

Special theme section: Eisenstein, Bogdanov, and the organization of culture

Aleksandr Bogdanov and Lenin on “Things-In-Themselves”

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Questions on the theory of cognition formed one of the focal points in the dispute between orthodox Russian Marxists and Aleksandr Bogdanov and his followers. Bogdanov was an adherent of Mach's theory, which abandoned Kant's concept of “things-in-themselves” (*Ding an sich*) outside the cognizing subject. According to Mach and Bogdanov, there is no need to duplicate human experience in appearances given in the senses and things behind these appearances. The orthodox Marxists, Lenin as well as Plekhanov, insisted that Kant's concept of things-in-themselves should be retained, but in a modified form: the things-in-themselves do not form a limit to our knowledge, as Kant (allegedly) thought, but turn into “things-for-us” in the everyday processes of material and scientific production. Both solutions, the Machian and the orthodox Marxist, have their problems. In the Soviet era, Lenin was depicted as the winner of the dispute. But a closer examination of Bogdanov's arguments shows that he actually found some weak points in Lenin's conception. However, this does not mean that Lenin's critique of Bogdanov as a subjectivist in his theory of cognition was groundless.

Пусть не Аксельрод, не Дан
В нашем опыте дан.
Дан же в нем один Богданов –
Существует ли «в себе» Плеханов?

Безусловно, нет, он не существует «в себе», а вне себя,
Ибо само существование Богданова выводит его из себя!
(Anonymous Russian epigram, 1908)¹

Many researchers have wondered why Russian Marxists in the early twentieth century were so enthused by philosophical matters in general and by Kant's theory of cognition in particular. Now forgotten late eighteenth-century German philosophers such as Aenesidemus-Schulze were cited and discussed feverishly. One is reminded of Marx's old dictum, that the French underwent a political revolution

¹ From: Yagodinskiy 2006: 45. The epigram's author is not named.

and the Germans a philosophical one – with the addition that the Russians appeared to want both types of revolution at once.

But the seemingly abstract interest had quite understandable practical motives. Finally, it was the role of the so-called “subjective factor” in history which was at stake. This was a problem with which generations of Russian revolutionaries had struggled since the mid-nineteenth century. Just before the breakthrough of Marxism in the last decade of the nineteenth century, the “subjective sociology” of Pëtr Lavrov and Nikolai Mikhailovskiy had been much *en vogue* in the radical wing of the Russian intelligentsia. Mikhailovskiy and his supporters insisted upon the decisive role of personal initiative in the historical process, and from this point of view they opposed what they interpreted as the “determinism” and “fatalism” of Marxism.

The dispute between Lenin (the orthodox Marxist) and Bogdanov (the Machian Marxist) must be viewed against this background, or else its intensity and high-pitched emotionality will remain enigmatic. The Russian empirio-criticism would, from the viewpoint of the history of ideas, best be characterized as a variant of the so-called “second” positivism (after the “first”, by Comte), but this does not yet explain the essence of the phenomenon. In her excellent analysis of Russian empirio-criticism, Daniela Steila stressed the specific traits of Russia’s recopying of European philosophical currents. This reception has never been purely academic; instead, the Russians have always sought solutions to the actual problems of their society.

It is, moreover, quite possible to interpret the empirio-critical revision of Marxism (dubbed by Bogdanov himself as Empiriomonism) as a continuation of the subjectivism of the Narodniki. It became influential in the left current of Russian Social Democracy – so influential that many contemporaries were ready to take it as the philosophy proper of Bolshevism. What Mikhailovskiy had claimed in the 1870s, namely that the subjective factor decides the outcome of the historical process, seemed now to resurge in the philosophy of Bogdanov, which denounced the determinism of many Marxists. This explains why the leaders of Menshevism and Bolshevism, Plekhanov and Lenin, were largely in agreement in their critique of Bogdanov. It even seemed that the Russian Machists brought Narodnik subjectivism to a head, to the extent that they – as Lenin wrote – approached the subjective-idealist and solipsist positions of Bishop Berkeley.

The thing-in-itself

For Bogdanov, the Kantian concept of a “thing-in-itself” is but an “obsolete philosophical idea”, which his own theory was able to overcome, as he declared in the second part of *Empiriomonizm* (1905) (Bogdanov 2003: 131). This volume of Bogdanov’s *chef-d’oeuvre* has as its introduction a detailed overview of the problematics of the thing-in-itself. The first lines of the text make clear that the German researcher Dieter Grille was quite right when, in his seminal monography on Bogdanov, he wrote that the Russian empirio-monist was “biologizing” the history of the mind by turning philosophical problems into psychological ones (Grille 1966: 143).

In other words, Bogdanov simply refuses to treat philosophical questions as “philosophical”. Instead, he converts them into questions of the psychology of the senses, of social psychology, or of social anthropology. The philosophical dualism of appearances and things-in-themselves, put forth by Kant, is for Bogdanov nothing but a “pale, vanishing reflection of another, clear and vigorous dualism [...] – the dualism of the animists”. In the same manner in which the primitive animist imagined that behind his everyday milieu there existed another world, the realm of spirits, so the philosopher imagined things-in-themselves which should exist behind the appearances. “When the dualism which evolved from the animistic ideas was extended to the whole world, the result was the ‘thing-in-itself’...” (Bogdanov 2003: 111). Kant took only the last step in this process, as he stripped the thing-in-itself

from all anthropomorphism. In Kant, "the thing-in-itself lost all of its empirical content and became incognizable" (Bogdanov 2003: 111).

Despite the fact that the Russian intelligentsia in general was not greatly interested in Neo-Kantianism, it was compelled to comment on many Kantian themes. In the 1890s, in *Die Neue Zeit*, the theoretical organ of the German Social Democrats, Plekhanov had criticised the Neo-Kantian views of Bernstein and Conrad Schmidt. A little later, in the first years of the new century, he would respond to the empirio-critical interpretation of Marxism by Bogdanov with essentially the same arguments.

A recurrent theme in Plekhanov's critiques was the question of the cognizability of the world, and thus even the status of the famous Kantian thing-in-itself. Daniela Steila has pointed to the seemingly disproportionate role of this central concept of the Critical philosophy in the discussions between orthodox Marxists and Machists (see Steila 1996: 191sq.).

In the article *Conrad Schmidt versus Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels*, published in *Die Neue Zeit* in October 1898, Plekhanov rebuffs the 'Kantian' agnosticism (although it would have been better to speak of a Neo-Kantian interpretation) of Bernstein's pupil, Schmidt. Plekhanov referred to Engels' comment that the daily practical activities of men, and especially the progress of industry, are the best ways to disprove the (allegedly) Kantian doctrine of an unknowable thing-in-itself. Being somewhat cheeky, Engels quoted an old English saying, "The proof of the pudding is in the eating", and thought the same applies to the process of cognition in general.

Plekhanov continues: "I shall try to explain the matter to him [Schmidt – V.O.] in the simplest of terms. What is a phenomenon? *It is a condition of our consciousness evoked by the effect on us of things-in-themselves*. That is what Kant says. From this definition it follows that anticipating a given phenomenon means anticipating the effect that a thing-in-itself will have on our consciousness" (Plekhanov 1976, II:381).

According to Plekhanov, everyday scientific and technological practice, its very success, is proof that "we can anticipate certain phenomena". He concludes: "So if we are aware of some properties of things-in-themselves, we have no right to call those things unknowable. This 'sophistry' of Kant falls to the ground, shattered by the logic of his own doctrine. That is what Engels meant by his 'pudding'" (Plekhanov 1976, II:381).²

The quotation shows us the blueprint of Plekhanov's argumentation, which he applied again, a decade later, in *Materialismus militans* (1908) against another opponent, Bogdanov. In his book *Empiriomonizm* (vol. III, 1906), Bogdanov had reproached Plekhanov for defining the matter as things-in-themselves which affect our organs of sense. In his "second letter" to his adversary, Plekhanov first quotes Bogdanov's reproach:

"Thus [you write smilingly], 'matter' (or 'nature' in its antithesis to 'spirit') is defined through 'things-in-themselves' and through their capacity to 'arouse sensations by acting on our sense-organs'. But what are these 'things-in-themselves'? 'That which acts on our sense-organs and arouses in us various sensations.' That is all. You will find that Comrade Beltov has no other definition, if you leave out of account the probably implied negative characteristics: *non*-'sensation', *non*-'phenomenon', *non*-'experience'".³

Plekhanov, seemingly irritated, then answers:

"I don't define matter *through* things-in-themselves at all. I assert only that *all* things-in-themselves are material. By the materiality of things, I understand – and here you are right – their ability one way or another, directly or indirectly, to act on our senses and thus arouse in us sensations of one kind or another." He continued by explaining that Kant himself had been inconsequent in defining

2 In Plekhanov's discussion of Kant (as in Engels' "pudding thesis") there is a *circulus in demonstrando* which is easily discerned. From the fact of a successful anticipation of phenomena, Plekhanov concludes unjustifiably that there exists a causal relation between things-in-themselves and the cognising subject.

3 The references Plekhanov gives here are to the first edition of *Empiriomonizm*, Book III, St. Petersburg 1906: xiii.

the things-in-themselves. On the first page of his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant acknowledged things-in-themselves to be the source of our sensations. However, “at the same time he was by no means averse to recognizing these things as something immaterial, that is to say, inaccessible to our senses” (Plekhanov 1976, III: 212).

Later in his exposition, Plekhanov concedes that “the expression ‘things-in-themselves exist outside our experience’ is not a very happy one. It could mean that things in general are inaccessible to our experience. This is how Kant understood it...” (Plekhanov 1976, III: 219). Be that as it may, Plekhanov insists that it is necessary to relinquish Kantian agnosticism. This implies that the Marxists should “employ the term ‘thing-in-itself’ in a quite different sense from the Kantians and Machists” (Plekhanov 1976, III: 212–213).

As one sees, Plekhanov thinks that the concept of a thing-in-itself is useful, but should be used in a sense other than that in which Kant and other agnostics use it. In fact, this concept seems to be for Plekhanov indispensable for a materialist theory of cognition. A materialist must, however, abandon the false, agnostic, allegedly Kantian idea of the impossibility of having any knowledge about the thing-in-itself.

Plekhanov thus seeks an unequivocal definition of the relations of the cognizing subject to the things-in-themselves – not a dialectical one, which would have taken into account the contradictory nature of the human cognitive process. In cognizing the world, the subject seeks knowledge of something which is objective; that is, independent of the subject. It was precisely this “dialectics” which produced ambiguities in Kant’s original discussion of things-in-themselves.

Lenin and Bogdanov

In his critique of Bogdanov, presented in the notorious philosophical pamphlet *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (1909), Lenin relies to a great extent on Plekhanov’s arguments against the subjectivist interpretations of Marxism by the Neo-Kantians and Bogdanov. Lenin too feels that he has to defend the concept of a thing-in-itself, although interpreted according to the doctrine of materialism:

“The ‘thing-in-itself’ is a veritable *bête noire* with Bogdanov and Valentinov, Bazarov and Chernov, Berman and Yushkevich. There is no abuse they have not hurled at it, there is no ridicule they have not showered on it. And against whom are they breaking lances because of this luckless ‘thing-in-itself’? Here a division of the philosophers of Russian Machism according to political parties begins. All the would-be Marxists among the Machians are combating *Plekhanov’s* ‘thing-in-itself’; they accuse Plekhanov of having become entangled and straying into Kantianism, and of having forsaken Engels” (Lenin 1977:98).

Lenin denied that Engels had refuted the thing-in-itself in general. According to him, Engels had refuted only the Kantian interpretation of it: “[I]t is not true that Engels ‘is producing a refutation of the thing-in-itself.’ Engels said explicitly and clearly that he was refuting the *Kantian ungraspable* (or unknowable) thing-in-itself” (Lenin 1977:102). Kant’s error was, according to Lenin, that he separated in a principal manner the appearances from the things-in-themselves, like the sceptic David Hume before him, and created thus between the (subjective) appearances and (objective) things-in-themselves a chasm that could not be bridged.

After having analyzed the arguments of the Machists, in the first instance as they were presented by Bogdanov, Lenin makes his three important conclusions with regard to the theory of knowledge (Lenin 1977:103 sqq.):

“1) Things exist independently of our consciousness, independently of our perceptions, outside of us [...]

2) There is definitely no difference in principle between the phenomenon and the thing-in-itself, and there can be no such difference. The only difference is between what is known and what is not yet known. [...]

3) In the theory of knowledge [...] we must think dialectically, that is, we must not regard our knowledge as ready-made and unalterable, but must determine [...] how incomplete, inexact knowledge becomes more complete and more exact."

A further aspect of Lenin's interpretation of things-in-themselves, as put forth in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, is the thesis – which he develops with a reference to Feuerbach – that in the process of cognition the things-in-themselves (*Dinge an sich*) constantly turn into things-for-us (*Dinge für uns*):

"The *an sich* (of itself, or 'in itself') of Feuerbach is the direct opposite of the *an sich* of Kant [...] The objects of our ideas are distinct from our ideas, the thing-in-itself is distinct from the thing-for-us, for the latter is only a part, or only one aspect, of the former [...] All the mysterious, sage and subtle distinctions between the phenomenon and the thing-in-itself are sheer philosophical balderdash" (Lenin 1977: 120).

In *Empiriomnizm*, Bogdanov had written that the point of view of such a materialistically reinterpreted thing-in-itself is nothing but a repetition of "the standpoint of the French materialists of the eighteenth century and among the modern philosophers – Engels and his Russian follower, Beltov [i.e., Plekhanov – V.O.]" (quoted here according to Lenin 1977: 121).

Lenin's reply to this assertion is interesting: "The reason for Bogdanov's distortion of materialism lies in his failure to understand the relation of absolute truth to relative truth" (Lenin 1977: 122). In other words, in order to defend the independence of the things-in-themselves, an independence which Bogdanov doubts, it is necessary to recur to the idea of an *absolute truth*. Otherwise, the scepticism of Hume and Berkeley cannot be resisted. In this way the dispute about things-in-themselves transforms into another dispute: does there exist an absolute truth or not? Bogdanov is explicit: "As I understand it, Marxism contains a denial of the unconditional objectivity of any truth whatsoever, the denial of all eternal truths." (Bogdanov, *Empiriomnizm*, Book III, pp. IV–V, quoted here according to Lenin 1977:122).

The positions of Lenin and Bogdanov on questions of the theory of cognition thus stood in opposition to each other in a clear-cut manner. Whilst Bogdanov denied entirely the concept of a thing-in-itself, seeing in it only an anthropological and psychological problem, to become obsolete as the sciences progress, both Plekhanov and Lenin wanted to retain it, albeit not in the "agnostic" form it had taken in the Critical philosophy of Kant and his followers. One could thus claim that when Lenin attacked Bogdanov in his *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, the sparring partners entered the fight under quite different premises. For Lenin, the dispute was eminently philosophical; for Bogdanov it was about matters of empirical science.

The outcome of the dispute was thus, in a way, predetermined. Lenin won a philosophical victory over Bogdanov, but that was mainly because Bogdanov did not want a philosophical dispute at all. He was more interested in what he conceived as a new scientific world outlook which should replace the old philosophy and metaphysics with deeper, more contemporary insights.

In the Soviet period, the results of Lenin's examination in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* were declared as official truth. The "Bogdanov case" was put *ad acta*. For ideological reasons, it was not possible to reconsider it. Even the Soviet era's best published study on the Lenin–Bogdanov dispute, A.I. Volodin's *Boy absolyutno neizbezhen*, accepts the official version and restricts itself to a description of how Lenin's philosophical work was written and prepared for print. Bogdanov's further answer to Lenin and its arguments were not analyzed (cf. Volodin 1982).

Bogdanov's muzzled answer to Lenin

Bogdanov replied to Lenin's critique as early as the following year. In 1910 he published a volume containing two extensive works, *Padenie velikogo fetishizma* and *Vera i nauka*. The latter had as its subtitle, *O knige V. Il'ina "Materializm i empiriokrititsizm"*. A further answer to Lenin's book was made in Bogdanov's later work, *Desyatiletie otlucheniya ot marksizma (1904–1914)*, which has the character of a memoir. But as it was published only posthumously, in 1995, I do not analyze it here.⁴

In *Vera i nauka* Bogdanov, still regarding himself as a "historical materialist" (cf. Bogdanov 1910: 146), begins his answer to Lenin with a definition of religious thought. It is, according to him, nothing but an authoritarian way of thinking, and is brought about simply by labour processes led in an authoritarian way. Faith (*vera*)⁵ is nothing but "Man's relation to an authority approved by him" (Bogdanov 1910: 147). But this kind of authoritarianism is characteristic even for Lenin, who had claimed that there exists an absolute truth. Bogdanov seizes the example of an absolute truth given by Lenin: the sentence "Napoleon died in St. Helena on the 5th of May 1821." He attempts to show that even this sentence, which according to Lenin should be absolutely valid, will after close scrutiny appear to be relative assertion. For example, the date of the fifth of May would presuppose the Gregorian calendar – and even "death" is not so easy to define medically (Bogdanov 1910: 154 sqq.).

These arguments, as unconvincing as they might appear, were nevertheless intended only as an illustration to Bogdanov's main idea: that human thinking and consequently even the concept of truth are dependent upon the historically changeable social organization of labour. He drives home his point:

"I dare to assure the esteemed author [V. Il'in; i.e., Lenin – V.O.] that such complex, generalizing concepts as 'autumn', 'winter', 'spring', etc., actually are not given to us in experience, but shaped by history [*vyrabotany istoricheski*]. For example, experience has given us a great many elements of 'cold', in combination [*soedinenie*] with elements which formed the complexes of 'snow', 'ice' [...]. The recurrence of these or other sums of experiences, with tiny variations, has served as material for the organizing 'idea' or 'law': *After the winter, there will be spring*. There is nothing absolute in these conceptions, or in the law which connects them" (Bogdanov 1910: 182).

Lenin had objected, stating that if the truth would be – as Bogdanov claimed – nothing but "an organizing form of human experience", then from this it would follow, for example, that the doctrine of Catholicism, with all its dogmas such as transubstantiation, would be true in the most literal sense.

To this ironic remark, Bogdanov now answers defiantly: "Catholicism *would* be a truth, if it were capable of organizing the present-day social experience of humanity in a harmonious and well-structured [*stroyno*] way, without contradictions [...] Catholicism *would* be a truth for the epoch, the experience of which it could organize successfully and completely; this fact no Il'in, with his muttering, can overcome" (Bogdanov 1910: 184).

Bogdanov expresses his position in a concise way, asserting once again his quite subjectivist theory of cognition: "the 'objectivity' [of physical experience] is nothing but its *general meaning* [*obshchezna-chimost'*] for humanity" (Bogdanov 1910: 185). It is thus obvious that, as regards the general positions of his philosophy, Bogdanov restricts himself to a repetition of his previously expressed views; e.g., in the three volumes of *Empiriomonizm*. In this respect, his answer to Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* is indeed not of much interest. However, in his *Vera i nauka* there is one intriguing observation concerning Lenin's doctrine of things-in-themselves.

According to Bogdanov, Lenin is operating in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* at the same time with three different concepts of the thing-in-itself. These three concepts "correspond to the three philosophical schools, whose ideas have been spread among the Russian Marxists" (Bogdanov 1910: 163).

4 See Bordyugov (General Editor) 1995. The volume was edited by N.S. Antonova and has a foreword written by Daniela Steila.

5 In the Russian language, "faith" (in the religious sense) and "belief" are not clearly distinguished. The noun *vera* covers both meanings.

The first of these comes from Feuerbach and Dietzgen, two materialist philosophers whom Lenin has cited copiously in order to prove the idea that “the world is a Being given to the senses and in this regard there is no essential difference between the ‘thing-in-itself’ and the ‘thing for us’, between ‘matter’ and ‘appearance’” (Bogdanov 1910: 163).

Bogdanov refers here to how Lenin had in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* quoted Feuerbach’s old work, *Über Spiritualismus und Materialismus*, from 1866. In this work, the German philosopher reproached the idealists who believed that they had been able to crush materialism by accusing it of dogmatism; the materialists assume the sensuous world as an undisputed objective truth. In other words, they assume “that it is a world in itself (*an sich*), i.e., existing without us, while in reality the world is only a product of spirit” (Lenin 1977:118).

After quoting the passage, Lenin comments triumphantly, identifying himself with Feuerbach’s position:

“This materialism of Feuerbach’s, like the materialism of the seventeenth century contested by Bishop Berkeley, consisted in the recognition that ‘objects in themselves’ exist outside our mind. The *an sich* (of itself, or ‘in itself’) of Feuerbach is the direct opposite of the *an sich* of Kant [...] Feuerbach very ingeniously and clearly explains how ridiculous it is to postulate a ‘transcendence’ from the world of phenomena to the world in itself, a sort of impassable gulf created by the priests and taken over from them by the professors of philosophy” (Lenin 1977:118).

Bogdanov remarks: “It seems I do not need to quote further. Only the existence for the senses is recognized, and as a part of it, the appearance, or human experience. This view is put forth against the ‘Machists’, who recognize only ‘experience’, only ‘the world of the elements’, which according to V. Il’in is but idealism, metaphysics et cetera” (Bogdanov 1910: 164).

Bogdanov continues by noting that Lenin in fact slips into the positions of his adversary; he defends, following Feuerbach, the idea that the “world in itself” is accessible by the “world of phenomena”. Because there is no impassable gulf between them, this must mean that we cognize through our sensuous experience the world as it is in itself. How then, asks Bogdanov, can Lenin at the same time reject the Machian thesis that the existence of the external world consists of nothing but our sense-impressions? “[W]hat really are these ‘elements of experience’ which V. Il’in rejects in favour of ‘sensuous experience’? They are colours, tunes, the hard, the soft, the warm [...] and so on. [...] Colours, tones, hardness, forms – all right, but are these not *sensuous elements* or *elements of the existence for the senses*? Obviously, yes! Is there thus any difference between V. Il’in and the ‘Machists’? Obviously not!” (Bogdanov 1910: 164–165).

Bogdanov has here uncovered a *locus minoris resistentiae* in Lenin’s idea of a thing-in-itself. Relying upon Feuerbach and upon a yet older materialist tradition, Lenin insisted that there is no essential difference between things-in-themselves and appearances. According to his interpretation, in the process of cognition things-in-themselves turn into appearances (i.e., things-for-us). There remains nothing one could call a “transcensus”. Lenin makes this assertion in order to avoid the alleged “agnosticism” of Kant; i.e., the thesis that things are, when regarded in themselves, impossible to be cognized. What Lenin does not pay attention to is that if the principal boundary between in-itself and for-us is diluted in this manner, then even the boundary between subjective and objective is likewise diluted. If things-in-themselves really change so effortlessly into things-for-us, as Lenin asserts, so must objectivity easily change into something subjective.

So Bogdanov is able to exclaim: “Thus, here V. Il’in is taking the same position as the ‘Machists’ he hates so much. When he is speaking about ‘things for us’, which are ‘a part or an aspect of the thing-in-itself’, and both have a quite ‘sensuous’ character, then he is only repeating with other words the same *ideas* that the Machists, too, adhere to” (Bogdanov 1910: 165).

It is true that Bogdanov has here found an inconsequence expressly in Lenin’s *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, the later canonical book of Soviet Diamat. But one must immediately add that

Bogdanov's own position does not through this discovery become in any way more consistent. A couple of pages later he writes:

"Mach and the Empirio-Criticists have a realist understanding of experience: experience consists of things and images [*obrazy*], of physical and psychical complexes. In both cases the elements are the same. In the first-mentioned complexes the elements are *elements of things*, in the latter ones they are elements of images, or *sensations*. The elements of things (or of the 'environment') are colours, forms, hardness, softness, and so on, and are taken as being independent of the individual [subject – V. O.], in a connection that is objective: in the complex 'petal of a rose', the colour red is united with the softness, the oval form, pleasant smell, etc., in an *objective* way, as an 'object', quite independently of whether 'I' am looking at this petal or not" (Bogdanov 1910: 167).

The big problem in this argument is as follows: if one chooses to understand experience in a "realistic" (materialistic) way, one cannot cope with the task without the concept of a thing-in-itself, which is independent of the cognizing and experiencing 'I'. But for Bogdanov, this possibility does not exist, since for him there are no things-in-themselves – everything is "organized experience". In other words, his "experience" has no well-defined, independent "opposite". In the quotation above he says outright that the "elements" of the subjective experience are "the same" as the objective elements. In other words, although Bogdanov quite rightly finds inconsequences in Lenin's use of the concept of a thing-in-itself, this does not mean that the concept as such would become obsolete.

As to the two other versions of things-in-themselves that Bogdanov finds in Lenin, the second is derived from Plekhanov. In general, one can find in Plekhanov more sympathy towards Kantian argumentation than in Lenin. Plekhanov did not treat the thing-in-itself and thing-for-us as concepts at the same level as Lenin did in the above-cited passages. According to Plekhanov, things-in-themselves should be conceived as a kind on "species" (*vid*), lying outside of the experience but nevertheless affecting our senses. This is a reading rather close to Kant (who, however, never called his things-in-themselves a "species"). In some parts of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, Lenin adheres to Plekhanov's interpretation, but according to Bogdanov he is unable to distinguish his position from that of Plekhanov, and therefore remains, even here, inconsistent (Bogdanov 1910: 172).

The third version of Lenin's concept of the thing-in-itself is not very clearly formulated in Bogdanov's critique, but even here he is able to make an intriguing comment. He notes that despite Lenin seeming at times to embrace Plekhanov's interpretation of the thing-in-itself, there remains "a big difference between Plekhanov and Lenin, of which one is not allowed to lose sight. For Plekhanov, the things-in-themselves do not at all have a *sensuous* character. Only their 'appearances' have this character [...] For Il'in, on the contrary, as he repeatedly asserts, there 'does not exist any other existence than a sensuous existence', and the things-in-themselves are principally of the same quality as the appearances" (Bogdanov 1910: 173).

In other words, Plekhanov's concept of the thing-in-itself is *metaphysical* whereas Lenin's concept is *empiricist*. This is a good remark. Nevertheless, when one tries to summarize the results of the Lenin–Bogdanov controversy, one has to conclude that although Bogdanov revealed some inconsequences in Lenin's concept, he did not succeed in his main task – the attempt to show that the idea of a thing-in-itself is generally obsolete. His own philosophy (if he even wanted to call it a "philosophy") was not conceptually commensurate with such a task.

Commentary by Antti Hautamäki

Vesa Oittinen presents an interesting account of the controversy between Lenin and Bogdanov about things-in-themselves. He points out the connections of this controversy to the political situation in Russia in the early twentieth century, before the Russian Revolution of 1917. In this context, Bogdanov represents “Machian Marxism” and Lenin “orthodox Marxism”. The issue of things-in-themselves is deeply philosophical, leading to hard problems of epistemology – and to the very essence of Marxian materialism.

I will link this controversy to the much-discussed debate between realism and anti-realism, and between absolutism and relativism (see Baghramian 2004; Hautamäki 2020; Putnam 1981). Lenin’s epistemology is clearly realism, although he called it materialism. He writes: “Matter is a philosophical category denoting the objective reality which is given to man by his sensations and which is copied, photographed and reflected by our sensations, while existing independently of them” (Lenin 1977: 130). To call objective reality material is another issue. If one is committed to Kantian things-in-themselves, then one opens a gap between objective reality (the *noumenal* world) and our sensations. For Kant, the noumenal world of things-in-themselves is transcendental, impossible to know. Lenin (and Engels) seems committed to things-in-themselves and it is exactly this commitment which is criticized by Bogdanov. For Lenin, it was important to argue that “there is definitely no difference in principle between phenomenon and the thing-in-itself...” (Lenin 1977: 103). But there is a serious difficulty in this claim, as Bogdanov pointed out. As Oittinen formulates it, “if the principal boundary between in-itself and for-us is diluted [as Lenin did], then even the boundary between subjective and objective is likewise diluted.”

When Bogdanov, following Mach, claims that there are no things-in-themselves and that everything is “organized experience”, he anticipates the tones of anti-realism. Take Putnam as an example. Putnam defends so-called “internal realism” against “metaphysical realism”, which is a type of realism Lenin represents (see Hautamäki 2020). Internal realism is a form of anti-realism. According to Putnam, “internalism does not deny that there are experiential *inputs* to knowledge; ... but it does deny that there are any inputs *which are not themselves to some extent shaped by our concepts*, by the vocabulary we use to report and describe them...” (Putnam 1981: 54). This implies that inputs can be shaped in many ways, dependent on the language used; this is an expression of conceptual relativism. In this sense there are no objective shapes determined solely by the world. Putnam interprets the Kantian notion of things-in-themselves to mean that all properties are secondary, dependent on us and on our concepts. “Our ideas are not copies of mind-independent things”, Putnam concludes (1981: 61). We can say that according to internal realism, a subjective factor is always present in our sensations and knowledge. But this does not mean that truth is “subjective”. Our signs do refer to objects within a conceptual scheme used by the community. It seems to me that Bogdanov is approaching this kind of anti-realism in his book, *Empiriomorphism* (1905).

The dialectics of absolute and relative truth is an important aspect of the Marxist conception of truth. It seems that Bogdanov did not quite understand this when he criticized Lenin and Engels for commitment to absolute truth. The dialectical view of truth accepts both absolute and relative aspects: “The materialist dialectics of Marx and Engels certainly does contain relativism, but is not reducible to relativism, that is, it recognises the relativity of all our knowledge, not in the sense of denying objective truth, but in the sense that limits approximation of our knowledge to this truth is historically conditional” (Lenin 1977: 137). In this connection Lenin refers to Engels’ notion of relative truth in *Anti-Dühring* (1975) (see Hautamäki 1980). According to Engels, “the knowledge which has an unconditional claim of truth is realised in a series of relative errors” (Engels 1975: 103). It is interesting to note that Putnam stresses also the approximative character of truth: it is an idealization of rational approximation, justification in epistemically ideal conditions (Putnam 1981: 55).

Oittinen interprets the dispute between Lenin and Bogdanov to be somehow incommensurable: "For Lenin, the dispute was eminently philosophical; for Bogdanov it was about matters of empirical science." Oittinen stresses that Bogdanov "was more interested in what he conceived as a new scientific world outlook which should replace the old philosophy and metaphysics with deeper, more contemporary insights." Bogdanov converts philosophical questions into questions of psychology of senses, of social psychology, or of social anthropology. Oittinen's conclusion is that the result of the debate was "predetermined", and that Lenin won a philosophical victory over Bogdanov! This is a controversial claim, however. Bogdanov was a predecessor of the important trend of modern philosophy to "naturalize" epistemology (e.g., W.V. Quine, Alvin Goldman). Naturalistic epistemology views human subjects as a natural phenomenon and uses empirical sciences, like brain sciences, cognitive neuroscience, cultural studies, and the sociology of knowledge to study epistemic activity. I consider that from the modern point of view, Bogdanov's approach to epistemology is more fruitful and interesting than Lenin's straightforward defence of realism.

Reply by Vesa Oittinen

I want to thank Antti Hautamäki for an interesting comment. I think the question of how far the philosophical views of Lenin and Bogdanov relate to the present-day discussion on realism and anti-realism would require a separate study, especially since there has been a constant evolution in the views of Putnam. So I shall restrict myself here to a couple of short comments.

I must say that I doubt whether Bogdanov's theory of cognition can be compared with Putnam's internal realism, at least with the version the latter presented in the 1980s. Putnam denied very explicitly that his internal realism should lead to relativism. He criticized the "metaphysical realists" (amongst whom Hautamäki would certainly include Lenin) but made important concessions. To explain his point of view, Putnam made use of an example that was very similar to those used in the debate between Bogdanov and Lenin: the statement "the earth is flat" was rationally acceptable 3000 years ago, but is not anymore. "Yet", he continued, "it would be wrong to say today that the statement 'the earth is flat' was true 3000 years ago; for that would mean that the earth has changed its shape". That is because "truth is supposed to be a property of a statement that cannot be lost" (Putnam 1981: 55).

Bogdanov, on the contrary, seems to be much more "subjectivist" than Putnam. For Bogdanov, the claim that the earth is flat would have been true 3000 years ago, just as the doctrines of the Catholic Church are true because there are people who believe in them. To my mind, Bogdanov is closer on this question to the French Marxist Louis Althusser, and his theory of ideology, than to Putnam. Actually, Putnam criticizes Althusser in the work I have just quoted (1981: 158, *passim*).

It is, of course, not surprising that Bogdanov, over a century ago, expressed views that resemble the "naturalized" epistemologies of contemporary (mostly analytic) philosophy. He followed in the wake of the so-called second positivism of Mach and Avenarius, whose work foreshadowed the same naturalist epistemologies. To call Bogdanov a predecessor of these modern trends, however, is an exaggeration, since he was not such an original thinker in philosophy as many seem to believe.

Commentary by Pietro Omodeo

Vesa Oittinen's essay on the political and epistemological controversy that erupted out between Bogdanov and Lenin at the beginning of the twentieth century, and culminated in the latter's *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* (1909), has the merit of drawing our attention to a context, from which we can still learn important philosophical lessons, especially relative to the ontology of the sciences, social epistemology and the politics of truth.

Early twentieth-century Russian reflections on scientific knowledge mediated between Kant, Marx and Mach. Neither Marxism nor neo-Kantianism benefit today from a hegemonic position in the philosophical debates on science, but at the turn of the last century, they certainly did. They had their roots in German philosophy and were deeply transformed in the cultural and political climate of revolutionary Russia (Steila 1996). Later, during the Cold War, their legacy shaped relevant strands of meta-reflection on science, most importantly, externalist approaches to science and forms of historicizing epistemology (Ienna & Rispoli 2019, Winkler 2013 and Rheinberger 2007). In Anglo-American academia, after the Second World War, neo-positivism, logicism and analytical philosophy together with internalist historiography were established as the most influential paths to the philosophy and history of science for ideological reasons. Yet, their abstractness and the difficulty of creating coherent university curricula in the history and the philosophy of science have reopened the field of science studies to alternative theories of knowledge capable of bridging the gaps, in particular historical epistemology (Engler & Renn 2018, Omodeo, Ienna & Badino 2021).

The crux of the Lenin-Bogdanov controversy was ontology. Lenin's criticism of Mach's philosophy, which influenced Bogdanov's *Empiriomonizm*, dealt in particular with the idealistic biases of conventionalism. According to Lenin, Machism posited the existence of an insurmountable wall between the knower and the object of knowledge. Since Machist epistemology assumed that there is a radical separation between the subjective realm of phenomena and the Kantian thing-in-itself, it renounced materialism. Lenin attacked such agnosticism concerning the world in itself because it made science prone to conservative agendas, including ideological and theological agendas. By contrast, he defended the relevance of the material and objective character of scientific knowledge. He was explicit about the political meaning of such a position. If we want to transform the world, we need to know it (Omodeo 2020). This concerned not only the natural sciences but also the social sciences. The class struggle has to rely on an objective evaluation of the power relations in society, therefore it cannot rest on methodological conventions that are non-committal as to the reality of their object of investigation.

These insights have not lost their relevance. In recent years, post-truth populism has provided evidence of the political weaknesses of constructivist positions (the heirs of conventionalism, including social constructivism of knowledge and post-modern subjectivism). The challenges of anti-science are forcing science studies to shift meta-reflection on the sciences from mere consideration of their intellectual and cultural a-prioris to the ontological problem of their referents (Pellizzoni 2019). In other words, political ontology has never been more urgent than today.

Bogdanov was attentive to the political dimension of epistemology, too, but from a different angle. As Oittinen stresses, he articulated his philosophy in closer connection to an analysis of the sciences. Bogdanov based his knowledge theory primarily on considerations of the historical advancement of the sciences, the social formation of their concepts and their methods. He emphasized the practical roots of all knowledge, which he explained against the background of the metabolism of society in its relation to natural resources. Such relation is a world-transformative technoscientific one, rooted in societal structures and labour. In this respect, Bogdanov serves as an important reference author for current debates about the man-made world of the Anthropocene, a time in which humanity has become a driving geological force (Rispoli 2014, Renn 2020).

Moreover, the Lenin-Bogdanov controversy is instructive in highlighting the political significance of knowledge theory. The adversaries were aware that what was at stake was the establishment of a scientific and philosophical culture that would be needed in an emancipated socialist society. While Bogdanov's scientific efforts were directed towards a systemic comprehension of reality, one that has labour at its center, Lenin considered praxis to be the basis of both our comprehension of the world and its transformation. Accordingly, the problem of political direction was the cornerstone of his analysis. But, of course, only the linking together of scientific knowledge and collective agency can offer an effective world-transformative philosophy and politics, one that can accomplish the leap forward from a natural necessity to praxeological freedom.

Although the Russian context has for long been neglected by philosophers of science, the present conjuncture suggests that it should be reassessed as an alternative to the dominant approaches to epistemology. Our time is one of unprecedented crisis in scientific culture, symptomatic of which are post-modern relativism, post-truth skepsis, and scientist ideologies (Oreskes and Conway 2012). Accordingly, we stand in need of more civic engagement on the part of scientists, and of a thorough reconsideration of the politics of science. Oittinen's essay offers us a fresh look at a seminal debate on science and its foundations that can help us to achieve a much-desired integrated paradigm for the study of the roots, legitimacy and objectives of science, that is, a full-fledged historico-political theory of science as a social and cultural praxis (Omodeo 2019).

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