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

Seiwert's 'Open Letter' to Bogdanov

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Introduction by Fabian Tompsett

This text, by Franz Seiwert (1894–1933) was published as 'Offener Brief an den Genossen A. Bogdanow' in the journal *Die Aktion* in July 1921 (Seiwert 1921). At the time Seiwert was aligned with this literary and political journal which was edited by Franz Pfemfert and published in Berlin between 1911 and 1932. From 1920 *Die Aktion* was supportive of the *Kommunistische Arbeiter-Partei Deutschlands* (KAPD) and was becoming increasingly critical not only of the *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands* (KPD), but also of the very concept of a political party. Earlier in 1921, in May and June respectively, *Die Aktion* had published two translations of Bogdanov: 'Über proletarische Dichtung' (Bogdanov 1921a) and 'Beispiel proletarischer Dichtung' (1921b).¹

The interest of Seiwert and of *Die Aktion* in the work of Bogdanov enables us to add these titles, and several others, to the list of German translations of his work that appears in *Bogdanov and His Work: A Guide to the Published and Unpublished Works of Alexander A. Bogdanov (Malinovsky) 1873-1928* (Biggart, Gloveli & Yassour 1998). Here there is reference only to the translation of 'Chto takoe proletarskaya poeziya?' that was published in 1920 under the title 'Was ist proletarische Dichtung?', as part of the series *Kleine Bibliothek der russischen Korrespondenz*, by A. Seehof & Co. This series was closely aligned with the *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands* (KPD). However, even before 1920, Bogdanov's work had been promoted in *Die Aktion*.

In June and July 1919 *Die Aktion* repeatedly advertised a text by Bogdanov: *Die Wissenschaft und die Arbeiter* ('Science and the Worker') (Bogdanov 1919a) which they announced would be available in August 1919. Efforts to locate a copy of this have proved fruitless. A few weeks later the journal published a short text of Bogdanov under the title *Die Wissenschaft und die Arbeiterklasse* (Bogdanov 1919b). This preceded the publication of a 29 page pamphlet with the same title by the *Verlag der Wochenschrift Die Aktion* in 1920 with a preface by Pfemfert² (Bogdanov 1920). We can date publication of the book more precisely by reference to a notice that appeared in *Die Aktion* No. 13/14 for 3 April 1920, according to which the title had been despatched but that many bulk orders had been "lost".

1 A comparison of the articles published in these two issues suggests that the first contains the text of Bogdanov's *Chto takoe proletarskaya poeziya?* (1918) and the second translations of the poems contained in the original. It is not inconceivable that this material was published in *Die Aktion* at the suggestion of Bogdanov, given that Otto Rühle had been in Moscow in June 1920 to attend the Second Congress of the Comintern, as reported in *Die Aktion* in October 1920 (Rühle n.d.).

2 See Thomas Moebius, *Russische Sozialutopien von Peter I. bis Stalin* (2015, 252) who quotes Pfemfert as follows: "Bogdanov's work is very valuable. It not only shows the way and goal, [...] there is more: the security and certainty that the proletarian worldview is a brilliant idea for humanity."

Was there any relationship between the German translations of *What is proletarian poetry?* and those that appeared in English three years later in *Labour Monthly* (Bogdanov 1923)? On the face of it, the English translations do not seem to have been based on the translations that had already been published in *Die Aktion*. Seiwert was certainly in contact with the Workers' Socialist Federation who published some of his illustrations in their magazine *Workers' Dreadnought*. Indeed his comrade Ret Marut had left Düsseldorf for London in 1923 and was aided by Sylvia Pankhurst, editor of *Workers' Dreadnought* (Goldwasser 1993). But like the KAPD, the Workers' Socialist Federation was forced out of the Communist International for failing to accept Lenin's dictum on accepting parliamentarianism. As in Germany, relations between the expelled Left Communists and the official Leninist Communist Party were often less than cordial.

The English translation of Seiwert's article that follows is based on the version published in *Der Schritt, der einmal getan wurde, wird nicht zurückgenommen*, an anthology of Franz Seiwert's writing edited by Uli Bohnen and Dirke Backes (Bohnen and Backes 1978). For a full list of contributions to *Die Aktion* see Wikisource (Wikisource 2016).

The title is reminiscent of Herman Gorter's *Open Letter to Comrade Lenin* (Gorter 1920) which also castigates the Central Communists (KPD Zentral) in relation to what both Gorter and Seiwert viewed as the betrayal of the Ruhr Uprising. Seiwert's use of term of address "Comrade" (*Genossen*) shows a level of political proximity which is quite different from that of Lenin: in his opening speech at the First All-Russia Congress on Adult Education (May 6, 1917) Lenin attacked Bogdanov as one of a "plethora of bourgeois intellectuals" whom he accused of testing their absurd ideas under the pretence of promoting a purely proletarian art and proletarian culture (Lenin 1972). This can be compared with the polemic of George Plekhanov (1856–1918) with Bogdanov, in the course of which Plekhanov said "you are no comrade of mine because *you and I represent two directly opposed world-outlooks*" (Plekhanov 1937).

OPEN LETTER TO
COMRADE A. BOGDANOV

Franz Seiwert 1921

Translation by Fabian Tompsett

Your work "On Proletarian Poetry" does not address a substantial part of poetry and the arts. I *essentially* agree with you, because you, in as much as you *are able*, reveal the truest ethos of the artworks, as well as showing how the symptoms of disorder of the capitalist system best reveal the order of this system, against which the ruling class are powerless. "The more a social activity, a series of social processes, becomes too powerful for men's conscious control and grows above their heads, and the more it appears a matter of pure chance, then all the more surely within this chance the laws peculiar to it and inherent in it assert themselves as if by natural necessity" wrote Friedrich Engels.³ Art is a social activity, a social process and that part of the art that you, Comrade Bogdanov, disregard, is that which is too powerful for the *conscious* control of man, which is most truly revealed as the coincidence of the singular and inherent laws of the artwork, the tendency of the artwork.

3 From *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* Chapter IX, Barbarism and Civilisation (Engels 1942).

Contemporary art is divided into the content which is displayed and the form in which the content is displayed. The content has to reshape the form, content and form must be the struggle, solidarity, class consciousness of the proletariat. And the work, in which this occurs will be created from the collective consciousness where the ego that creates the work, is no longer an isolated bourgeois-individualist, but rather an expressive instrument of the collective. Marx taught us to recognise the equality of all co-existing things with every other thing, to see the common law inherent in them. This knowledge is not only applied with hindsight (social-democratic opportunist Marxism), but also concerns art in that as regards proletarian art, it only arises when content *and form* are proletarian.

It seems to me that the context in which proletarian finds itself, when the proletarian content is articulated through a bourgeois *Artform*, is quite social democratic, with the term social democratic including the Central Communists.⁴ The same attitude is asserted when it is claimed that the continuation of the production process in the capitalist-centralised sense, from top to bottom, can be used as the production system of communist society, the same attitude which claims that through so-called Unity schools, bourgeois science can escape the bourgeois scientific methods, in the belief that science created in the service of the bourgeoisie could be proclaimed free, independent and objectively true in relation to this class viewpoint simply by being taken out of hands of the bourgeoisie, to become the science for the proletariat. Yes, *for* the proletariat because it remains a proletarian mass, however, not *of* the proletariat, whereby it frees itself through overcoming itself as the proletariat. Only then is it necessary and sufficient for the proletariat to assert its entitlement in the face of the history of humanity, to expropriate from the hands of the bourgeoisie, production, the insights of the technical sciences, which I also expect to include medicine, to make use of the bourgeois artform as a means for propaganda, and if so desired, to create the *proletarian* organisation of production, the *proletarian* science and *proletarian* art.

Communist society and proletarian culture are not created through seizing capitalist society and bourgeois culture. Rather, we have to create them. Thus to the extent that proletarian culture displays in its form an expression of organisation and the sense of solidarity of the masses, these are displayed in the artworks, as visible forces, movement, equilibrium, in short the “nature”, the world, both jointly and severally, to compellingly appear to the individuals as necessary for the development of their self-consciousness, their creativity and their participation in the totality. Thus there can be no longer be a duality of content and form more, because content and form are one.

So, Comrade Bogdanov, it is not as easy as you think to determine whether a work is created from the collective consciousness or not. It is not a matter of whether the label says “I” or “we”. There is always the question of whether “We” has been *achieved*, whether the “We” has been realised in the artwork, and the “I” has become indifferent. Explored in this context, who is the “most distinguished in Germany, or even Europe”, George Grosz sitting in the dock or the chairman of the KPD in the same place⁵. It’s the same picture and a mutual confirmation. Consider alongside Max Hölz one of the many nameless proletarian whose “mouthpiece” he was.⁶ This is also a confirmation!

4 By “Central Communists” Seiwert is referring to the leaders of the *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands* (KPD) who had expelled the more radical *Kommunistische Arbeiterpartei Deutschlands* (KAPD) in October 1919. Paul Levi (1883–1930) was their leader. See also *Worum handelt sich?* (Seiwert 1920) where Seiwert is particularly bitter about their role in the Peace of Münster (31st October 1920) where two KPD leaders consented to the disarmament of the Red Army of the Ruhr. By the 8th April 1920, the Freikorps had killed over 1,000 militants of the Red Army.

5 George Grosz (1893–1959) was a German Dadaist and Communist activist. In 1921 he was put on trial for *Gott mit Uns* (Grosz 1920) a portfolio of 9 drawings attacking the German military for their brutal repression of the Workers’ Councils. He and his publisher were found guilty and fined.

6 Max Hölz (1889–1933) was a German Communist activist who organised a Red Army in Vogtland, near the border with Czechoslovakia at the time of the Ruhr Uprising in 1920. In 1921 he once again took part in military activity in the March Action of 1921. He was aligned with the KAPD which supported an attempt to overthrow the Weimar Republic. He was eventually captured and his trial began in May 1921 (Kuhn 2012). However, many of the AAUE grouped around *Die Aktion* were critical: Otto Rühle had published an article critical of Hölz who responded in his memoirs (Hölz 2012).

Comrade Bogdanov! For me, it is increasingly clear that the proletarian society generally will not know these parts into which bourgeois culture is disintegrating: science, art, and again their parts: poetry, music, painting and so on. Form and content will not be known but only work created from the true collective consciousness in which everyone becomes a creator, in which everyone is a creator. The only past that exists is that which enters the collective consciousness, where it is again recreated. Only the bourgeoisie gain from this. Everything comes together, united in the desire for socialism for communism. Communist society nowhere tolerates leaders and gods, everyone must and will be their own leader, their own creator. That is the council structure build as opposed to the future state⁷ of Social Democracy.

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7 Zukunftstaat: August Bebel (1840–1913) devoted over 100 pages to this concept in his *Die Frau und der Sozialismus* (1879) which advocated the application of science and rational planning to resolving the problems of implementing socialism. See Kenneth Calkins (1982)

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Author information

Fabian Tompsett has been active as a publisher and translator of Left Communist texts through such publishers as Rising Free, Unpopular Books and Transgressions: A Journal of Urban Exploration since the 1970s. He combined the roles of printer – publisher – distributor/bookseller in the pre-internet age, but is now active on the internet, particularly with Wikipedia. The success of this vernacular encyclopaedia led him to research earlier approaches to encyclopaedism, focusing in particular on Bogdanov's Workers' Encyclopaedia and Neurath's International Encyclopaedia of the Unified Sciences. He was thus well-prepared when he discovered he was approaching the German Left Communist movement, albeit from a new perspective. This work complements previous research he has done as regards Asger Jorn, looked at in terms of the conjugation of Art, Science and Politics.

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