

*Daniela Steila***LABOR BETWEEN BIOLOGY AND RELIGION  
(Some Bolsheviks' Reflections Before the Revolution)\***

The article analyses philosophical discussions on the sense of labor in pre-revolutionary Russian Marxism. The author maintains that the “left” Bolsheviks’ thinking presents some common traits and a common philosophical horizon. Both A. A. Bogdanov and A. V. Lunacharsky consider that the human being is not a passive observer of external objective reality or the servant of historical necessity. Being the center of knowledge and action he is able to impose his own rules and to organize the world within the limits of his experience. The problem of human labor highlights some interesting aspects as regards the relationship between humankind and nature, and helps to clarify the specific positions of “left” Bolsheviks on matter and spirit, as well as on biology and religion.

With Hegel and Marx, Russian Marxists consider labor as the “mediation” between the human being and the world. Labor is considered to be, on the one hand, the “biological” relationship between the human being and his environment, on the other hand a specific human instance as “useful” labor. Discussion between Bogdanov and Lunacharsky about the use of the word “labor” is conducted in Avenarius’ terminology. According to the author this is the way to put an end to mechanicism, which seemed the scientific grounds of Plekhanov’s orthodoxy, with the help of “energetism” and empiriocriticism. Bogdanov wants to establish a continuity between the understanding of the human world and society, on the one hand, and the natural, physical world-views on the other. Lunacharsky, on the contrary, made labor the cornerstone of a religious-eschatological world-view. And from both their standpoints, the reflection on labor leads to find as its subject not the single human being, but the collective. Refs 28.

*Keywords:* Russian Marxism, “left” Bolsheviks, A. A. Bogdanov, A. V. Lunacharsky, labor.

*Д. Стейла***РЕЦЕПЦИИ ТРУДА В ДОРЕВОЛЮЦИОННОМ БОЛЬШЕВИЗМЕ:  
ОТ БИОЛОГИИ К РЕЛИГИИ**

Статья посвящена анализу дискуссий о сущности труда в предреволюционном русском марксизме. Автор обращается к наследию левых большевиков — А. А. Богданова и А. В. Луначарского, выявляя общий философский горизонт их мысли. Их объединяет понимание человека не как внешнего наблюдателя объективной реальности и слуги исторической необходимости, а как центра познания и действия, призванного устанавливать свои законы и организовывать мир, исходя из ограничений собственного опыта. Проблема человеческого труда обнаруживает интересные аспекты взаимоотношений человека и природы, проясняет специфику позиций Богданова и Луначарского относительно материи и сознания, биологии и религии.

Вслед за Гегелем и Марксом русские марксисты считали труд посредником между человеком и окружающей средой, подчиняя его законам физики и биологии. Вместе с тем как специфически человеческая деятельность труд оценивался как полезный, приятный и свободный. Дискуссия между Богдановым и Луначарским об употреблении термина «труд» ведется в терминологии Авенариуса. Автор статьи связывает это с необходимостью преодоления механистичности «ортодоксального марксизма» Плеханова через обращение к энергетизму и эмпириокритицизму. Богданов стремится утвердить непрерывность взаимоотношений общества и природы. Луначарский, напротив, делает труд краеугольным камнем религиозно-

---

*Даниэла Стейла* — доктор философии, доцент, Туринский университет, Италия; [daniela.steila@unito.it](mailto:daniela.steila@unito.it)

*Daniela Steila* — Doctor of Philosophy, Associate Professor, University of Turin, Italy; [daniela.steila@unito.it](mailto:daniela.steila@unito.it)

\* The article was translated in English by Lucia Pasini.

© Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет, 2016

эсхатологического мировоззрения. Но обе позиции рассматривают труд как свидетельство коллективности человеческого существования. Библиогр. 28 назв.

*Ключевые слова:* русский марксизм, левые большевики, А. А. Богданов, А. В. Луначарский, труд.

Though often disregarded or misjudged, pre-revolutionary Russian Marxism was a very lively milieu for theoretical and philosophical discussions. Since Marxism was introduced in Russia by Plekhanov and his group of the “Liberation of Labor” in the 1880s, some very serious philosophical problems, such as the sense of history, the role of subjectivity or the ontological or ethical status of ideals, became an arena for political struggle. Furthermore, Russian Marxism was never meant just as an instrument to analyze the political and social reality, but as a complex “world-view”, capable of accounting both for nature and society. In Russia reading and discussing philosophy was considered a part of the revolutionary training, and quite often political activists used the time spent in exile or in prison to read and study<sup>1</sup>.

In this context, a group of Marxists, who played an important role within the Bolshevik fraction at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, proves to be especially interesting. A. A. Bogdanov, A. V. Lunacharsky, and others became known as “left” Bolsheviks, or “the other Bolsheviks”, as Robert Williams called them in his famous book published in 1986<sup>2</sup>, emphasizing the fact that the Bolsheviks had been usually identified with Lenin and his followers, while there were other representatives, and other opinions. None of those definitions is perspicuous, since there was no real “school” or common movement, although the “left” Bolsheviks’ thinking presents some common traits and a common philosophical horizon.

In short, we can say that, according to them, the human being is not a passive observer of external objective reality at all, and he does not modify the latter, because he has discovered its specific laws and therefore adapts his own actions to them<sup>3</sup>. In their opinion, the human being becomes the center of knowledge and action; the laws of nature turn out to be mere criteria for the organization of experience, and as such they are intended to be changed and modified. Instead of submitting to natural and historical necessity, humankind is to impose its own rules and to organize the world within the limits of his experience.

The problem of human labor, which we shall consider here, presents some interesting aspects as regards the relationship between humankind and nature, and helps us to clarify the specific positions of the so called “left Bolsheviks” as regards matter and spirit, as well as biology and religion. In this article I shall consider only Bogdanov and Lunacharsky, the two most prominent figures both in philosophy and in politics.

### **1. Labor as a biological mediation between human being and environment**

Marxists, together with Hegel, consider labor as the “mediation” between the human being and the world. It is actually labor, as a specific form of mediation, that determines the peculiarity of humankind compared to other animals. In *The German Ideology*, Marx

---

<sup>1</sup> See [1, pp. 25-6]; [2, p. 302]; [3, p. 118]; [4, p. 25].

<sup>2</sup> [5].

<sup>3</sup> Such was, for instance, Plekhanov’s position. See [6, pp. 6–17].

writes that men “begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence <...>. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their material life” [7, p. 31]. According to Marx, labor is not only a means to secure survival, but also to produce a specifically human life. In the first book of *The Capital* one can read the well-known definition of labor as “a process in which both man and Nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material reactions between himself and Nature. He opposes himself to Nature as one of her own forces, setting in motion arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate Nature’s productions in a form adapted to his own wants” [8, p. 187]. Unlike the animals, which also transform the nature in order to satisfy their own vital needs, human labor is not fixed by predetermined biological mechanisms. The human being changes nature according to needs that have been widely changing within history, and to this aim he uses instruments that already are the results of the transformation of nature by the humankind.

The basic definition of “labor”, which A. A. Bogdanov formulates in his *Short Course of Political Economy* published in 1897, mainly recalls Marx’s ideas but with a peculiar “energetic” formulation. Labor, he says, is “the loss of human energy to a certain aim, which has been previously acknowledged”, this aim always being “the satisfaction of any human need”<sup>4</sup>. It is quite easy to explain why Bogdanov gives such an “energetic” interpretation: he wants to formulate a whole world-view, harmonizing both natural and social sciences, and to give a “historical” view of nature, which would be capable to integrate the Marxist dynamic view of society, by opposing the idea of nature as “an endless process” to the “static representation” of nature, which was traditional and typical of the so called “scientific materialism”<sup>5</sup>. Bogdanov’s “historical” view of nature outlines a universe of reciprocally connected processes, an intrinsically monistic universe where the law of the conservation of energy provides the basis for a unique interpretation. The formation of society itself is explained from the standpoint of the conservation of energy: the individual engages in a conscious struggle for survival, but such a struggle is much more effective if it is conducted by the group or the species. In such a conflict between man and nature, labor is an essential moment.

As it is well known, a few years later Bogdanov abandons “energeticism” in order to formulate his original “empiriomonism”, in dialogue with empiriocriticism, which was at that time very popular within Marxism and, more generally, in the whole of the educated Russian society<sup>6</sup>. However, the primarily biological character of labor, understood as the fundamental relationship between human being (and human species) and environment, world, nature, does not disappear; on the contrary it is even emphasized.

In Richard Avenarius’ works the word “labor” is used together with “nutrition” to mean respectively the relationships of an organism on the one hand with what determines its “material exchange” (which Avenarius expresses by the letter S, from the German word *Stoffwechsel*), and on the other hand with what applies a stimulus (which Avenarius expresses with the letter R, from the German word *Reiz*). Here “labor” has a specific biological meaning: it is in biology that one can speak of “labor” and “nutrition” of a cell, of

---

<sup>4</sup> I quote here from the ninth edition [9, pp. 3; 2].

<sup>5</sup> See [10, p. 18].

<sup>6</sup> See [11].

a tissue, etc.<sup>7</sup> This double aspect is characteristic of any relationship of any organism, any “system”, with its own environment, and applies to simple individual organisms as well as to complex organisms, i. e. societies.

The fact that Russian “left Bolshevik” had exactly Avenarius’ terminology in their minds is proved by a discussion between Bogdanov and Lunacharsky about the use of the word “labor”. Bogdanov maintains that Avenarius misused the terms “nutrition” and “labor” by applying them to all the “processes of assimilation of external energy by a system” or to all “the possible types of disassimilation” [14, p. 96]. According to Bogdanov, on the contrary, labor means necessarily a conscious element, which occurs only in some of the many possible ways of “disassimilation” of energy. From this standpoint, the expression “the labor of the cell”, for instance, is incorrect. However, Bogdanov does not come to emphasize the “social” aspects of the mediation between human being and nature. His critique of Avenarius remains on the latter’s “biological” and “psycho-physiological” level. Bogdanov thought that Avenarius’ use of the words was only quite unsuccessful: “‘nutrition’ means *delivering* materials to a certain organ with the aim of vital assimilation, but it is not the very same assimilation, while ‘labor’ is the *immediate disassimilation* of energy” [15, p. 168]. Therefore, according to Bogdanov, to use “nutrition” and “labor” as connected terms is inconsistent within the “biological” and “physiological” discourse itself.

Lunacharsky, as a former student of Avenarius’ in Zurich, not only upholds his master’s terminology, but tries to show that Bogdanov’s theory can be considered as completely consistent with it. According to both Bogdanov and Avenarius, the link between labor and nutrition is actually indissoluble: without labor there is no assimilation of energy (a physical organism has to do a certain work in order to assimilate food); without an earlier assimilation of energy labor does not exist. Lunacharsky concludes: “labor is the necessary presupposition for further assimilation; i. e. there exist some cases when labor is a necessity, and its lacking would unconditionally mean a *diminution* in the conservation of life. In such cases there must be a vital difference, which is reflected within consciousness as a quest for movement and labor, as *Arbeitsbedürfnis*, as *Mehrarbeitsbedürfnis*” [16, pp. 62–63].

Here Lunacharsky uses another specific concept of Avenarius’: the “vital difference”, meaning an imbalance within the ideal energetic equilibrium, toward which all the organisms tend. According to Avenarius, the physiological life of any organism develops in a perpetual “rhythm of labor and nutrition”, since the individual adjusts himself according to any change of environmental factors, in order to reestablish the previous balance or to create another one. Therefore, in Lunacharsky’s opinion, any need to assimilate energy evokes the feeling of wanting movement and labor; on the other hand, an excessive accumulation of energy through a prolonged assimilation without any “outburst” of labor can be harmful for the organism by turning into mere “nervous activity”.

The idea of “labor”, as the specific human relationship between human being and environment, remains here within the horizon of a naturalistic and biological consideration.

## 2. “Useful”, “pleasant”, “free” labor, as a specific human activity

From a biological, rather than sociological, point of view, as a human activity, labor is a loss of energy, and as such must take a negative emotional tone<sup>8</sup>. Nevertheless, in our

<sup>7</sup> See [12, pp. 70–71]; [13, p. 381].

<sup>8</sup> A “negative variation” in Avenarius’ words. See [12, pp. 72–75].

concrete historical experience we can find a few cases when labor seems to be “pleasant”.

According to Bogdanov, it is the representation of the goal of labor that makes it a “positive” experience. The “goal” is not given by the perception of the existent, by stimuli already existing in the environment, but by the representation, which depends only indirectly from the existent, and rather necessarily requires a conscious act of planning. As a representation of the satisfaction of a need, or of an adaptation to the environment, the “goal” has always a positive emotional tone.

The “pleasant” labor is “useful”: it has as a result the increase of the system’s energy, so that, as Bogdanov writes, “the vital ‘plus,’ which arises from the new relationship of the system with its environment, exceeds the whole amount of energetic losses caused by the labor” [15, p. 164]. This produces a positive “improvement of the psychical life on the side of associative creation and voluntary activity” [Ibidem], and has immediate positive consequences on the psyche of the working organism. But it has even more important indirect effects. In Bogdanov’s words: “The relationships of the ‘psyche’ with its ‘environment’ change; the immediate contents of this or that series of empirical complexes change, and the ‘environment’ becomes the source of newer and newer perceptions for the ‘psyche’; the growing material of immediate past experiences becomes the start-point for further development” [Ibidem].

The analysis of labor through the categories of his empiriomonism leads Bogdanov to resume and clarify Marx’s definition: “A greatest sociologist based his theory of the social development on this idea: by transforming the external nature through the process of labor, the human being transforms his own nature. Our psycho-genetic analysis enables us to formulate this idea more concretely: through the process of useful labor, the human being transforms his own nature in the direction of an increase of harmony and fullness of his own life and variability of its forms” [Ivi, pp. 164-165].

“Useful” labor, which really “produces” an increase of energies in the system, turns out to be the human beings’ specific activity, and human history is therefore oriented toward the progress.

Labor is considered to be, on the one hand, the “biological” relationship between the human being and his environment, on the other hand a specific human instance as “useful” labor. In both its aspects, not only does labor seem to occupy most of the human beings’ time, but its time of labor also comes to be the properly “human” time and vice-versa. All that remains outside of labor (reproduction, taking care of children, even feeding oneself...) is what human beings have in common with the animals.

If labor, specifically “useful” labor, is to define what is properly human, what will be the relationship of human gratuitous activities such as games, culture, and art, with labor itself?

### 3. Game and Labor

Russian Marxists quite often discussed the relationship between game and labor. Plekhanov, the so-called “father” of Russian Marxism, dwelled on the topic in the third of his *Unaddressed Letters* (1900), where he took into consideration the contemporary anthropological literature, while following the same perspective of Friedrich Engels’ *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884). Plekhanov, together with Herbert Spencer, wants to prove the logical and chronological priority of labor as regards to games:

“the activity, which aims at utilitarian goals, or, to put it differently, the activity, which is necessary in order to maintain both individuals and the whole of society, precedes the game and determines its contents” [17, pp. 338]. Labor comes first: by working, human beings employ their strengths usefully and are pleased by it; by playing, they repeat similar situations of pleasant exercise of their own strengths without an open and immediate productive aim. The labor, as the properly human form of mediation between human being and nature, becomes the ground and the model of any other human activity. According to Plekhanov, the human competence of aesthetic enjoyment comes later and somehow descends from the ability to deal with the objects as utilitarian means.

The question of the pleasant and aimless, not utilitarian, human activity, is considered also by Russian “critical” Marxists. Lunacharsky in particular deems that it should be a problem for Bogdanov, who seems to consider labor basically as a matter of effort and sufferance, and who finds its positive aspect in the fulfillment of its goal. “Game”, “creation”, aimless activity, according to Lunacharsky, has a much better explanation within Avenarius’ frame of categories. If organism aims at keeping its own energetical balance, a sort of homeostatis with its environment, an excessive accumulation of energies is a bad disruption of balance. In these cases the “excess of strenghts” must find a vent in aimless activities, in the “luxury” of life that is game, art, culture... [16, pp. 62–63].

Bogdanov answers that he actually accepts this position: once a system has accumulated too much energy, it has to get rid of the excess. However he emphasizes his idea that only finalistic, useful, productive activities are truly good, by remarking that there are many different ways to get rid of excessive energy. If the system, the individual, does not pass her limits, or does not move consciously in order to modify her environment, “the consumption of energy does not produce any *plus* of life, it is mere consumption, a negative vital unbalance”, which provokes a feeling of sufferance. But the system can pour her excessive energies out, or modify her relationship with the environment, and thereby produce newer and newer “impressions”, which become on their turn a direct or indirect source of a new assimilation of energy. Bogdanov concludes: “a positive vital series, a surplus of assimilation, can establish itself *for the center of consciousness* (‘game, creation are pleasant’), although *the organism as a whole* consumes more than it assimilates” [15, pp. 175–6].

Bogdanov’s and Lunacharsky’s different approaches to the problem seem to depend on their different evaluation of Avenarius’ ideas. To Bogdanov, Avenarius’ empiriocriticism was wrong in looking for a stasis: Avenarius considered the vital differences as mere disturbances of balance, without any distinction between a positive or a negative sense; the concept of vital difference itself came therefore to embrace “two energetically opposite phenomena”: “the increase of the energy of the system, when nutrition overcomes labor, and the decrease of the energy of the system, when labor overcomes nutrition. Both cases are gathered in one concept because they have an identical biological meaning: the decrease of the conservation of life” [18, p. 15].

But Bogdanov, who examined the problem from an energetistic point of view, pointed out that the excess of nutrition over labor, which implicates an increase of the internal energy of the system, also means an increase of its chances of survival. On the other hand, the decrease of energy, which is caused by the excess of labor over nutrition, provokes a decrease of the capability to preserve the system [18, pp. 18–20]. According to Bogdanov, the vital differences have a very different meaning depending on their positive or negative

sign; giving an example from economics, “the two forms of vital differences correspond to *deficit* and to pure profit” [18, p. 20].

Lunacharsky, on the contrary, thought that Avenarius’ ideal was not at all “stagnation”, but “balance”, to which all the natural processes tend [16, p. 59]. Lunacharsky found it as an “ideal” in many different world-views: “Buddha’s yearning for Nirvana, Eros as a tireless effort toward Plato’s supreme Idea, the Christians’ worry for redemption, for release from the sadness of the ephemeral, the metaphysics’ *amor erga rem aeternam et infinitam*, the decadents’ complain for eternity and infinity, the naturalists’ inclination to monism, all of them have <...> a common trait: they are all forms of a unique effort to elaborate” the most comprehensive world-view, “and therefore to escape once for all from the vital variations in knowledge, forced by the environment” [16, p. 22]<sup>9</sup>.

It seems that in Lunacharsky’s opinion labor as a conscious mediation, which aims to usefulness, as it is for Bogdanov, loses its central role within the relationship between individual and environment, system and world, and is placed on the same level as other cultural, religious, and artistic “mediations”. Actually, Lunacharsky deems that labor is even more essential than it was for Bogdanov, but on a different level of the discussion.

#### 4. The religious-eschatological meaning of labor

Bogdanov wants to establish a continuity between the understanding of the human world and society, on the one hand, and the natural, physical world-views on the other, through a common and consistent energetic interpretation of the relationships and mediations, first of all the mediation of labor as the properly human mediation. Lunacharsky, on the contrary, made labor the cornerstone of a religious-eschatological world-view. Here, labor represents the properly human relationship to the environment, but at the same time it becomes the fulcrum of a new religion of humankind. Unlike his close friend Gorky’s “cosmism”, which is a celebration of nature, Lunacharsky prefers to talk of “economism” [19, no. 11, p. 32]: “The religion of humankind does not deify nature, but takes it as a spontaneous power, a semi-cosmos, as a task, as the source of strenghts, of joy, especially so when the human being deprives it of the possibility to blindly harm its great son, the future god” [19, p. 60].

Nature, for Lunacharsky, is a messy and mysterious heap of forces and processes, where the human being alone is called to put order by the means of fight and subjection. Going in the same direction, his contemporary Stanislaw Brzozowski, a Polish philosopher, was sketching out a “philosophy of labour” where the collective efforts of humanity do not face an already given world, but the task and responsibility of creating the world through labor [20, pp. 153–160]<sup>10</sup>. Lunacharsky did not wholly agree with such a position, which, he thought, went so far as to deny nature itself. For him, however, nature is not only the environment where human world develops itself, as it was for Bogdanov. Nature is rather an antagonistic force, which human labor has to conquer, bend, violate, in order to obtain obedience. A play written by Lunacharsky for the theatre is exemple of his view of nature. There he compares three different ways of thinking and living, in the characters of three travellers: a baron, who is a Schellingian philosopher, a poet, and an ingeneer, i. e.

<sup>9</sup> The “vital variations in knowledge” are variations within the vital series of knowledge, which come up when something unusual, unknown, problematic appears in one’s environment.

<sup>10</sup> See also [21, pp. 315–327].

a “practical” man. The three of them are forced by a storm to seek shelter in a mysterious castle owned by a noblewoman. By pretending to be a ghost, she will put the superstitious ones on the run, and will award a night of love to the “practical man”, who does not give in to fear. Before the ghost appears, the three men talk about different subjects, including their respective views of nature: here, the positive character depicts the relationship between the human being and nature as a conquest that can sometimes result in violence. He declares: “Nature has always seemed to me to be a woman. A great aristocrat. Like a powerful and noble empress of some wild tribe. Whereas the human species seems to me a youngster without relatives and tribe, ignorant and clumsy... We might say a puppy. But from his muzzle and paws you can see a good breed. He grows, learns, and becomes more skilful. The wild queen can snatch him, roast him, if he falls under her angry hands while he is still weak. But be brave, my boy! You must grow and gain strength, and then you will devise some tricks and grab the beautiful wicked one. When you succeed in grabbing her, hold her tight, hug her passionately... And suddenly she will surrender, she will take off all her masks and clothes, and she will say: ‘My dear’. Well... the story will end with a marriage, as in any good novel” [22, p. 46–47].

Human beings, according to Lunacharsky, have to “torture nature with arrogance” [23, p. 92]. through their labor, since “man discovered himself as a god in labor and in technology, and he decided to impose his will on the world” [24, p. 104]. Lunacharsky agrees with Bogdanov that labor is the specific human relationship with the environment, the world, the nature, but according to him such a relationship is conquer and domination instead of mediation.

With different nuances, both Bogdanov and Lunacharsky put labor at the center of their own world-views. And from both their standpoints, the reflection on labor leads to find as its subject not the single human being, but the collective.

## 5. The collective organization of labor

While considering labor as a biological, psycho-physiological phenomenon, Avenarius took into consideration the so-called C-systems, including the *Kongregalsysteme* or systems of higher order, “whose elements or parts are human individuals, or better are C-systems of human individuals” [12, pp. 158–159]. The link between stimulus and answer, nutrition and labor, which characterizes the relationship between the individual and the world, functions for the social systems and their natural and cultural environment as well, but at different levels.

In the religious perspective we have just considered, humankind as a species is the partner and potential conquerer of nature, both by means of individuals and by means of generations following one another. For Lunacharsky it seems to be a sentimental, rather than rational overcoming the limits of individualism: reason is an individualizing principle, while feelings lead the individual to identify himself with the superior unity of humankind [25, p. 135]. Such an identification is problematic only from our immature individualistic standpoint. For a real socialist, “species, humanity is real, while the individual is only a partial expression of such an essence” [19, no. 10, p. 24]. Lunacharsky writes: “Man is just an example of the species: at the beginning he is one of its particular manifestations, connected to the species only on the biological level but, with the socialist consciousness, he becomes a proud and conscious expression of such a species, surrounded in space and



time by other individuals, who give their efforts together to build more and more harmoniously the temple of the powerful life” [23, p. 87]. That does not mean that the individual should be negated by the collective. On the contrary, Lunacharsky maintains a sort of natural selection of ideas, which calls for a certain spiritual originality: “The development of the ‘individual’, of spiritual originality, has to be highly appreciated in the socialist society for the same reasons why it will never give up a certain specialization in the fields of work. The richness of ideas, the abundance of different points of view, hypothesis, and addresses, guarantees a better choice, since the fundamental law, according to which ideas improve themselves, is their struggle and the victory of the most lively among them” [26, p. 253].

Here, however, a problem arises, which Lunacharsky tends to neglect in his eschatological utopia: how concretely could the collective labor be organized? How will the individuals, who specialize themselves in different fields of work, actually cooperate?

On this topic Bogdanov is much more precise than Lunacharsky. According to him the question is crucial and involves the basic definition of human labor as “useful”. He remarks in the second volume of *Empiriomonism*: “only the labor that comes out from an organization as such, from the person’s own fundamental needs, can be useful for the development of a person, of a single psychic organization. Such is the ‘common’ labor in its fullest meaning: its aim is not imposed on the person by any ‘external obligation’, which intervenes in one’s experience in disharmony with the complex — it does not matter whether it is violence by another person, or the power of famine” [15, p. 166]. For this reason, Bogdanov noticed that forced labor, which the prisoners are forced to do, can be considered only as punishment, and not as rehabilitation, since it lacks in positive gratification through which it would increase the energy of the system, and positively influence the psyche: “Forced labor is a waste of energy, generally, *not* rewarded by a correspondent or superior increase of energy, which results from that same waste” [15, p. 165].

But how is it possible to put together the requirement that labor is “free”, not “obliged”, with the necessity of a collective organization, of a “plan”? Bogdanov answers in his first utopian novel *The Red Star*. Here, he sketches a communist society already existent on Mars, and he illustrates thereby the practical solutions of different problems, including the organization of labor. During the transition from capitalism to communism, “from about a century there was an obligatory working day of six hours at first, which was successively shortened”, being a “vestige” of the old system [27, p. 67]. New technological inventions, which meant an improvement of the productivity, and the organization of labor, “contributed to solving the main difficulty, namely the transition to a system in which each individual is perfectly free to choose his own occupation” [27, p. 67].

The visitor from Earth cannot but ask how the organization of labor concretely works, how the workers distribute themselves in the different branches of production. The “hand” that harmonizes the whole system is statistics: there is a central Institute of Statistics, which “has agencies everywhere which keep track of the flow of goods into and out of the stock-piles and monitor the productivity of all enterprises and the changes in their work forces. It that way” explains the Martian guide, “it can be calculated what and how much must be produced for any given period and the number of man-hours required for the task. The Institute then computes the difference between the existing and the desired situation for each vocational area and communicates the result to all places of employment. Equilibrium is soon established by a stream of volunteers” [27, p. 66]. The astonished terrestrial observes the apparent spontaneity of the whole process: “If a meeting of experts in some

field decided that it was necessary to organize a scientific undertaking, or if a conference of labor statisticians concluded that a new enterprise must be created, or if a gathering of the residents of the city wanted to decorate some building or other, new figures on the amount and types of labor that would be needed were immediately published by the Institute of Statistics, hundreds and thousands of new workers were flown in, and in a few days or weeks the whole project was completed and the workers had disappeared heaven knows where. All of this impressed me almost as a peculiar kind of magic. It was quiet and cold and had no incantations or mystical embellishments, but its superhuman might made it seem all the more mysterious" [27, p. 87]. Statistics succeeds in harmonizing freedom and necessity, and obtains the necessary labor for the survival and development of society without forcing anybody to do a job that he does not choose voluntarily and spontaneously: "The statistics oblige no one to do that. Everyone takes these figures into consideration when making their own plans, but they cannot be guided by them alone. If you were to want to begin working at this factory you would probably find a job; the surplus figure in the central statistics would rise by one or two hours, and that would be that. The statistics continually affect *mass* transfers of labor, but each individual is free to do as he chooses" [27, p. 68].

### Conclusions

We briefly considered the main elements of the reflection on labor in the thought of two important leaders of un-Orthodox Russian Marxism. From the "biological" meaning of labor as a relationship of "active" exchange of a system with its environment, we moved to Bogdanov's definition of "useful", "pleasant", "free" labor as a specifically human activity. As a consequence, we noticed that the time of labor becomes specifically human, and vice-versa, which raises the question of explaining the meaning of disinterested human activities (such as game and artistic creation). Bogdanov and Lunacharsky give different answers to this problem.

Then we went through the religious-eschatological peculiarities of Lunacharsky's thought, which deems labor to be the place where nature is humanized through dominion and conquest. Finally, we went on to consider the question of a possible settlement of the confrontation between "free" labor and planning of collective labor.

A few traits that seem to be characteristic of Russian Marxism came out. First of all, a certain "naturalism". Marxism is supposed to be a sort of "natural" science of society, capable of integrating with biology and psycho-physiology. We have seen that, since its entering Russia, at the beginning of the 80s, Marxism pretended to be a whole world-view, "scientific" in its treatment of society. Russian Marxism was always considered as a complete "world-view". As such, Marxism could lead the praxis to success.

Bogdanov's "energetic" interpretation of labor refers to biology much more than physics. That can be explained with the enormous success that Darwin's evolutionism and psycho-physiological studies by Moleschott and Vogt, but also by Magendie and Claude Bernard had in Russia in the 60s-70s. At the turn of the century, the amazing changes in science (the crisis of materialism, the critique of causality, philosophical conventionalism) had meaningful consequences on the intellectuals, who had grown up with a very deep faith in science. Bogdanov, Lunacharsky, and many others relied on different scientists, whom they considered to be more "up-to-date" than classic physics and mechanicism,

which seemed the scientific grounds of Plekhanov's orthodoxy. Hence their interest for energetism and Mach's and Avenarius' empiriocriticism, which seemed to allow them to overcome the crisis of positivism, without abandoning the familiar language of psychophysiology and evolutionism.

Secondly, such a Marxism is very clearly a sort of religious, eschatological worldview, especially according to Lunacharsky. A very specific religious element, "anthropological" and "economical" much more than traditionally religious, should fill the lack of enthusiasm and revolutionary passion which might come out from too a "scientific" Marxism.

Concerning that specific point one might say that Lunacharsky did not change his mind during the revolution. In 1925 he republished with very small changes his second volume of *Religion and Socialism*, with the title *From Spinoza to Marx*. On the last page one reads: "Whatever is said about the excessive intellectualistic tendency of our revolution, in its conscious manifestations it is full of hot feeling as an element of that Marxism which is certainly its dominant force as a theory. But enemies and people not involved in it sometimes still charge Marxism of dryness and coldness. This book aims to give an outline of Marxism as a consistent worldview. It wants to give the chance to feel all the unrivalled depth and luxury of emotions, which an active Marxist's consciousness naturally lives with" [28, p. 133].

## References

1. *Vospominaniya o V. I. Lenine* [Memories on V. I. Lenin], Moscow, 1960, vol. III. (In Russian)
2. N. Rjakhovskij. "N. N. Baturin (K pervoj godovshchine smerti N. N. Baturina)" [N. N. Baturin (On the First Anniversary of His Death)]. *Proletarskaja revoljucija*, 1928, 11/12 (82/83). (In Russian)
3. Strumilin S. G. *Iz perezhitogo. 1897–1917* [From my Experiences. 1897–1917]. Moscow, 1957. (In Russian)
4. Lunacharskij A. V. *Vospominaniya i vpechatleniya* [Memories and Impressions]. Moscow, 1968. (In Russian)
5. Williams R. C. *The Other Bolsheviks. Lenin and His Critics. 1904–1914*. Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1986.
6. Steila D. *Genesis and Development of Plekhanov's Theory of Knowledge. A Marxist Between Anthropological Materialism and Physiology*, Dordrecht, 1991.
7. K. Marx — F. Engels. *The German Ideology. Collected Works*. Moscow, London, New York, 1975–2004, vol. 5.
8. Marx K. *The Capital*. K. Marx — F. Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 35.
9. Bogdanov A. A. *Kratkij kurs ekonomicheskoj nauki* [Short Course on Economics]. St. Petersburg, 1906. (In Russian)
10. Bogdanov A. A. *Osnovnye elementy istoricheskogo vzgljada na prirodu* [Fundamental Elements of the Historical View on Nature]. St. Petersburg, 1899. (In Russian)
11. Steila D. *Nauka i revoljucija. Recepcija empiriokriticizma v ruskoj kul'ture (1877–1910 gg.)* [Science and Revolution. The Reception of Empiriocriticism in Russian Culture (1877–1910)]. Moscow, 2013. (In Russian)
12. Avenarius R. *Kritik der reinen Erfahrung*. Leipzig, 1888.
13. Klein M. "Die Philosophie der reinen Erfahrung". *Naturwissenschaftliche Wochenschrift*, XI (1896).
14. Bogdanov A. A. *Empiriomonizm. Stat'i po filosofii* [Empiriomonism. Essays on Philosophy]. Moscow, 1904. (In Russian)
15. Bogdanov A. A. *Empiriomonizm. Stat'i po filosofii. Kniga II* [Empiriomonism. Essays on Philosophy. Volume II]. Moscow, 1905. (In Russian)
16. *Kritika chistogo opyta Rikharda Avenariusa v populjarnom izlozhenii A. Lunacharskogo* [The Critique of Pure Experience by Richard Avenarius in a Popular Exposition by A. Lunacharsky]. Moscow, 1905. (In Russian)
17. Plekhanov G. V. *Pis'ma bez adresa* [Unaddressed Letters]. *Izbrannye filosofskie proizvedenija* [Selected Philosophical Works]. Moscow, 1956–1958, vol. V. (In Russian)

18. Bogdanov A. A. *Poznanie s istoricheskoy točki zrenija* [Knowledge from a Historical Point of View]. St. Petersburg, 1901. (In Russian)
19. Lunacharsky A. V. “Budushchee religii” [The Future of Religion]. *Obrazovanie*, 1907. (In Russian)
20. Brzozowski S. *Idee (Wstep do filozofii dojarzalosci dziejowej)*, Lwo’w 1910; “Der Geschichtsmaterialismus als Kulturphilosophie. Ein philosophisches Programm”, *Die Neue Zeit*, Jhrg. XXVI, Bd. 2.
21. Steila D. “A Philosophy of Labour. Comparing A. V. Lunacharsky and S. Brzozowski”, *Studies in East European Thought*, 2011, 63.
22. Lunacharsky A. V. *Tri putnika i Ono* [Three Travellers and It]. *Komedii, izd. 2* [Comedies. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.]. Petrograd, 1919. (In Russian)
23. Lunacharsky A. V. *Dvadcat’ tretij sbornik Znanija* [The Collection n. 23 of “Znanie” Publishing House]. *Literaturnyj raspad. Kniga II* [The Collapse of Literature. Volume II]. St. Petersburg, 1909. (In Russian)
24. Lunacharsky A. V. *Religija i socializm, vol. I* [Religion and Socialism. Vol. I]. St. Petersburg, 1908. (In Russian)
25. Lunacharsky A. V. *Osnovy pozitivnoj estetiki* [The Foundations of Positive Aesthetics]. *Ocherki realiticheskogo mirovozzrenija* [Essays on the Realistic World-View]. St. Petersburg, 1904.
26. Lunacharsky A. V. *Meshchanstvo i individualizm* [Philistinism and Individualism]. *Ocherki filosofii kolektivizma* [Essays on the Philosophy of Collectivism]. St. Petersburg, 1909. (In Russian)
27. Bogdanov A. A. *The Red Star. The First Bolshevik Utopia*. Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1984.
28. Lunacharsky A. V. *Ot Spinozy do Marksa* [From Spinoza to Marx]. *Ocherki po istorii filosofii kak mirosozercanija* [Essays on the History of Philosophy as a World-View]. Moscow, 1925. (In Russian)

**For citation:** Daniela Steila. Labor between Biology and Religion (Some Bolsheviks’ Reflections Before the Revolution). *Vestnik SPbSU. Series 17. Philosophy. Conflict studies. Culture studies. Religious studies*, 2016, issue 4, pp. 63–74. DOI: 10.21638/11701/spbu17.2016.407

Received: 02.06.2016

Accepted: 16.06.2016