second section dealt with "economic" issues, with essays by Bogdanov and others. The third section presented a miscellany, including an essay by N. Korsak, which was another pseudonym for A. A. Malinovskii, alias Bogdanov.

In the introduction to the first edition in 1904 (probably written by Bogdanov himself), idealism was rejected as the unhealthy consequence of, paradoxically, ideal weakness, demoralization, distrust of human possibilities, and retreat to metaphysical guarantees. The authors' realism, on the other hand, was characterized by the rejection of all metaphysical absolutes. This theoretical conception had strong practical implications. It was a form of disenchanted realism closely linked to a practical "idealism" of enthusiastic commitment to the fullness of life. In the preface we read: "Steady consistency in knowledge and steady consistency in life are two manifestations of the same principle. Theoretical realism, as the expression of this principle in the sphere of knowledge, and practical idealism, as its expression in the sphere of life, are siblings in spirit."⁴⁴

The collective volume attempted to propose a new worldview, rather than merely to criticize idealism. A few months after its publication, Lunacharskii explicitly asserted the autonomous and original meaning of the text. "We have come *all by ourselves*—he wrote—to present some problems that, to a superficial observer, appear to be very closely related to reflections and discourses of the idealists. There is no doubt that the ideas on which the 'realists' base their work would have been articulated regardless of the appearance of the 'pious

43. A. V. Lunacharskii, *Etiudy kriticheskie i polemicheskie* (Moscow: Pravda, 1905), 215.

44. *Ocherki realisticheskogo mirovozzreniia. Sbornik statei po filosofii, obshchestvennoi nauke i zhizni*, 2-oe izd. (St. Petersburg: Izd. S. Dorovatovskogo i A. Charushnikova, 1905), v.

philosophers' who shine with their halo of sanctity. Their appearance was only a signal to us that it was time to come out!"⁴⁵

For the authors of the "realist" collection, realism was the standpoint of a consistent critique of every form of metaphysics, including the traditional materialist metaphysics of historical necessity as well as the new metaphysics of transcendent values. However, this did not imply a rejection of ideals and their significance for human action. As Bogdanov noted as early as 1901, this form of realism was opposed to "idolism," the metaphysical absolutization of values and ideas, but not to "idealism." He explained that "*the characterisation of 'idealism' is applied to the manifestation of active psychical life; feelings, desires, and deeds are considered to be idealistic the more they are socially directed.*" At the same time, this characterisation always presupposes a real or only a conceptual *clash* between attitudes that are more social and attitudes that are less social whereby the first is victorious. [...] Idealism signifies a victorious struggle of more social elements of the psyche with less social elements."⁴⁶

In discussing Stammler's ideas, which, as we have seen, were so influential for the Marxists who embraced "idealism," Bogdanov noted that Stammler's main error was his assumption "that everything other than 'external norms' is nothing but 'individual' and 'accidental'." In contrast, realism holds that "collective experience" is a powerful force within social reality, capable of "bringing regularity into the social life of people to a much greater degree than external norms." Bogdanov continued:

Collaboration is inseparable from the commonality of experiences. Social labour means social experience. The human psyche is a product of the life of social labour, and no matter how "individual" it is, a multitude of threads continuously tie it together with the psyches of other people. The basic similarity of biological organization, the same spontaneous forces of external nature that people struggle against and overcome, the constant exchange of thoughts and impressions—all of these things form a massive amount of common experiences in the life of any given society.⁴⁷

Ideals are an integral part of this collective experience. They derive from the power of life itself, from the human desire for a better, stronger, and fuller life for all the humanity. As expressions of collective experience, they can direct human action toward their goal.

Lunacharskii also rejected the assumption that positivism *per se* negates the power of ideals, which was one of the fundamental tenets of the entire collection of *Problems of Idealism*. On the contrary, he asserted that "positivism cannot ignore" the existence of the ideal, which

45. A. V. Lunacharskii, "Zhizn' i literatura," in *Pravda*, 11 (1904): 261.

46. A. Bogdanov, *Toward a New World: Articles and Essays, 1901–1906: "On the Psychology of Society," "New World," and Contributions to "Studies in the Realist Worldview,"* trans. D. G. Rowley (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2021), 21. Italics in the original.

47. *Ibid.*, 369.

emerges from human life in its constant confrontation with the natural and social environment. In Lunacharskii's words,

humanity aims not only at the knowledge of the external environment, but also at the clarification of a corresponding program of action: how should the environment be modified so that all the needs (including the ever-present need for growth of forces) are satisfied as fully and luxuriously as possible? How should the forces of humanity be organized to achieve this goal more effectively? These are the basic questions of positive idealism.⁴⁸

Since ideals are based on the growth of the vital forces in humanity, Lunacharskii identified "the criterion for comparing ideals" in "the fullness of life."

Clearly, the realists' conception of the "ideal" differed markedly from the transcendent ideals espoused by Bulgakov, Berdiaev, and others. Lunacharskii emphasized this distinction: "*An ideal before us* serves as a powerful motivator for action, while an *ideal above us* eliminates the need to work. It is already there, it exists apart from us, and it is reached not by knowledge, struggle, or reform, but by mystical divination, mystical ecstasy, and deep introspection. The more the idealists strive to illuminate the kingdom of heaven, the more tragic is the darkness they cast upon the earth."⁴⁹

The ideal ahead was compatible with determinism, while at the same time rejecting fatalism. Lunacharskii attempted to draw a clear distinction: while fatalism is incompatible with freedom, since "it presupposes the consciousness of a power existing outside us and against us," determinism, on the other hand, "does not contradict freedom at all. It merely analyzes the fact of my freedom, finds that freedom is *mine*, i.e. it is determined by *my* organism, which in its turn is connected in a chain of phenomena." Lunacharskii concluded: "The same determinism teaches that no *action can* take place without consequences, and that we can always rely on certain laws to produce the desired result of a finalistic impact on the environment."⁵⁰ Such determinism provided a solid foundation for human action and guaranteed its success. However, it did not contradict the role of ideals, which arise from the human desire for a fuller and stronger life.

For both Bogdanov and Lunacharskii, probably the most original thinkers among the non-Orthodox Russian Marxists at the early twentieth century, the Archimedean point—which was necessary to develop a critical attitude toward reality and ultimately to overthrow it—was not provided by the certainty of objective structural laws of historical development, which was the core of Plekhanov's Marxism. Nor was it provided by the transcendent values dear to the authors of *Problems of Idealism*.

48. Lunacharskii, *Etiudy kriticheskie i polemicheskie*, 235–236.

49. *Ocherki realisticheskogo mirovozzreniia*, 131.

50. *Ibid.*, 236–237.

Nevertheless, Bogdanov and Lunacharskii held different views on the foundation of their critique of reality. Bogdanov believed that objective knowledge could be based on the collective experience of humanity. In his view, "the characterization of 'objectivity' altogether cannot be based on individual experience—neither the stability of its composition nor the harmony between the results of activity and the data of experience that is the starting point of that activity. The basis of 'objectivity' must lie in the sphere of *collective* experience."⁵¹ Although Bogdanov emphasized the collective character of human experience, it is important to note that "there is no place for the absolute in the sphere of human experience; everything there is relative."⁵² In the course of history, humanity develops worldviews that prove increasingly effective in organizing human experience. However, none of these worldviews, including Marxism, can claim absolute truth. According to Bogdanov, "for a philosophy that takes a historical perspective, there is neither absolute truth nor absolute error. Such a philosophy is obligated to find in every error that portion of relative truth which justified belief in it, just as it strives to find in every truth that portion of error that requires us to move on from this truth to another, higher truth."⁵³ Plekhanov and Lenin both argued that there is an "objective" criterion of truth, and that this criterion is located not in the subject, but in the relations that exist in the external world. As Plekhanov summarized: "Those views are *true* which correctly represent these relations; those views are *false* which distort them. The theory of natural science is *true* when it correctly grasps the mutual relations between the phenomena of nature; a historical description is *true* when it correctly depicts the social relations existing in the epoch described."⁵⁴ Conversely, Bogdanov proposed a criterion for selecting the most optimal of various ideals, defined in the broadest collective sense as the highest ideal. He wrote: "Since the essence of idealism consists in the social nature of its frame of mind, the more social the ideals are, the more idealistic they are." For example, "an ideal that does not go beyond the confines of the relationship of life of a limited group of people is lower than an ideal whose content embraces the life of all society."⁵⁵

Lunacharskii believed that the standpoint of effective critique of reality and the basis of progressive ideals was the tension of life towards the full realization of its power and strength. Unlike traditional metaphysical thinkers, who "worship the existing and close their eyes to everything else," "realists" aim to "enlighten and unify the whole of reality."⁵⁶ Their monistic worldview could not be limited to the representation of reality, but had to become the framework and orientation for human active intervention in the natural and

51. A. A. Bogdanov, *Empiriomonism. Essays in Philosophy*, books 1–3, trans. and ed. D. G. Rowley (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2019), 18. Italics in the original.

52. Bogdanov, *Toward a New World*, 29.

53. Bogdanov, *Empiriomonism*, 133.

54. Plekhanov, *Izbrannye filosofskie proizvedeniia*, vol. 1: 671.

55. Bogdanov, *Toward a New World*, 24.

56. R. Avenarius, *Kritika chistogo opyta v populiarnom izlozhenii A. Lunacharskogo* (Moscow: Izd. S. Dorovatovskogo i A. Charushnikova, 1905), 122–123.

social environment. According to Lunacharskii (as well as to Bogdanov), the values that guide human action in the world cannot be absolute. He wrote: "Nothing in the world is inherently good or evil. Nothing possesses intrinsic value, outside of its relation to a sentient organism."⁵⁷ A thing is considered good for a given subject if it enhances its ability to live or the depth of its life. Ultimately, the criterion of value must be one's own pleasure. Lunacharskii conceived of this as "*edoné*, the wavering *joy of life*," "the joyful feeling of the growth of one's inner strength."⁵⁸ Inspired by both Nietzsche and Avenarius, Lunacharskii maintained that "the love of life, of nature, a boundlessly increasing tendency to happiness" was the basis of his "assessment of the world." Furthermore, he noted that this perspective was "completely pagan," since it "has nothing to do with the morality of duty, since it *does not subject* the human being *to anything*," but pursues "the fullest and most harmonious possible existence."⁵⁹

An Alternative Marxism?

The "critical" Marxism proposed by thinkers such as Bogdanov and Lunacharskii developed as an alternative to both orthodox Marxism and the "idealism" of the legal Marxists. The concept of the subject and its capacity to act in the world was central. In contrast to the individualistic perspective of the legal Marxists, the "critical" Marxists posited that the individual is inextricably linked to the collective of humanity, which they identified as the true subject of history. In contrast to the orthodox Marxists, they argued that absolute truth was impossible, and that this lack of absolute truth precluded the possibility of ultimate guarantees, including those that might have been derived from the necessary laws of history. Nevertheless, the "critical" thinkers examined here seem to share a fundamental and unshakable conviction that the pursuit of individual personal aspirations would not conflict with the needs of collective development. Lunacharskii asserted that the diversity and plurality of individual ideas was a necessary condition for the progress of the collective community. In his 1909 contribution to the *Essays of a Collectivist World-View*, Lunacharskii declared that "the development of 'individuality' and spiritual originality cannot but be highly valued in socialist society for the same reasons that it will never renounce a certain degree of specialization within various branches of labor. The presence of a multiplicity of ideas, an abundance of different points of view, hypotheses, directions, provides the most successful approach, since the fundamental law by which ideas are improved is their conflict and the triumph of the most viable."⁶⁰ Bogdanov, for his part, was aware that there could be a conflict between individual choice and collective organization, but he was confident that

57. Lunacharskii, *Etiudy kriticheskie i polemicheskie*, 396.

58. Ibid., 155, 172.

59. Ibid., 405. See D. Steila, *Nauka i revoliutsiia. Retseptsiia empiriokrititsizma v russkoi kul'ture*, trans. O. Popova (Moscow: Akademicheskii Proekt, 2013), 165–177; B. G. Rosenthal, *New Myth, New World. From Nietzsche to Stalinism* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State UP, 2002).

60. *Ocherki filosofii kollektivizma* (St. Petersburg: Znanie, 1909), 253.

the statistical laws of large numbers would eventually reconcile freedom and necessity. In the socialist society of Mars, as depicted in Bogdanov's utopian novel *Red Star*, the figures provided by the Central Institute of Statistics indicate the number of workers required in each area of production, and hundreds and thousands of workers redistribute themselves accordingly. This ensures that the labor necessary for the survival and development of society is obtained without forcing anyone to do a job they do not freely and spontaneously choose. In Bogdanov's words: "The statistics continually affect *mass* transfers of labor, but each individual is free to do as he chooses."⁶¹

The attempt to realize socialism, to which they had devoted their lives, seemed to disprove the fundamental optimism that the harmonization of individual and collective development was possible. In the late 1920s, Bogdanov observed that the supposedly new social system was organized according to the authoritarian models that he had criticized throughout his life. Moreover, Bogdanov noted that the triumphant proletariat was turning into a "herd" of slaves. He wondered: "What did *I* want to do with Marxism and what did *they* do with it?"⁶² Instead of the universal organizing class that was expected to transform the entire world, Bogdanov saw a herd in search of a leader. He jotted down his thoughts in his notebook: "A class that needs absolute leaders is still by its very nature a subordinate class," incapable of assuming responsibility for the new economic, social, and cultural organization.⁶³ Lunacharskii, who played a more active role in building the Bolshevik regime than Bogdanov, seemed to question the moral justification of the atrocities committed in the name of the revolution toward the end of his life. According to his daughter's account, he expressed bitter disillusionment in a diary entry dated 1930:

Of course, I am a revolutionary on behalf of a tremendous flowering of a strong, bright, and just culture. But when you chop wood, the chips fly. Let us suppose that I myself did nothing disagreeable. Even if it were justified by the revolution, but still disagreeable. However, I cannot hide from myself the fact that, in the final analysis, I must answer for everything. [...] Yes, it would be impossible to improve this terrible society without the revolution. But at what price will victory come? And will it indeed come? The price has been paid, but ...⁶⁴

Both Bogdanov and Lunacharskii considered their ideal society to be a system in which each individual could find perfect fulfillment in the wholeness of humanity. Furthermore, both agreed that in order to achieve such an ideal, humanity must overcome its conflicts

61. A. A. Bogdanov, *Red Star. The First Bolshevik Utopia*, ed. L.R. Graham and R. Stites, trans. Ch. Rougle (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984), 68.

62. RGASPI (Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv social'no-politicheskoi istorii), f. 259, op. 1, d. 48, l. 111. The words in italics are underlined in the original.

63. *Ibid.*, l. 43.

64. The quotation from Lunacharskii's diary is provided in I. Lunacharskaia, "Why Did Commissar of Enlightenment A. V. Lunacharskii Resign?" in *The Russian Review*, vol. 51, n. 3 (1992): 341.

and contradictions with the natural environment. The lively discussions on the subject of individual death that took place among the so-called "other Bolsheviks" demonstrate the importance of their belief that even death, as the ultimate inescapable contradiction between human being and nature, would be overcome in the context of the collective immortality of humanity.⁶⁵ However, the transformation of nature by humanity through the "humanization" of nature, as Marx had conceptualized it, became for Russian "critical" Marxists a task of domination and conquest, of technological subjugation of spontaneous and disorganized natural forces, which were therefore perceived as potentially dangerous. Lunacharskii was perhaps the most explicit in declaring that the new worldview takes nature "as a spontaneous force, a half-cosmos, a task, and a source of strength and joy."⁶⁶ The contradictions "between the laws of life and the laws of nature" are overcome by scientific socialism through the introduction of "the idea of the victory of life, the subjugation of spontaneity to reason through knowledge and labor, science, and technology."⁶⁷ In order to achieve this goal, it is necessary for humans "to boldly torture nature everywhere, and overcome its always alleged limitations."⁶⁸ Lunacharskii notes that the new humanity conceives of its "ideal of happiness and community" not as a "mystical dream," but rather as "the plan according to which it must rebuild the world." He continued: "Human beings found themselves as gods in labor, in technique, and decided to impose their will on the world. With a hammer, an iron hammer they will destroy what is formless and evil. With the same hammer they will forge their golden happiness."⁶⁹

The assumption that the human subject is the mighty conqueror of nature and the ultimate ruler of the universe was one that "critical" Marxists could not criticize. It could be said that this idea is deeply embedded in the whole of modernity, which Marxism ended up sharing with capitalism because of the common conviction that science and technology will eventually overcome the misery and suffering of humanity. Today, however, as we face the catastrophic consequences of climate change and as technology is often used to facilitate ever more destructive aggression and devastation, it becomes imperative to reconsider this notion of a powerful human subject. A consideration of the reflections on the meaning of the "ideal" and the relationship between freedom and necessity that developed in Russian Marxism at the beginning of the twentieth century reveals that the traditional modern conception of human

65. See R. C. Williams, "Collective Immortality. The Syndicalist Origins of Proletarian Culture, 1905–1910," in *Slavic Review* 39, 3 (1980): 389–402; R. Tartarin, "Transfusion sanguine et immortalité chez Alexandr Bogdanov," in *Droit et société* 28 (1994): 565–581; D. Steila, "Death and Anti-Death in Russian Marxism at the Beginning of the 20th Century," in *Death and Anti-Death*, ed. Ch. Tandy (Palo Alto: RIA UP, 2003), 101–130; Rosenthal, *New Myth, New World*, 79–93; A. Bernstein, *The Future of Immortality. Remaking Life and Death in Contemporary Russia* (Princeton-Oxford: Princeton UP, 2019), 67–70.

66. A. V. Lunacharskii, "Budushchee religii," in *Obrazovanie* 11 (1907): 60.

67. A. V. Lunacharskii, *Religiia i socializm* (St. Petersburg: Shipovnik, 1908), vol. 1: 40–42.

68. A. V. Lunacharskii, "Dvadtsats' tretii sbornik *Znaniia*," in *Literaturnyi raspad*, kn. 2 (St. Petersburg: EOS, 1909), 92.

69. Lunacharskii, *Religiia i socializm*, vol. 1: 104.

subjectivity was not questioned by orthodox Marxists, their "critics," or even the "idealists." The socialist "dream" became a nightmare not so much because of the power of the collective over the individual, but rather because of the acritical assumption of the modern idea of a powerful, strong, and independent subject, responsible for dominating the natural and social environment. The tragedies of the twentieth century, and the continuing horrors of the twenty-first, suggest that we should see ourselves as vulnerable, weak subjects, in need of attention and care, and always dependent on others.⁷⁰ By embracing human vulnerability and exposure as something to be celebrated and cherished, we may be able to develop ideals that reject ultimate metaphysical guarantees, but still direct our actions in the world toward a better future of greater justice and solidarity, precisely the goal of the Russian revolutionaries' ideal.



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70. See, for instance, J. Butler, *Precarious Life. The Powers and Mourning of Violence* (London-New York: Verso, 2004); *Vulnerability. Reflections on a New Ethical Foundation for Law and Politics*, ed. M. Albertson Fineman and A. Grear (London-New York: Routledge, 2016); Adriana Cavarero, with Judith Butler, Bonnie Honig, and Other Voices, *Toward a Feminist Ethics of Nonviolence*, ed. T. J. Huzar and C. Woodford (New York: Fordham UP, 2021).