

# Alexander Bogdanov and Independent Working-Class Education

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**A**fter many years in obscurity, the name of the Russian political activist Alexander Bogdanov (1873-1928) is starting to achieve the sort of recognition it deserves. At the time of the split between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks, he was a prominent Bolshevik who perhaps rivalled Lenin in reputation. However, from the start, Bogdanov was developing a different approach from Lenin: an approach which envisaged a revolutionary movement growing out of the development of advanced workers by their own efforts, regardless of the extent to which the 'educated representatives of the propertied classes' elaborate a socialist ideology (*What is to be Done?* 1902). Although the row which later developed between Lenin and Bogdanov focused around certain philosophical issues, I shall here focus on Bogdanov's approach to Independent Working-Class Education (IWCE).

Bogdanov was a member of the intelligentsia. He was expelled from Moscow State University for political activism. In 1895 he was exiled to Tula, an industrial city 120 miles south of Moscow. Here he continued his education in two different ways: he enrolled as an external student with the University of Kharkov, qualifying as a doctor in 1899, and also joined a study circle organised by Ivan Saliev, a worker-engineer at the local armaments factory. Unfortunately there is very little written about Saliev, but he established this study circle which proved to be quite influential as Russian Social Democracy developed a more working-class base in the 1890s. Alongside Bogdanov two other intellectuals were involved: Vladimir Bazarov (1874-1939), the future Menshevik and Soviet economist, and Ivan Skvortsov-Stepanov (1870-1928), son of a clerical worker, who later became a prominent Bolshevik. Together, crucially, with the worker-students, they created what has been described as an underground university. In 1924 Bogdanov was to remark that it was the particular effort of his students to 'connect technical and economic phenomena with the forms of spiritual culture arising out of them, like links in a single complex chain of development' that had a profound impact on his way of thinking.

Thus, far from acting as an intellectual bringing political class-consciousness to the workers - as outlined in *What is to be Done?* - Bogdanov was involved in a collaborative study circle with workers, whereby he learnt from their questions and modified his views accordingly. One result of this is the book *A Short Course in Economic Science*, originally published in Russian in 1897, but which was published in England in 1923 in a translation by Joe Fineberg and published by the Labour Publishing Company. (A subsequent edition was also published by the Communist Party in 1927.)

Bogdanov threw himself into the Russian revolutionary movement, suffering arrest and imprisonment on several occasions. He was involved with organising the 1907 Tiflis Bank Robbery. However, following political differences in the wake of the failed 1905 revolution in Russia, the relationship between Lenin and Bogdanov broke down. James White offers an account of this in his book *Lenin, the Theory and Practice of Revolution* (2001). Suffice it to say here that although the issues upon which Lenin challenged Bogdanov were philosophical, the underlying political issues ran deep. Although Bogdanov was expelled from the Bolshevik faction - where he had enjoyed a prominent role - he did not abandon the struggle for socialism, but rather saw the nature of the struggle in a different light. After a brief period in the *Vpered* group, he left them in 1911. He was not to join any political party after that. However, in the period after the Russian Revolution he did play an important role in the development of the Proletkult movement and in 1918 became founding director of the newly established Socialist Academy of Social Sciences, a position he held until 1923. During this period he was on the receiving end of hostility from Lenin, who saw Bogdanov's ideas as a threat - for example these ideas partly inspired the *Workers Opposition*, a group within the Bolshevik Party who challenged Lenin's top-down approach.

During the earlier period (1910-11) it was from practice that Bogdanov learnt: firstly organising a party school in Capri, where he was hosted by

Maxim Gorky. Gorky was a very popular novelist who had the status equivalent to a pop star, and was renowned for his socialist ideals. Thus in 1909 Bogdanov encountered Nikifor Vilonov, a railway worker attracted to the Bolsheviks. Vilonov spent time with Bogdanov in Capri, and influenced Bogdanov when he wrote *The Philosophy of Living Experience*. Originally published in Russia in 1913, the first English edition of this book was published in 2015.

Here Bogdanov develops an argument which compares the practical experience of work with a practical approach to philosophy and science: as workers 'are accustomed to use material tools in labour and realise that they make them by their own hands, it is easier for the proletarians to grasp the essence of those mental tools which they themselves produce'. For Bogdanov, philosophy was not an abstract academic study that takes place in ivory towers, but rather 'a necessary tool of guidance in practice and thought' experienced by every human being. However, he saw the collective nature of work under capitalism as providing the conditions by which working-class people would come together and generate collective experiences, which would then start to take on a scientific character. In this respect his thinking was a forerunner of contemporary notions of the 'wisdom in crowds', and it is revealing that modern computer translating has moved on by leaps and bounds because a mass of data concerning what are considered good translations has been fed into a database to allow statistical methods to yield results, rather than using the sort of abstract comparison of grammatical structure for the purpose as was done previously. In this he brought together the work of Ernst Mach - an Austrian physicist who was also involved in writing popular science books - with the work of Karl Marx. Such statistical approaches to science had started to spread in the late nineteenth century.

Following a brief spell in Bologna (1910-11) Bogdanov focused on theoretical work rather than practical activity in IWCE. It was only after the Russian Revolution that he really engaged in it once again, and for a brief period his ideas had a powerful effect. However, Lenin had lost none of his antipathy towards Bogdanov. Bogdanov was a leading light in Proletkult, a cultural organisation outside the Bolshevik Party, which focused on developing Proletarian Culture. It encompassed a whole series of workers' clubs, which were often linked to the avant-garde in art and architecture. It particularly attracted cultural workers from the Constructivist movement, who often worked on designing new facilities for these clubs. Some were active in the working-class theatre movement, which sought to

recast theatre as a popular tool for public enlightenment. Rather than relying on pre-formatted scripts and the power of a single director, this movement developed a *laboratory approach* whereby the activist-actors sought to merge with the audience rather than preserving the sort of distance which bourgeois theatre demanded. Aleksei Gan was particularly prominent in this field, and when he wrote his book *Constructivism* (1922) - which was one of the key theoretical texts of the Constructivists - drew extensively on Bogdanov's writings. Constructivism was an art/anti-art movement, in that it aimed to replace the specialised activities of bourgeois trained artists with a form of proletarian cultural practice by which the workers would express their collectivised creativity as they went about their daily life. Although it gained worldwide renown, it is only very recently that its connection with Bogdanov and IWCE has become properly recognised, in the English language at least.

Bogdanov was also involved in an attempt to apply his understanding of IWCE to the transformation of education as a whole, including higher education and scientific research. Indeed, he viewed the application of these ideas as essential in order for science to be emancipated from the narrow pursuit of personal interest. The German novelist Arthur Holitscher (1899-1945) visited Soviet Russia in 1920 and wrote *Drei Monate in Sowjet-Russland* (Three Months in Soviet Russia), an interesting account of what he saw there. He describes the integration of theatrical methods used in Moscow - with some workers play-acting as bourgeois leaders on the world stage while others confront them. He also describes how the chain of production and other economic matters was explained to the peasants through travelling propaganda trains. In the campaign against illiteracy, those who had recently learnt to read and write were at the forefront of passing on their learning: 'The joy of learning is sparked by the joy of communicating to others what you know yourself, but have only recently learnt'.

Holitscher describes how education proceeded for children, with workers going to schools to teach about their practical skills in a scientific fashion. But he further describes the proletarian college's work:

The lectures at the proletarian college do not turn out to be like lectures given at ordinary colleges. The teacher does not plant himself at the lectern to teach the student about that which the student is unaware of but which the teacher has already learnt a long time ago. The teacher is simply chairing the meeting and leading the discussion. The presentation connects. An arbitrary field of knowledge is

presented and discussed. The teacher converses with the students and where a gifted student is able, by virtue of their unspoiled and originally functioning apparatus of thinking, they teach and instruct the teacher. It's a seminar, as you can see. The leader of the debate only has the vocation and responsibility to use their greater knowledge and deeper experience to direct the listeners and co-creators to where they want to go. Maybe the audience will give them a new point of view which they did not even suspect at the beginning of the debate - well, all the better for them and for science. If new aspects are brought through discussion thanks to the naive and straight thinking ability of the worker's brain, then the somewhat vague and precarious structures of the proletarian university will be proved and strengthened.

One of Bogdanov's innovations which he promoted to accompany the proletarian colleges was a 'workers' encyclopedia'. In fact it was my contemporary experience with Wikipedia which led me to start getting interested in Bogdanov. I became involved with Wikipedia, the 'encyclopedia anyone can edit', over fifteen years ago. I was fascinated at how its ethos of rejecting the specialist in favour of the thinking ability of the ordinary person evolved. Although it does not promote a specifically class-based approach, I feel it has become a vernacular encyclopedia, in tune with the sort of resources that Ivan Illich called for in his book *Deschooling Society* (1971). In this sense I feel that Wikipedia has realised this proposal by Bogdanov, even though its initiator, Jimmy Wales, was imbued with the capitalist ideology of Ayn Rand!

Bogdanov's broader vision of what socialism would be like is best portrayed in his utopian novel *Red Star* (1908). Here the hero visits Mars, which underwent a socialist revolution several years previously. Interestingly, far from providing a simple utopian view of a perfect society, it rather shows a society trying to come to grips with ecological catastrophe. Even for those of us who might find his vision too unrealistic, perhaps the problems of a socialist society grappling with major ecological problems inherited from capitalism might prove interesting. With the recent news of a million young people going out on strike against inaction around climate change, perhaps we will see the revived interest in Bogdanov have practical applications rather than being just another intellectual fad.

#### Further reading:

Alexander Bogdanov, trans. David G. Rowley (2015) *The Philosophy of Living Experience*

Ivan Illich (1971) *Deschooling Society*  
 Arthur Holitscher (1921) *Drei Monate in Sowjet-Rusland*  
 Fabian Tompsett (2017) 'Proletcult: IWCE and the Russian Revolution, in *Post-16 Educator* 88, July-September  
 James White (2018) *Red Hamlet: the Life and Ideas of Alexander Bogdanov* (paperback version due November 2019)

# Independent Working- Class Education Network

<http://iwceducation.co.uk>

Downloadable versions of the two pamphlets:

***'Plebs': the lost legacy of Independent working-Class Education***

and:

***Class-struggle Adult Education for the 21st Century: Why we need it and how we can move towards it***

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