© EUSP, 2017 ISSN 2310-3817 Vol. 5 Stasis No. 2 (engl) p. 50–79

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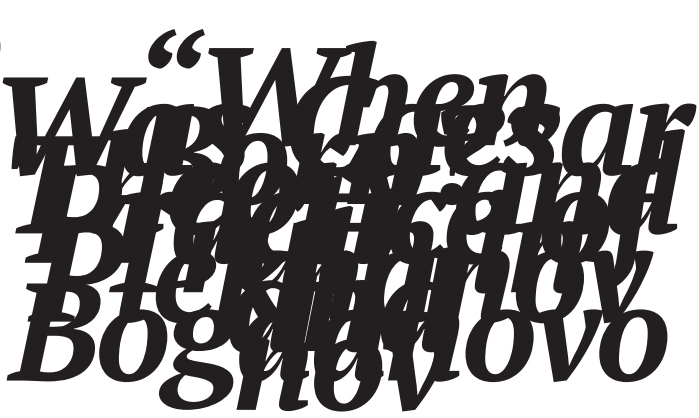

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"When Was Caesar Born?" Theory and Practice of Truth in Plekhanov and Bogdanov

Abstract

Although political differences between various factions of the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) have been studied quite extensively, theoretical debates about the nature of Marxism and the role such debates had in determining Party programs and strategic decisions remains in need of a more thorough engagement. One such theoretical discussion, the question of the nature of (absolute) truth, is the subject matter of the present essay. The primary debate was between Georgi Plekhanov, one of the most respected representatives of early Russian Marxism, and a group of theoreticians united around Alexander Bogdanov, an early collaborator of Lenin (until their break in 1909) and an author of several original theoretical works that attempted to challenge the established orthodoxy of Plekhanovite Marxism. The question of the nature of truth stood at the center of the debates between Plekhanov and Bogdanov. The ultimate challenge that Bogdanov threw to the representatives of (self-proclaimed) "orthodox Marxism" was the

question of the ultimate nature of Marxist theory: Is Marxism a science or a faith? If it is a science, it must operate within a scientific theory of truth and, as is the case with any genuine science, continue to grow and adapt to the changing circumstances of research. If it is indeed a faith, a set of absolute truths revealed to one person (Marx) and passed on to his disciples in sacred texts and by appointed prophets, then it contains as much value as any other faith or superstition.

Keywords
Dialectical materialism, theory of knowledge, objective truth, dogmatism, scientific socialism, Russian Marxism

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> *Dogmatism* as a way of thinking, whether in ordinary knowing or in the study of philosophy, is nothing else but the opinion that the True consists in a proposition which is a fixed result, or what is immediately known. To such questions as, When was Caesar born? or How many feet were there in a stadium?, etc., a clear-cut answer ought to be given, just as it is definitely true that the square on the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares on the other two sides of a right-angled triangle. But the nature of a so-called truth of that kind is different from the nature of philosophical truths (Hegel 1977: 23).

Among the many questions that preoccupied Russian (and then Soviet) Marxists, one stood out as somewhat unusually abstract and overly theoretical, namely, the nature of *truth*: philosophical, scientific, and political truth. In addition to endless discussions about the correctness of a certain program or a political agenda, discussions that were and are present in any active political community, there was an additional (often surreal) dimension of high-minded and abstract conversations about the nature of truth and reality. What later Soviet students of Marxism will consider to be the definitive understanding of truth proposed and defended by Lenin in "Materialism and Empirio-criticism" (1972a), emerged as a result of a larger struggle against various Marxist "heretics" who proposed and defended various theoretical platforms that were aimed, according to their critics, at "supplementing" Marx and Marxism with new scientific and sociopolitical discoveries and insights. Although this conversation included a variety of groups and individuals, the main narrative can be constructed around three major figures—Georgi Plekhanov (the "father" of Russian Marxism), Vladimir Lenin (at times faithful son, at times militant adversary of Plekhanov), and Alexander Bogdanov (prodigal son and apostate). These three figures are represented by three works: Plekhanov's "Materialismus militans" (three extensive letters written against

Bogdanov during the period from 1908 to 1910) (2004b), Lenin's "Materialism and Empirio-criticism" (published in 1909 and re-issued and distributed on a much larger scale in 1920) (1972a), and Bogdanov's essay "Faith and Science" (a direct response to Lenin but also to Plekhanov's flavor of "dogmatic Marxism," published in 1910) (2010). These debates in their historical context might not strike contemporary readers as very sophisticated or even worthy of extended theoretical attention. This initial impression however is mistaken. The discussions that we turn our attention to in this essay have been the subject matter of many consequent conversations and have, in more than one way, informed the development of Marxism in the West and in the Soviet Union.

Opening Shots are Fired (Bogdanov contra Plekhanov)

Bogdanov's philosophical views always irritated Plekhanov and Lenin, but while Lenin was willing to overlook his aversion to Bogdanov's theoretical experiments, Plekhanov often made his views on the matter known to others. The public confrontation between Bogdanov and Plekhanov started with an open letter by Bogdanov published in 1907. The main accusation against the "father of Russian Marxism" was that he was responsible for multiple earlier clandestine attacks on Bogdanov's philosophical views. The formal reason for Bogdanov's open letter was a question from a group of comrades from the Caucasus, sent to him by the editors of *Vestnik zhini* (The herald of life). These comrades were claiming that "some from the Bolshevik camp (Bogdanov, Lunacharskii) were defenders of empiriocriticism of Avenarius and philosophy of Mach." (Bogdanov 1907: 46). After a few other citations from the letter, most to the effect that Bolsheviks like Bogdanov considered Marx's theory to be insufficiently elaborated and in need of supplementary philosophy, namely that of Mach, Bogdanov addresses Plekhanov and accuses him of orchestrating a campaign against all "empiriocritics" and "Machists." Instead of direct and engaged criticism of Bogdanov's position, the allegation went, Plekhanov limited himself to sarcastic and dismissive remarks here and there (in introductions to his translations and books and elsewhere).

His optimism, Bogdanov wrote, led him to believe that Plekhanov (and his students) were very close to a serious open engagement with his ideas, very close to a rational debate full of arguments about the nature of their opposing views. Having tired of waiting, and attempting to bring the issue to the fore, Bogdanov directly engaged Plekhanov's attacks in the extensive introduction to the third volume of his *Empiriomonism* (partially written while he was imprisoned for his participation in the revolutionary activities of 1905 and published in 1906) (2003). Now in the open letter, Bogdanov summarizes his opposition to Plekhanov's kind of Marxism

in the following manner: 1) Plekhanov's view of truth as unconditional and eternal exposes him, in contrast to Engels, as a clear and hopeless adherent of dogmatism; 2) Plekhanov's view of "matter" as something "primary" and "spirit" as something "secondary" lacks any clear explanation of the nature of this "matter" and its relationship with "spirit"; 3) Plekhanov's understanding of the notion of the "thing-in-itself" is incoherent; and 4) Plekhanov's own correction and expansion of Marxist historical-philosophical theory contradicts historical materialism and deviates toward idealism.

None of Plekhanov's earlier engagements with Bogdanov's views came in the form public debate. All of his engagements were either indirect or by proxy, and two of these proxies are worth mentioning: "comrade Orthodox" (a fitting nickname adopted by Lubov Akselrod who will later be known as "Akselrod-Orthodox") and someone known as A. Deborin (yes, *that* Abram Deborin, but at the time only an aspiring young student of Plekhanov).

Akselrod's essay against Bogdanov was aptly named "A New Kind of Revisionism" (1906) and appeared in the now Menshevik *Iskra* in 1904. A Soviet researcher of the period, A. I. Volodin, presents the circumstances of the writing of this essay in the following manner: In 1901 (while still working together with Lenin), Plekhanov sent a book by Bogdanov to Akselrod for review, then gave it a read himself and decided to write an "entire essay" on it but somehow never got around to it (Volodin 1982: 28). We know from Plekhanov's letters that he took Bogdanov's work to be a "decisive negation of materialism" (Lenin 1935: 237). The opening lines of the essay clearly aim to sow discord among the Bolsheviks since Akselrod claims that the idea for writing a critique of Bogdanov's philosophical positions came directly from Lenin in the first half of 1903 (i.e., before Lenin's exit from the editorial board of *Iskra*). This turn to open criticism of Bogdanov's theoretical views was a clear attack on Bolshevism as a "new kind of revisionism" (Volodin 1982: 37).

Akselrod does not mince words and announces from the get-go that the views of comrade Bogdanov "have nothing to do with the theory of Marx and Engels" (Akselrod 1906: 172). The author takes clear offense at Bogdanov's suggestion that some views of Marx and Engels were not fully elaborated and are in need of further clarification and supplementation. Marx's materialism is found in the view that objective reality exists outside and independently of any cognizing subject, and this reality acts upon the subject thus giving it objective information about the true state of affairs in the world. Marx's great discovery, according to Akselrod, was his identification of the cause of the historical development as found outside of various human ideas and outside of human consciousness as such (Akselrod 1906: 175) Bogdanov, we learn, rejects materialism and claims that nature does not exist outside of human perception and experience, therefore he is a revisionist and an idealist. Akselrod's elaboration of Bog-

danov's ideas relies on selective citations (often taken out of context) and presents the latter as a veritable lunatic who claims that nature does not exist outside of our consciousness, since it is a product of collective sensations and human representations (Akselrod 1906: 177).

Since Bogdanov rejects Marx and his materialism, he must reject the "objective cause of historical regularity [*zakonomernost*]" (Akselrod 1906: 180). Bogdanov is an idealist and does not consider nature as existing objectively outside of human experience. Akselrod finds all sorts of "contradictory" statements in his works, but hammering down the main objection to Bogdanov's view that the *objectivity* of truth is found in the agreement of human opinions. For Akselrod, this objectivity is found in the correspondence between thinking and the way reality actually is in its independence from any human opinion. Plekhanov and his followers will recite this theory again and again as a sort of dogmatic pronouncement that must persuade those who hear it simply because it is true (or, in many cases, because Marx allegedly said so). Akselrod's conclusion deserves to be quoted in full:

> Therefore *scientific socialism*, not on the basis of social consciousness, but on the basis of objective social conditions, determines the historical tendency of the future not on social consciousness, but on the evaluation of the degree of development of the forces of production and their relation to a given social organization. If, however, we accept the premise of subjective idealism [i.e., Bogdanov's view] and accept that the only *objective* criterion of *social truth* is the collective consciousness of a *given* society, then all socialist aspirations of our epoch, at this point only grasped by a minority, must appear as nothing more than *subjective utopia* of this minority (Akselrod 1906: 184).

If Akselrod only hints at Bogdanov's status as the main revisionist of the Bolshevik faction, Abram Deborin states it quite openly and without reservation in his 1908 attack piece in *Golos sotsial-demokrata* (The voice of the social-democrat) called "The philosophy of Mach and the Russian revolution" (1908). Having gone through standard accusations against Mach (read Bogdanov), Deborin concludes that

> Machism is a world view without a world, and as a philosophy of subjectivism and individualism, combined with Nietzschean immoralism that justifies "evil," exploitation and so on, it forms an ideological fog that covers up the practical aspirations of the bourgeoisie. Bolshevik philosophers in their "ideology" do not leave the confines of petit-bourgeois point of view. And Bolshevik strategists and tacticians with their romantic revolutionism and petit-bourgeois radicalism apply in practice theoretical principles of philosophical nihilism based on the *negation of objective truth* [...] Our Mach-like Marxists are conscious Bolsheviks that

> "theorize" the practice and tactics of the strategists and tacticians. And Bolshevik tacticians and practitioners are unconscious Machists and idealists (Deborin 1908: 12, own emphasis added).

The implication here is that Bogdanov's philosophical views are not simply the opinions of one person or a small group but are representative of the general anti-Marxist deviation of the Bolsheviks, of their alleged tendency to stick with Marxist phraseology only in order to manipulate the masses and to pursue their non-Marxist agenda.[1] When Bolsheviks negate objective truth, they negate Marxism and slide into subjectivism and immoralism. And what is this objective truth? It is the truth of the discovery of objective laws of social development, first explicated by Marx and Engels, and now elaborated further (without, however, supplementing them or altering them) by the father of Russian Marxism, Plekhanov.

Both of Plekhanov's acolytes, Bogdanov argues in his open letter, distort his ideas and misquote his statements to a point where their attacks cease to be an honest criticism and cross over into "criminal enterprise" (Bogdanov 1907: 50). The whole engagement is an example of empty accusations and forged citations, and Plekhanov is to blame since his disciples clearly act out his commands to attack Bogdanov and his comrades. This criminality must stop and Plekhanov must cease attacking Bogdanov "on credit" (on the strength of his previous achievements and his reputation as an authoritative exponent of Marxism).

In his unpublished 1914 memoirs, Bogdanov divides his "stream of excommunications" from Marxism into two periods that correspond to the two priests of orthodox Marxism in charge of the proceedings: Plekhanov and Lenin. Plekhanov's disciples ("the little ones"), according to Bogdanov, were but the great teacher's proxies, lacking in originality or theoretical sophistication.[2] Lenin's attacks, which came in 1909, were nothing but an amusing example of the transformation of a "respected essayist and politician [...] into a philosopher; and what a philosopher!" (Bogdanov 1995: 93).

Both Plekhanov and Lenin insisted on the need to reassert the notion of objective (absolute) truth; indeed, in some sense this entire debate, political and personal missives aside, was around the old philosophical problem of truth and falsehood. Let us review the arguments in order of appearance, remembering that all the future students of Russian (and Soviet) Marxism were informed only about the arguments of the "orthodox"

[1] This opinion comes directly from Plekhanov who held the view that "Bogdanov is the theoretician of Bolshevism, Lenin its profligate" (cited in Steila 1991: 53).

[2] For the reference to the "little ones" see Bogdanov (1995: 173). In the Russian original the allusion to Matthew 18 and Jesus's sermon about the children is clear, that is, "the little ones" are here minor characters ("children") in comparison to the great arch-Marxists like Plekhanov and Lenin.

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Marxists while encountering counterarguments only indirectly when cited by the excommunicators. Only until relatively recently, Bogdanov's polemical challenges to both were not widely available to the general public, so students of the period were unable to understand why "*Bogdanovshchina*" was in need of such intense and frequent thrashings.

Militant Materialism (Plekhanov contra Bogdanov)

In the Soviet Union, Plekhanov's biography was allowed twenty years of genuinely Marxist theoretical and political activity—from 1883 (the creation of *The Emancipation of Labor* group) to 1903 (Plekhanov's siding with the Mensheviks after the Second Congress). While this chronology fits with the Bolshevik narrative, it does draw our attention to the fact that after 1903 and especially after 1905, Plekhanov's political and theoretical influence began to decline. As Samuel L. Baron put it, the times have changed but Plekhanov had not, thus "in the area of political affairs Plekhanov had nothing fresh to contribute," which made the last decade or so of his life a "protracted, painful, and somewhat meaningless epilogue" (Baron 1963: 279). It is in the context of this declining political and theoretical influence that we must read Plekhanov's vitriolic attacks on anyone who dared to question his Marxist credential and his interpretation of Marxist philosophy.

Plekhanov's letters against Bogdanov appeared under the title "Materialismus Militans" (2004b). The intensity of Plekhanov's attacks was such that even those who were familiar with the great elder's peculiar manner of "debating" his opponent were put off by these letters. There were three in all; two were published in *Golos sotsial-demokrata* (The voice of a social-democrat) nos. 6–7, 8–9 (1908), and the third was published in a collection called *Ot oborony k napadeniyu* (From defense to attack) that appeared in 1910.[3]

Before we get to the substance of Plekhanov's attack on Bogdanov and zoom in on the issue of "absolute truth," let us take a quick look at the original arguments that Bogdanov attempted to direct at Plekhanov and his view of Marxism. In the above-mentioned *Empiriomonism*, Bogdanov tried for the first (but not the last) time to articulate his philosophical views. He placed his understanding of Marxism in the wider context of

[3] *Golos sotsial-demokrata* was a journal published by Mensheviks-liquidators from February 1908 to December 1911. Plekhanov left the editorial board in May of 1909, but relationships were already strained in 1908 after the Fifth All-Russian Conference of RSDLP. Lenin gave a rather stern assessment of the journal in a series of essays, including a poignant "How Plekhanov and Co. Defend Revisionism" (Lenin 1977b: 281–85).

what was at the time the most recent findings of theoretical and applied science. The third volume of *Empiriomonism* opens with a direct engagement with "comrade Beltov," Plekhanov's pseudonym.[4] Before getting down to the business of refuting Plekhanov, Bogdanov summarizes his position by looking at "three materialisms": the naïve materialism of natural scientists, the social materialism of Marx and Engels, and the confused, vague materialism of comrade Beltov. This latter materialism is better termed a "materialism of eternal absolute truths."

Tracing his own philosophical development, Bogdanov points out that when he first encountered Marx (and Marxism) he was mainly interested in science and therefore held a sort of "old materialist" position of monism: atomistic matter is the content of all experience, physical or psychical. But after Marx, this old materialism no longer worked because one had to "cognize one's own cognition," and here only a new kind of "social-genetic investigation" would do (Bogdanov 2003: 217). Such investigation revealed that fundamental concepts of old materialism—matter, invariable laws of nature, and so on—were the result of the social development of humanity and therefore were only temporary truths (true during a particular period of time), not eternal or *absolute* truths. Bogdanov supports his view of the negation of any unconditional or eternal truth by appealing to Engels, but, unlike Plekhanov, not in order to establish the truth of his own views (Engels said it, therefore it is true) but simply in order to show that Marx's faithful companion understood the nature of truth in very much the same way and therefore that it was Plekhanov with his quasi-religious worship of the absolute truth who was in the wrong. In social-historical studies one cannot find too many eternal truths (if any at all) but only a great number of "platitudes and commonplaces of the sorriest kind" —such as one example that would become a focal point of the debates about the nature of truth: "Napoleon died on 5 May, 1821" (Engels 2010: 83).

What kind of truth is a simple commonplace platitude such as "Napoleon died on 5 May, 1821"? Or, if we use the example from Hegel cited above, what does the answer to a question such as "When was Caesar born?" seek to establish? Is there a fundamental difference between a truth and a platitude? There is for Bogdanov: "Truth is the living organizing form of experience; it leads us somewhere in our activities and provides a point of support in life's struggle" (2003: 218). Truth organizes human experience; simple correlation of fact to fact (Napoleon's death or Caesar's birth) *does* very little, almost nothing, and there is almost certainly nothing "eternal" or "absolute" about such simple statements of fact. And if the date of Napoleon's death is the same sort of objective truth

[4] This engagement between Bogdanov and Plekhanov, of course, has already been the subject of many essays—for a good overview of the issues, see Yassour (1983).

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as statements regarding the nature of human cognition or the overall goal of revolutionary activity, then what we have, according to Bogdanov, is a very *un*-dialectical set of platitudes that one either accepts or rejects.

One such platitude caused a considerable stir in Russian Marxist literature and without it one would not understand the significance of the entire conversation about absolute or relative truth—the issue of *matter*. Bogdanov's criticism was directed at a lack of clear conceptual explanation of the nature of "matter." In light of Bogdanov's overall lack of interest in such metaphysical atavisms as notions of "nature" or "matter," his challenge to Plekhanov (and other metaphysical materialists) was fairly simple and thus particularly enraging to the latter: What is this matter that underlies everything and yet cannot be experienced? To the question "What is matter?" Plekhanov responded that it is that which arouses in us various sensations. As he vehemently defended it against Bogdanov's alleged "subjective idealism," Plekhanov persisted in this "definition" and reiterated it again and again. Although neither Bogdanov nor Plekhanov put it thusly, the issue is clearly the following: the question "What is matter?" is posed without a preliminary investigation into the nature of human cognition; to ask about "matter" already assumes that we consider it to be the source of our sensations and therefore the source of experience and knowledge. But to begin with investigation of matter is to begin from an impersonal metaphysical point of reference: having observed both human cognition (sensations) and its possible source (matter), an outsider-metaphysician asks about the nature of one and the other. The tautology is clear when we put the questions into its correct historical sequence: first, "How are sensations (and knowledge) aroused in me?"—"they are aroused by *matter*"—"and what is matter?"—"it is that which acts on our sense-organs and arouses in us various sensations." A closed logical circle if there ever was one.

To investigate the nature of *matter* without first asking about the condition of possibility of human cognition (from Descartes to Kant) is like asking about the nature of *God* without first investigating the historical emergence and development of religious faith—a thoroughly metaphysical and un-Marxist endeavor through and through. So Plekhanov's propositions aren't just old-fashioned from a scientific point of view, but are cryptically idealist arguments from the very start.[5] If we begin with the subject (either individual or collective), we can only ever arrive at a theory of knowledge that is based on experience (either individual or col-

[5] Vladimir Bazarov (Rudnev), another unjustly forgotten participant in these debates, openly accused Plekhanov and Lenin of mysticism in his essays on the subject matter. See his "Mistitsizm i realizm nashego vremeni" [Mysticism and realism of our time] in Bazarov (1910). This essay originally opened a controversial ("Machist," according to Lenin) collection, *Essays on Philosophy of Marxism*, published in 1908 (Bazarov 1908). Bazarov's interpretation of Plekhanov's fetishism is important for the general context of Bogdanov's criticism.

lective) but never on some absolute or objective truth. Even the nature of mathematical truth, an example Plekhanov does not use, is not as assured as one might think, so when we attempt to propose that there are social and historical truths that are as indubitable and objective (absolute) as Marxist laws of social or economic development, the entire enterprise reeks of the worst kind of obscurantism and metaphysical hogwash.

Now on to Plekhanov's "letters" against Bogdanov.

Plekhanov's first letter to Bogdanov is probably the weakest of the three in terms of theoretical content—it's an opening shot full of not just logical errors but sheer personal abuse and unsubstantiated accusations. Even though we must remember the context and the general standards of the time when it comes to the polemical tone and rhetorical methods Plekhanov employs here, it is still a bit of shock to read a respected and seasoned writer to falsely accuse his opponent of essentially being an uneducated and misinformed rube with no clue about anything philosophical, or anything political for that matter—a complete nobody who dared to suggest that Engels might have been wrong or that he, Plekhanov, could have misread Marx. The overall tone of the first letter is clear and can be best illustrated by an anecdote from a reported conversation between G. L. Shklovsky who, after the Third Congress in London, attempted to pacify an irate Plekhanov by suggesting the harsh words directed at him in the pre-Congress discussions were not meant to completely alienate him. Addressing the implication that refusal to attend the Congress was equivalent to putting oneself outside the Party, Plekhanov allegedly said: "Plekhanov, my dear, cannot be expelled from the Party; Plekhanov is its program, its banner" (cited in Tyutyukin 1997: 218).

Plekhanov's attitude in the first letter is very much that of the only true Marxist in existence who is forced to point out to an illiterate and obnoxiously self-confident ignoramus that "Plekhanov, my dear, cannot be expelled from Russian Marxism, Plekhanov is its program, its banner." He is clearly extremely irritated, not so much with Bogdanov, but with what Bogdanov represents—continuous alleged attacks on orthodox Marxism aimed at "revision" and "elaboration" of its basic doctrines.

The first letter sets the tone, not only for the abusive and dismissive attitude that Plekhanov does not intend to hide from his readers, but also for the way he intended to "argue" against his opponent. There are three easily identifiable rhetorical moves that Plekhanov makes and then repeats over and over again. The first move is "my teacher is better than your teacher," a move that Bogdanov will later dismiss as an atavism of Plekhanov's authoritarian thinking: to understand one's position, we must look at one's predecessors (authority figures). Juxtaposing his views as the views of a disciple of Engels (and, therefore, by extension as a disciple of Marx, Engels's close collaborator) and Bogdanov's views as the

views of a disciple of Mach, Plekhanov continues to press the exasperatingly childish point that his authority figure (Engels) said X, and therefore, if Bogdanov's authority figure (Mach) said Y and disagreed with X, then it is clearly in the wrong since "Engels said so."

The second move is Plekhanov's constant appeals to proper exegetical procedure that every reader must follow by default but that Plekhanov himself is free to deny due to the third rhetorical device. The proper way of reading Plekhanov is to study all of his works and read them in the context of his overall oeuvre: Bogdanov did not read or understand Plekhanov's books, and, being an uneducated country bumpkin of a philosopher, he took everything he did allegedly understand out of its proper context. In return, Plekhanov is not bound by the same rules of engagement because his opponent is a "convinced Machist" who cannot understand and hold the materialist (Marxist) point of view. (Plekhanov 2004: 189). Bogdanov takes the Marxist Plekhanov out of context *because* he is a devout Machist; Bogdanov cannot understand materialism *because* he is an ideologist of the bourgeoisie. "The bourgeoisie fear materialism as a revolutionary doctrine, well adapted to tear from the eyes of the proletariat the theological blinkers by means of which they wish to benight it and impede its spiritual growth" (Plekhanov 2004: 206).

Regarding the substance of Plekhanov's defense against the accusations that his definition of matter is vague and tautological, very little can be gathered from the first letter other than the following point: If Plekhanov's notion of matter is as Bogdanov describes it, then it is so because it is borrowed directly from Marx and Engels. Thus, where Bogdanov misunderstands what "the school of Marx and Engels" says about matter, he is excused because he is a philosophical amateur; but where he understands the views of orthodox Marxists correctly but criticizes them nonetheless, he is an open enemy of materialism and revolutionary Marxism.

Having dealt with Bogdanov's overall person and philosophy in the first letter, Plekhanov dedicates the majority of his second letter to a more or less detailed theoretical analysis of Bogdanov's criticism of his view of matter. However, instead of rehearsing the discussion of the nature of matter and "things-in-themselves," let us use this opportunity to ask a different question: Why was it so important for Plekhanov (and later Lenin) to establish and defend an allegedly straightforward (read: naïve) realist view of reality? The answer will help us understand not only the intensity of these debates, but also the general popularity of these questions.

When Plekhanov complains that his view of reality and his definition of matter are taken out of context, he is partially correct because the context of his own use of terms like "things-in-themselves" is his militant debates against "neo-Kantians" such as Conrad Schimdt under the overall rubric of Plekhanov's attacks against "revisionism." As Baron put it in his description of Plekhanov's "defense of the faith": "…the main objective of his crusade against Neo-Kantianism was to throw up a barricade against

the infiltration of skepticism into the socialist movement. If the external world were indeed unknowable, how pitiful and ludicrous would be the pretentions of those who claimed to have founded a *scientific* socialism" (Baron 1963: 179). The options were either skepticism (and here Plekhanov lumped together Kant with Hume and others who raised the issue of accessibility of reality) or "unimpaired belief in the *inevitability* of the socialist revolution" (Baron 1963: 181).

But the matter is far from simple because Plekhanov's realism is a form of dogmatism in precisely the way that Bogdanov will discover and articulate: any form of realist insistence on full accessibility and knowability of "things" is premised on a primitive view of cognition as *passive* perception of what is and therefore premised on an unarticulated assumption that one either sees "things" as they are seen by the realist, or one is deluded. Plekhanov's simple realist assertion that thing just *are* what they are is further complicated by his need to rename this basic realist position as a form of materialism. It is here that his materialism becomes metaphysical since behind the "thing as it is by itself" (*Ding-an-sich*) there is a mysterious substance called "matter" that unites and binds everything together into *material* reality. The dogmatism of the straightforward insistence that one does not need to investigate the conditions of the possibility of cognition was already made famous by Kant's reference to the "dogmatic slumber" from which he had been woken by Hume, who was working against so-called "common-sense" realists as Thomas Reid and Joseph Priestly.

Although Plekhanov cites Engels as his ultimate authority on the subject, the passage that he likes to bring up says very little about a metaphysical substance such as "matter." In his famous "the proof of the pudding is in the eating" dictum from *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific,* Engels in fact admits that to truly argue against Kant means to throw away any argument and get down to the basic, immediate use of things. If actions on things correspond to our perception of their qualities, our perceptions are demonstrated to be true *in practice*, not in theory (Plekhanov 2004a: 380–81). Engels seems to have gone no further, but Plekhanov is in dire need of a philosophical system since, despite his frequent claims to the contrary, the proof of *his* pudding is not in the eating but in the metaphysical analysis of the pudding's constituent parts.

Plekhanov's third letter was written and published at a later date in a collection of essays (1910), as its author no longer cooperated with the periodical that published the first two letters. In it he attempts to show that Bogdanov is a poor reader and disciple of Mach, that he lacks knowledge of the elementary rules of argument and logic and so on and so forth with more personal abuse. The most serious accusation, according to Plekhanov's own views, is the accusation that Bogdanov is rejecting the existence of the physical world, a ridiculous charge that will be repeated later by Lenin and scores of Soviet authors. This charge is supported by a few

basic naïve realist objections, such as that the reality of the physical world cannot be denied because it is right there in front of us. Any questions regarding our ability to perceive the world as it is are bound to end up in solipsism. By reducing Bogdanov's complex argument about the nature of cognition and experience to a set of ridiculous syllogisms ("if all we know about the world is experience, then without experience there is no world" and so on) Plekhanov is able to free himself from actual theoretical engagement with an apostate pseudo-Marxist.

Interlude: Lenin contra Bogdanov

Nikolai Valentinov, Lenin's former ally and supporter, famously described the circumstances of the writing of "Materialism and Empiriocriticism." According to Valentinov, Lenin took only a few days to skim through twelve-hundred pages of Mach and Avenarius. He wrote a short "memorandum" and gave it to Valentinov. It seemed that Lenin never actually got around to Avenarius and "read" Mach just enough to come up with a definite conclusion that Mach's philosophy was sheer "gobbledygook." Despite its cult status in Soviet philosophy, Lenin's book was not at all taken seriously as a philosophical contribution to Marxism at the time of its appearance.[6] In fact, it caused much derision and mocking from those it purported to have thoroughly destroyed. While we will look at Bogdanov's response in this essay, another figure who was attacked in Lenin's book—Vladimir Bazarov—had this to say about the work: "If the works of our transcendental materialists [Plekhanov and Co.] are far from being distinguished by consistency and strictness of thought, Ilyin's [Lenin's] book even among such literature is indeed something exceptional in its confusion; proposing against his often imaginary opponents now transcendental, now realist interpretation of matter the author is helplessly lost in the forest of these two trees during the entire 400 pages of this exorbitantly swollen pamphlet" (Bazarov 1910: XXIII).

Lenin saw himself as defending orthodox Marxism and its most important proposition that insisted on the absolute nature of truth. Karl Ballestrem, in one of the earliest engagements with the topic of "Lenin versus Bogdanov," presents the issue of Truth in the following manner: "The more one reads Lenin, the clearer it becomes that he thought only a worker convinced of possessing *The Truth* and of being on *The Right Course* could consistently work and suffer and sacrifice for the revolution." This is where Ballestrem places "the decisive historical moment in the transition from Marx's

[6] Cf. Ruben: "It is no exaggeration, then, to speak of a wide range of opinion highly unfavourable to *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*" (1977: 170). Soviet literature on Lenin's book is extensive to say the least. See, for reference, Kedrov (1959; 1983), Kopnin (1969). Evald Ilyenkov also wrote a small book dedicated to Lenin's work (1980).

ideas to a closed system of ideology which more appropriately bears the name of Marxism-Leninism" (Ballestrem 1969: 283–84). Ballestrem's entire argument is then built around this thesis, and while some of his observations seem plausible, the overall premise is difficult to accept on its face. The worker (and the peasant) would most certainly not be lost without the Truth, would most certainly know what he wants to struggle for (a better life) and how to achieve it (reorganization of the present condition). In fact, to suggest that *before* Marxism (and Lenin's group as its most authoritative interpreter and practitioner) the masses were lost and unmotivated for revolutionary struggle is precisely to play along with the Leninist narrative of the history of revolutionary activity in Russia. Workers (and peasants) were not idly sitting around and waiting for the Truth to dawn on them, for the Right Course to reveal itself to them. They struggled against the authoritarian Tsarist system with all available resources. If we must then correct Ballestrem's interpretation, we must say that what Lenin and his group thought they brought to the table was not a *theory* of Truth, but a *practice* of truth, a political strategy that would work better than previous attempts to dislodge both Tsarism and ultimately bourgeois capitalism.[7] Lenin's contention against Bogdanov was that the latter polluted pure Marxist notions and therefore made them less useful, less effective in practice.

> Bogdanov's response to Lenin is a medium-sized essay that attempts to counter all of the accusations directed at him. The tone is combative, but the message is clear: Lenin's approach to Marxism is based on *faith* while Marxism is a *science* and therefore cannot be treated as a set of absolute unchangeable truths. The piece is therefore called "Faith and Science" (Bogdanov 2010). The tendency to regard certain truths as absolute is the tendency of faith, not science. There is nothing absolute or eternal for science, only relative and finite truths that exist today and are likely to disappear tomorrow. Faith is static, science is dynamic. Bogdanov proposes to consider the struggle for the idea of absolute and eternal truth to be the central motif of Lenin's book. As an example of an absolute and eternal truth, Lenin selects the already known to us example from Engels: "Napoleon died on 5 May, 1821." Bogdanov's response is simple: this statement is not a truth of any kind but a simple, currently correct statement that does absolutely nothing useful. The criterion of truth is practice, and if a statement of fact cannot be used in practice, it is not a genuine truth (Bogdanov 2010: 149).

[7] Although we mentioned above that Lenin's philosophical book was not widely judged to have been successful, some attempts have been made to reevaluate its theoretical potential—cf. Louis Althusser's essay "Lenin and Philosophy" (1971: 11–43). Althusser's own articulation of the practical nature of truth can be found in his notion of "theoretical practice" discussed at length in his important work *For Marx* (see chapter 6 "On the Materialist Dialectic" in Althusser 1969: 161–218)

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Bogdanov's position is based on his understanding of the nature of knowledge as based solely on experience: the very notion of "absolute" is fictitious since the content of our concepts is based on experience, and experience does not contain anything that is absolute or changeless. The desire for absoluteness is the desire for completeness, purposefulness, meaningfulness of life—a desire for a religious (supra-experiential) revelation of Truth. Science has nothing to do with this pursuit of religious satisfaction. Science refuses to abide by some set of absolute and eternal laws, and in that it presents and articulates its own activity as a form of *collective* organization of experience.[8] Faith, on the other hand, gravitates toward authority and authoritarianism—faith needs an authority to believe in, to follow and to worship (Bogdanov 1910: 157). Unfortunately for everyone involved, the "prophets of absolute truth" here are two individuals who, according to Bogdanov, would have been appalled at the treatment they are receiving at the hands of the new mystics like Lenin: Marx and Engels. These two historical persons with their own limitations and challenges are perceived to be infallible; either everything they write is absolute truth or, if they are fallible, they are not worthy of our consideration. This is authoritarian thinking pure and simple: all or nothing.

The center of Lenin's attack on "Machism" was his mocking of Bogdanov's view of truth as an organizing form of human experience. Lenin borrows his thought experiment from Plekhanov, who already used it in his polemic, but Lenin thinks that he has struck gold with this take on the matter and that after this particular argument no one will take Bogdanov's approach seriously. Interestingly enough, a similar argument is used by a contemporary French philosopher, Quentin Meillassoux in his version of an attack on what he labels "correlationism."[9] Here is Meillassoux, writing in 2006, about the problem of "ancestrality":

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[8] Cf. Bogdanov: "We think that the difficult task of elaborating all-encompassing proletarian worldview must be pursued collectively, and the struggle between theoretical variants should not overshadow in our consciousness the unity of our great practical task. History shows that any system of ideas—religious, philosophical, legal, or political—no matter how revolutionary it was during the time of its emergence and struggle for domination, sooner or later becomes an inhibition and an obstacle for any further development, it becomes a social-reactionary force. If a theory was to avoid this fatal degeneration it had to rise above it cognitively, to explain it and to disclose its cause. Marxism was such a theory" (1977: 219).

[9] Slavoj Žižek makes a similar observation in his book *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*: "Meillassouxis argumentation often sounds like a repetition of Lenin's ill-famed *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* (such as when, in an exact echo of Lenin, he ultimately reduces Kantian transcendentalism to a repackaged version of Berkeley's solipsism). Indeed, *After Finitude* can effectively be read as *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* rewritten for the twenty-first century" (2012: 625).

> Empirical science is today capable of producing statements about events anterior to the advent of life as well as consciousness. These statements consist in the dating of "objects" that are sometimes older than any form of life on earth [...] How are we to grasp the *meaning* of scientific statements bearing explicitly upon a manifestation of the world that is posited as anterior to the emergence of thought and even of life—*posited, that is, as anterior to every form of human relation to the world*? (Meillassoux 2008: 9, 10).

The overall gist of Meillassoux's discussion here is that if we operate on the "correlationist" assumption that statements about "objects" are inherently linked to experiences "subjects" have when encountering these "objects" (knowledge being a matter of correlation of subjects and objects), then how does such a view of cognition deal with events that took place *before* "every form of human relation to the world"? Having gone through some possible responses from a "correlationist" that do not interest us here, Meillassoux, again, confronts his imaginary opponent with a question:

> ...all we have to do is ask the correlationist the following question: *what is it that happened 4.56 billion years ago?* Did the accretion of the earth happen, *yes or no*? In one sense, yes, the correlationist will reply, because the scientific statements pointing to such an event are objective, in other words, intersubjectively verifiable. But in another sense, no, she will go on, because the referent of such statements cannot have existed in the way in which it is naïvely described, i.e., as non-correlated with a consciousness (Meillassoux 2008: 16).

Thus begins a long and laborious discussion of the shortcomings of "correlationism" that, depending on who is asked, either succeeds in overcoming it or fails and leaves us still within the confines of the cursed "object-subject" correlation.[10]

Here is Lenin on the same subject—in a section of "Materialism and Empirio-criticism" called "Did Nature Exist Prior to Man?" he writes:

> Natural science positively asserts that the earth once existed in such a state that no man or any other creature existed or could have existed on it. Organic matter is a later phenomenon, the fruit of a long evolution [...] Matter is primary, and thought, consciousness, sensation are pro-

[10] Due to the constraints of this essay we must forego any detailed engagement with the contemporary realism debates that emerged as a result of Meillassoux's challenge of "correlationism"—for some discussion of issues involved see Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman (2011). For an excellent critique and counter-narrative see Wolfendale (2014).

> ducts of a very high development. Such is the materialist theory of knowledge, to which natural science instinctively subscribes (Lenin 1977a: 75).

Lenin mocks all attempts to resolve the alleged contradiction, whether through a concept of coordination ("correlation" in Meillassoux's vocabulary) or a concept of projection (a human subject imagines himself to be present before he existed and experienced reality): "The sophistry of this theory is so manifest that it is embarrassing to analyze it" (Lenin 1977a: 77). Lenin refers back to Plekhanov who refuted idealism (there is no object without subject) by suggesting that since earth ("object") existed before humanity ("subject") emerged, then, voila, idealism refuted by common sense!

Lenin returns to the "earth before humanity" example again when he discusses the nature of "objective truth" and Bogdanov directly: "Natural science leaves no room for doubt that its assertion that the earth existed prior to man is a truth [...] The assertion made by science that the earth existed prior to man is an objective truth [...] [I]f truth is an organizing form of human experience, then the assertion that the earth exists outside any human experience cannot be true" (Lenin 1977a: 123–24).

Lenin and, a century later, Meillassoux put their philosophical currency on the challenge to "idealism" or "correlationism" that they think completely debunks and overturns any attempt to talk about meaningful scientific statements in terms of correlation between the observer and the observed—the earth existed unobserved and unexperienced by a human subject, and science tells us so.

Bogdanov's response is fairly simple: when we think about the world before human collectivity, we think about it from the perspective of this human collective and its experience. When we imagine a prehuman earth, we imagine it as if experienced in the same manner it is experienced now. When one thinks about the original event of earth's emergence, does one not project one's present experience of observation into past? How can we think and talk about such an event without mentally placing ourselves into a situation where we can observe such an event? This is only possible because we are capable of basic projection. Any other interpretation assumes the existence of some mysterious external observer point of reference. For Bogdanov, all these notions are easy to explain because they are all ultimately tied to one question: How does science arrive at the knowledge about how things were before the emergence of human experience?

> Humans were digging into the earth's crust in search of useful metals and minerals; they studied in their labor experience the location of various layers of the ground and the relationship between them; on cliffs and in crevices of mountains they discovered complex pictures of relationships between these layers, important and interesting for the exploi-

> tation of the hidden riches of the earth. At the same time, they observed—and sometimes experienced directly—various elemental processes that changed the constitution of the earth's core. All of this experience was, naturally, organized into that unifying idea that the present state of earth's crust is a result of a long development.
> Further, there were found in various layers of that crust the remains of various plant and animal organisms. In the latest layers there are remains of human beings and human labor while in the deeper layers there are no such traces, but only the skeletons of the animals of lower type. Going even deeper beyond a certain known limit one does not find any evidence of organic life. This entire paleontological material in its connection with contemporary chemical material can be harmoniously combined, organized only into the following idea: "earth existed before human beings, and even before any life in general."
> Is it not obvious that therefore this idea is precisely the organizing form of experience? (Bogdanov 2010: 178–79).

If Bogdanov's view of truth is to be adopted in order to understand what sort of organizing form of experience stands behind Lenin's insistence on the absolute nature of truth, we can clearly see that its main point is to promote not science but a form of dogmatism. Lenin's truth is not, as it insists, some objective and disinterested pursuit of scientific correspondence between thought and being, between the subjective experience and the objective reality that underlies that experience. Lenin's truth is an organizing form of experience that puts forth its view as objective only to hide its ideological agenda. And, according to Bogdanov, its ideological agenda, precisely because it is presenting itself as lacking any agenda, follows the pattern of the authoritarian epoch of human development where the world was divided between the organizer and the organized between the expert and the masses, between God and its creation.

The notion that each human epoch has its own understanding of truth is not new to Bogdanov by any means, and all the Russian Marxists of the time saw it as coming from Hegel's understanding of the nature of human history. However, if Hegel's version has the Spirit develop from primitive and limited forms to more advanced and, ultimately, true expressions, Bogdanov's positivist version eliminates such absolute *telos* and instead substitutes it with a relativity of the notion of collective good. Bogdanov's theory of ideological development, however limited due to its historical situation, presents a version of Marxism that, unfortunately, did not survive the dogmatic onslaught of Plekhanovite-Leninist orthodoxy. We say "unfortunately" not in order to suggest that Bogdanov's version was somehow "better" than Lenin's, but only in order to emphasize that the elimination of many (if not all) variants of Russian Marxist thought in the post-1917 consolidation impoverished Marxism as a theoretical and a political constellation of ideas and principles.

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Is Marxism a Science or a Faith? (Bogdanov contra Plekhanov)

While both Plekhanov's and Lenin's attacks were discussed and studied in great detail—one can think of a rather large library of Soviet books dedicated to Lenin's "Materialism and Empirio-criticism"—Bogdanov's energetic responses to both have not been widely available to the students of the period.[11] Most of his major works have been reissued in facsimile editions, but no new scholarly versions of Bogdanov's books and essays on the subject have appeared since the original debate.[12] Thus, in order to understand Bogdanov's objections to dogmatic Marxism, let us take a look at both his responses to Plekhanov's attacks and his own attempts to understand the nature of Marxism.

Although Bogdanov actively engaged in polemics with Plekhanov in various publications, his summary of all the disagreements came in the form of a small pamphlet called *Prikliucheniia odnoi filosofskoi shkoly* [Adventures of one philosophical school] (Bogdanov 1908). There are five such "adventures," and the first two are the items discussed above: matter as a thing-in-itself and the nature of objective truth. Plekhanov's "school," writes Bogdanov, claims to be a materialist school but posits matter not in the scientific sense of that which is experienced and described by science (physics, chemistry, and so on) but in the abstract-metaphysical sense of that which underlies all experience, matter as a misunderstood Kantian thing-in-itself. Experience is always under suspicion because it is allegedly subjective and belongs to an individual (collective experience being a simple summation of individual experiences rather than individual experiences being incomplete and isolated fragments of collective experience). The subject of experience is the owner of his or her own sensations. Any truth that is based on experience cannot attain the necessary level of objective truth. Matter is what lies behind and therefore what determines all possible experience—it causes our sensations, it gives us all the necessary information about objective reality. But what is this matter? We do not and cannot know. We can only know this matter's action on us; its actual qualities and nature are inaccessible to us. For Bogdanov, this is

[11] When Bogdanov's responses are mentioned (which is not the case with many Soviet books on this subject), they are dismissed as "pasquinade" and "libel" (Kedrov 1983: 14).

[12] In 2001, Valerian Popkov and others created the International Institute of Alexander Bogdanov (http://www.bogdinst.ru) that published and disseminated a lot of useful information about Bogdanov's work related to systems theory, economic and "tektology." In 2013, the Historical Materialism series at Brill initiated a project to publish Bogdanov's main theoretical works as part of the Bogdanov Library (https://bogdanovlibrary.org).

pure metaphysics—what is known to us is explained with reference to something that cannot be known or experienced directly.[13]

The next question is closely connected with the first: the nature of objective truth is connected with our access to reality, with our scientific endeavor to gain as much knowledge about reality as possible. Objective truth cannot be absolute and unchanging because it is based on experience, and science cannot claim that it discovered some eternal law of nature since its inquiry can produce only contingent truths waiting to be replaced by some other more precise and better articulated but still contingent truths of future science. And yet, when it comes to scientific discoveries of Marx and Engels, the same logic does not apply. These two thinkers are imbued with such profound ability for insight that anything that they produced as a result of their *scientific* observation becomes absolute and eternal truth. All the future generations can do is supplement and confirm the findings made by these two prophets.[14] What sort of connection did they manage to develop with the eternally moving matter that gives us all we need in terms of scientific knowledge without ever fully revealing its awesome power?

Plekhanov's overall reverence toward the founders of Marxism has always been a target for Bogdanov's criticism, but others have noticed and mocked it as well. Pavel Yushkevich mentions a story about the caliph Omar who allegedly suggested that all books of the Alexandrian library be burned: "If those books are in agreement with the Qur'an, we have no need of them; and if these contain something new, they are dangerous because they go against the word of God" (1909: 389). Thus, for Plekhanov any work of Marxist scholarship was either already present in the works of Marx and Engels (and therefore useless) or it was a deviation from true

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[13] Compare this view with that of Mikhail Epstein, who approaches Lenin's "matter" from a similar perspective: "According to Lenin, 'matter' exists independently of any sensation, as a primordial reality that precedes and determines the contents of human experience […] 'Matter' in this materialist sense is nothing but *hyper-matter*, the most abstract of all ideas, endowed with the predicate of primordial and self-sufficient existence. Furthermore, to 'matter' is attributed self-awareness, self-generated motion, dialectical contradiction, thesis and antithesis, assertion and negation, consent and dissent, i.e., all the qualities of an active, animated and even rational entity, although at the same time the 'material' is posited as the antipode of the 'spiritual' or 'ideal'" (Epstein, Genis, and Vladiv-Gover 1999: 22–23).

[14] Cf. Bogdanov: "If there is faith, then there must exist some authority from which it is derived, authority that must be believed. The absolute is one of the names of this authority. In this case the 'absolute' is incarnated in the ideas that were at some time somewhere expressed by Marx and Engels. These are the prophets of the absolute truth. And it is perfectly clear that, as prophets, they must not, they cannot say anything that is not correct: either they are true prophets, and therefore their every word is inspired, or they can be mistaken, but then they are people like us, so who is going to establish the absolute truth?" (2010: 157–58).

Marxist thought (and therefore dangerous). A careful reader of Plekhanov's polemical works often finds oneself struggling with the following dilemma: If everything that needed to be written was already written by Marx and Engels, why does one need an enthusiastic scholar such as Plekhanov with his letters, pamphlets, essays, and books? Yet since Plekhanov does exist and does produce such a voluminous output, then there must be something missing in the original Marxist authors that requires their disciples to exert so much energy in explaining and defending their positions. If Marx and Engels are the true prophets, then Plekhanov is surely their most faithful disciple whose mission is to spread the good news of "scientific socialism" without distortion and addition. The use of religious language is quite explicit throughout Plekhanov's polemical corpus: there are orthodox (faithful) disciples, and there are false prophets and heretics.

A faithful disciple of the two prophets of Marxism, Plekhanov's self-assigned mission was to defend their doctrine from any correction or change through engagement with contemporary scientific discourse. What was originally an attempt at a scientific description of the reality of capitalism, according to Bogdanov, became a dogmatic restatement of positions and views judged to be true simply because they were formulated by Marx and Engels. For Bogdanov, this inevitably lead to a form of *fetishism*, and in his larger engagement with both Plekhanov and Lenin (although Lenin only gets an appendix, and Plekhanov is never engaged by name), he presents his own view of the subject matter. The book was aptly called *The Fall of Great Fetishism* (2010). A criticism of Plekhanov and Lenin is placed in a larger study of the *origin* of their errors, not simply as another polemical thrust against their accusations and counterarguments. Having presented his theory of ideology in the first chapter of the book, Bogdanov then traces the emergence of the "fetishism of norms"—simple technical rules for doing something becoming abstract (detached from practice) rules and norms—to the "fetishism of ideas"—here cognition emerges as an abstract form of combining various technical rules and norms—to the ultimate downfall of the "great fetishism" due to the development of proletarian collective forms of ideology.

The fetishism of norms is a form of fetishism because it takes a *collective* practice that produces a set of technical rules and makes them into a self-standing fetish of norms that now dominate the collective that created them. The fetishism of ideas is a form of fetishism because it takes a practice of truth, a set of collective experiences called "knowledge," and makes them into a self-standing fetish of an individualist thinking of an authoritarian kind. Now an individual thinker is creating and developing various ideas. A collective experience that produces these ideas—being determining thought—is ignored and repressed. All this takes place as a result of a breakdown of the original collective and an emergence of an alienated individual doer and thinker. But this individuality is an illusion,

a fetish—what only stands for the practice of the collective is taken as a self-standing independent reality. Here capitalism provides us with some help as it creates a new collective of proletarian workers who are initially forced to cooperate but then, according to Marxist analysis, create a new class that is capable of overcoming this "great fetishism" and creating the necessary conditions for a future socialist society. The proletarian collective is not yet in its final form, and it is only through a series of steps that it becomes what it is meant to become. The driving force of this development is the comradely cooperation that the proletariat arrives at as its culture moves slowly but surely away from fetishist forms of thinking and action toward socialist forms of comradely cooperation and overall collective co-existence. This is not a return to primitive collectivism of the pre-fetishist community but an advance toward a better connected and better articulated form of collectivism. Here not only are human beings joined together with other human beings, but the entire human collective is joined with the technology (machines) that it has created and the external world that it is in the process of taming. Here we have a kind of *cybernetic* collectivism.[15]

It is among these reflections on the nature of "ideological crisis" that Bogdanov makes a very clear point that Plekhanov and his ilk are old-fashioned authoritarians still bound up with individualist thinking that idolizes individual geniuses instead of following the thread of their thought toward the future collective: "It would seem that there is no doctrine that is more full of criticism, more hostile toward any spirit of authority, than our Marxism. And yet how common still is a truly slavish attitude toward the words and writings of the great teacher! It is still common to substitute the method of proof or disproof of various theoretical and practical positions with citations that refer to Marx thought about this or that!" (Bogdanov 2010: 116–17). Despite a lack of explicit references to Plekhanov, it is clear to any reader of the period that it is his thinking and attitude that are dismissed as fetishist and authoritarian forms of hero worship. Where the fetishist forms of theory and practice still rule—one individual thinker creating ideas, one individual master responsible for organizing all activity—we find only a religious form of attachment to the person of Marx and not a collective elaboration, development and, yes, correction of his ideas based on new collective experience and new science.

What is truth then? For Bogdanov, only a fetishist would associate truth with some absolute and eternal statement about the nature of reality—in the form of an "idea" an empty statement is torn away from its origin in the social reality of labor. Truth is nothing but a "living organizing form of human practice" (Bogdanov 2010: 71). If this practice is the

[15] For an interesting use of Bogdanov's ideas along these lines see Wark (2015).

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practice of oppression and exploitation, truth is the form of such practice: bourgeois philosophers serve the needs of bourgeois exploitation by divorcing truth from its role in the practice of oppression and thus creating an abstract truth of correspondence between idea and reality. These truths are presented as objective and self-standing, but the proletariat in its struggle against oppression and exploitation easily discovers that these truths are "the tools of support and enforcement of that order of things against which it is struggling, the tools of ruling used by those who rule, the tools of suppression of activity of those who are exploited" (Bogdanov 2010: 108). In sum, truth is what truth does.

Plekhanov's arguments against his opponents, including Lenin and the Bolsheviks, has always relied on the necessary connection between theoretical views (truth) and political positions (practice). Incorrect theory by default produced incorrect practice—if one was a Marxist heretic, one was a political deviant. Bolsheviks were not Marxist in their political views because they were "Machists" and Marxist apostates. In turn, when Lenin and his supporters attacked Plekhanov's political recommendations of 1905 (and later of 1914), they were careful to condemn his actions as going against Marxist theory and thus label him as a deviant from the orthodoxy. The assumption that theory must be linked with practice remained unchallenged. Even if Lenin and Bogdanov agreed to disagree on philosophical matters for a time, according to the official (read: Lenin's) version of the events, it had to come to the fore of the struggle once Bogdanov's alleged theoretical sins became too difficult to ignore. In this strangely un-Marxist view, one's theoretical *thought* determines one's practical *being*.

> When Marx says that the criterion of truth is practice, he expresses by this, first of all, the point of view of relativity of truth. With the change of human practice their truth changes as well. What was the truth within the limits of narrow practice ceases to be such in wider practice (Bogdanov 2010: 181).

Conclusion: On the Future of "Scientific Socialism"

The investigation of the nature of truth and the consequences of this inquiry on the practice of truth during the period under consideration in this essay must be placed in the context of what happened next: the revolutions of 1917 and the subsequent formation and growth of an entire new sort of political system, known to us today as the Soviet Union. The majority of the students of Soviet Marxism associate the term "dialectical materialism" with the clearly defined line that allegedly begins with Marx and Engels and stretches, through Plekhanov, Lenin, and Stalin, all the way to the legendary dull dogmatism of the late Soviet diamat. However,

the true birth of dialectical materialism as a militant model of "orthodox Marxism" should be traced to the famous republication of "Materialism and Empirio-criticism" in 1920, which was meant to crush, once more, the persistent popularity of various innovative elaborations of Marxism, with Alexander Bogdanov's version at the head.

Contrary to Soviet historical narrative, and often uncritically adopted by Western commentators, Lenin's attack on Bogdanov's "reactionary philosophy" in the original publication of "Materialism and Empirio-criticism" in 1909 did not, at the time, have the desired effect and was dismissed as a partisan *political* attack on the former ally aimed to score *political* points with Lenin's new allies. Mostly forgotten until its reissue in 1920, the book suddenly became an effective weapon of the "orthodoxy," not due to its philosophical argumentation, but due to the new political power of its author. Lenin's struggle against Bogdanov's "reactionary philosophy" resulted in a number of genuinely philosophical discussions, culminating with a famous "dialecticians–versus–mechanists" debate of 1924 to 1929.[16] Dialectical materialism emerged as a weaponized (and repressive) version of Marxism with the explicit purpose of creating a rigid and systematic doctrine of "scientific socialism" that culminated in the suppression of all genuine discussions of the essence of Marxism by 1929 to 1930.

The end of significant active fighting in the Russian Civil War of 1918 to 1921 and the introduction of the NEP in March of 1921 inaugurated a genuinely new era in the life of the newly established Soviet republic. This period between the end of "war communism" and the defeat of Bukharin (and the rise of Stalinism) is a fairly thoroughly researched realm of the history of the Soviet Union. Most scholars of the period agree that it was, in the words of Stephen Cohen, "a conspicuously rich and diverse decade of intellectual ferment." As Cohen goes on, "in philosophy, law, literature, economics, and other fields, wide-ranging theoretical controversies, both related and unrelated to the political debates under way in the party leadership, made this the most vital period in the history of Bolshevik thought and among the most interesting in the history of Marxist ideas" (Cohen 1973: 108). After the revolution was successfully defended, the Marxist nature of the Soviet state and its future became the main points of heated discussions both inside and outside of the confines of academic institutions (such as the Sverdlov Communist University, founded in 1918, and the Institute of Red Professors, founded in 1921) and journals (such as the famous "thick" Marxist journal *Under the Banner of Marxism*, founded in 1922).

As neither Marx nor the Marxist classics were particularly specific about the possibility of building actual socialist societies (regardless of

[16] For a detailed discussion of these debates, see Yakhot (2012).

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how one interprets evidence one does find in their writings), the questions of both practical direction and theoretical justification were not unimportant in the content of immediate post-Civil War discussions. Lenin and his close theoretical supporters were, in one sense, unprepared for the enthusiastic explosion of various theoretical options, all claiming to follow the original Marxist intentions. The problem of the new philosophy, eventually posited and "resolved" during the "dialecticians–versus–mechanists" debate, emerged in the early 1920s as the crucial problem of the Soviet identity: What was to become of this new "socialist" state that was no longer threatened with annihilation by its internal and external enemies?

On the one hand, there was Plekhanov and his "orthodox" Marxism (i.e., "dialectical materialism"). Lenin's sympathies always lied with Plekhanov's kind of Marxism, despite their personal and political disagreements. On the other hand, there were those who sought to extend what they understood as Marxism into new and uncharted theoretical, political, socioeconomic and cultural realms. The question of what was to become of Marxism as it now established itself as the official doctrine of the new state was the question of the future of Marxism as either a form of philosophy (an ideological construct aimed a theoretical elaboration) or a form of science. While Plekhanov's demise in 1918 and his late political affiliations made it next to impossible for the Bolshevik government to publish and disseminate his writings (an official collected works effort started only in 1922), Bogdanov published twenty-four different titles between 1917 and 1920 (Biggart 1987: 242).[17] In addition to Bogdanov's popularity as a writer, his influence could be seen in the publication of Nikolai Bukharin's 1921 textbook of "Marxist sociology" called *Teoriia istoricheskogo materializma* (translated into English as *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology* [1925]). This popular textbook went through five editions from 1921 to 1928. It presented Marxism to the new generation of Soviet students as a *science* of history, a way to understand and pursue the new scientific construction of the future socialist society.[18]

In 1922, *Under the Banner of Marxism* [Pod znamenem marksizma] published a short (indeed a shortened version of a larger piece) essay by Sergei Minin called "Philosophy overboard!" [Filosofiiu za bort!] (1922a). Minin's argument was fairly direct and in the simplified version can be summarized as follows: If socialism is indeed the latest (final) stage of human development, then it is clear that religion was the product of

[17] Bogdanov's main late theoretical work *Vseobshchaya organizatsionnaya nauka (Tektologiya)* [Universal organizational science (tektology)] appeared in a new two-volume edition in 1917 (Bogdanov 1917). Another edition of the work, now called *Tektologiya: Vseobshchaya organizatsionnaya nauka* [Tektology: Universal organizational science], appeared in 1922 (Bogdanov 1922).

[18] For more on Bukharin-Bogdanov connection, see Biggart (1992).

slave-owning and feudal societies, philosophy—of the capitalist stage, and science—of the socialist stage; the need for philosophy will disappear as humanity approaches the ideal stage of socialism, characterized by science. As Minin puts it, "landlords and slave-owners, feudal lords and serf-owners used the weapon of religion. The bourgeoisie fought with the help of philosophy. The proletariat however relies in its struggle exclusively on science." (1922a: 122). Science, continues Minin, is the knowledge of material world acquires by the human beings as they act upon the world. Minin then cites a number of texts by Marx and Engels in which they deny that there is any future for philosophical constructions of the past (especially Hegel) and define "dialectical materialism" as science of universal laws of movement and development of nature, human society and thinking.

An essay by Minin was published as a part of polemical section and was immediately followed by a rejoinder. "Can there be such a thing as proletarian philosophy?" asks the respondent. After chiding Minin for some terminological confusion, the author of the response claims that since Marx and Engels used philosophy in order to create their "dialectical materialism"—materialism and dialectics being philosophical notions—we must not reject philosophy. Followed by multiple references to the classics of "Marxist philosophy"—a strategy that will quickly become the signature of many Soviet "disputes"—the respondent concludes that Minin's call for abandoning philosophy is based on a misunderstanding of the role of philosophy in Marxism. There is no real discussion of the substance of Minin's conclusion—the working class must use science, not philosophy, in its struggle for socialism.

The short period of around 1920 to 1929 was a fruitful period of philosophical discussions that, despite the more or less disreputable tactics by all philosophical camps involved, could be described as relatively open and productive. The philosophical, or to use the idiom of the time, ideological, diversity of the early 1920s did not exactly lend itself to easy manipulation and management by Party officials. The struggle for ideological unanimity, at times manipulative and deceitful, as times sincere and motivated by genuine concerns for theoretical purity, was not *destined* to result in the Stalinist elimination of freedom, as there was nothing inherently "totalitarian" about the Marxist discussions of the 1920s. However, the streak of the repression of dissent through "party discipline" was certainly strong and growing stronger.

Although many would think that the final pages of genuinely interesting Soviet philosophy were written in the 1920s and were lost forever as Stalinist repression approached, the fundamental question about the status of Marxism as science continued to be debated and brought to the fore of public discussion. Soviet Marxism, as any other philosophical unit, experienced its ups and downs, yet was never quite able to do away completely with both original thinkers (such as, for example, Evald Ilyenkov)

or original approaches to Marx and Engels.[19] The main question remains: Is Marxism a set of philosophical principles designed to propel our conversation about the future of human society forward or is it a science that allows us to predict the economic and political consequences of various contemporary points of data?

In a review essay of recently published books on Marx in *The New Yorker* (Menand 2016), the author connects Marx's current relevance (and even popularity) to the events of Russian and Soviet Marxism: "The Russian Revolution made the world take Marx's criticism of capitalism seriously. After 1917, communism was no longer a utopian fantasy" (Menand 2016: 92). There is no doubt that Marxism has been making its theoretical comeback ever since the global economic collapse of 2008. But questions about its contemporary role still remain. To some, the Soviet experience is the best argument *against* the vitality of a Marxist approach, while to others it is a testament to its incredible tenacity and adaptability. The question whether Marxism is a philosophy or a science is the question that assumes that we know and correctly understand the nature of these concepts. If we adopt Bogdanov's terminology, we must be asking ourselves whether Marxism today is still capable of producing a set of scientific truths that would organize the social life of humankind in such a way as to promote those aspects of overall human collective that lead away from capitalist exploitation toward the future goal of a decidedly socialist collective.

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[19] The intersection between Ilyenkov and Mikhail Lifschitz is particular fruitful and has been pursued by several Russian-speaking researchers in the last decade or so. In the theoretical interaction between the two, Lifschitz stands for a peculiar "diamat" approach to objective truth in art and artistic expression while Ilyenkov insists on a more subtle and nuanced reading of Marxism in its Hegelian context. For further reading see Lobastov (2004), Lifschitz (2003). English-speaking readers are now able to familiarize themselves with some of these conversations due such recent publications as Levant and Oittinen (2014).

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