Marxism as Spinozism? One episode in the history of Soviet philosophy

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Abstract

This paper seeks to reconstruct philosopher Aleksandr Bogdanov's approach to the philosophy of Spinoza in the context of the debate against Plekhanov. I demonstrate that the Soviet interest in Spinoza's theory has never been purely historical, but rather, it served an important function in developing the theoretical foundations for Marxist philosophy. However, Bogdanov was one of only a very few who objected strongly to Plekhanov's attempt to relate Spinoza's philosophy to Marxism in a direct way. Two principles underlie Bogdanov's critique: one being methodological, the other—systematic. The methodological principle has a hermeneutical character, since it demands that we treat historical concepts by taking into account their context and their changes during the time. According to Bogdanov, failing to fulfil this principle results in the dogmatization and instrumentalization of philosophy, and transforms it into political doctrine. The systematic principle concerns Bogdanov's radical rethinking of the relationship between extension and thought. I argue that by rethinking Spinoza's concepts in the framework of “ideo-empirical parallelism”, Bogdanov develops his own theory of cognition, which he called “empiriomonism”. When considered in historical context, I argue that these debates can serve as a window into the foundational role the Spinoza's philosophy has played in the formation of different versions of Russian Marxism, as well as in the development of Russian Marxism in general.

Keywords Russian Marxism · Marxist Spinozism · Bogdanov · Plekhanov · Critique · Marxist philosophy · Theoretical development

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Introduction

The end of the nineteenth century through the first third of the twentieth century was a turbulent period in Russian history, replete with crises, revolutions, wars, and the failure of social systems. This complicated social–political reality was then reflected in an unprecedented flourishing of science and art. Intellectuals living and working in this period evaluated the historical processes of their times according to the particular intellectual perspective they represented. Some highlighted the rapid development of capitalism, the country’s technical and cultural modernization, and the transformation of societal connections, a process generally defined as “Europeanization.”¹ Others focused on political or cultural analysis. Two terms arose to characterize the cultural developments of the pre-revolutionary period in Russian history: namely the “Russian Religious-Philosophical Renaissance” and the “Silver Age.” The period between 1914 and 1932–33, in turn, is now often called the “The Copper Age of the Avant-garde,” and the “Golden Ten” of Soviet Philosophy of the 1920s.

Such terms risk giving the false impression of a harmonic process of cultural development. In reality, this “hitherto unprecedented pluralism of thought” (Pustarnakov, 2003, p. 205) was accompanied by a struggle among different political, literal, artistic, and philosophical currents. In philosophy, we can observe the fierce debates that broke out among various schools and directions of thought, including between intellectualism and anti-intellectualism, positivism and idealism, and realism and mysticism.² According to intellectuals of the period, the struggle among these various currents constituted “the basic content of the global evolution in the field of philosophy” (Berman, 1911, p. 3). We see how, at this historical moment, two mutually exclusive poles were formed: between the “materialismus militans” of Plekhanov and his followers,³ on the one hand, and different forms of “idealismus militans,” according to Vladimir Bazarov’s apt definition, on the other.⁴ At the same time, there were irreconcilable differences even within each camp, and the debates on Marxism from this period provide an excellent illustration of these differences.

Russian Marxism was never purely academic. The nascent industrialization of the country and the development of the labor movement led to a general belief that the future of Russia lay with the workers, and thus the appeal of Marxism in Russia can primarily be attributed to the fact that it was regarded as a means of educating the working class. As a practical ideology, Marxism was supposed to be able to provide answers to all theoretical and practical issues of life. Among its core tasks was to provide a platform for the collective—atheist, rationalist, and scientific worldview.

¹ For example, Pavel Yushkevich writes: “Russian life is becoming European [...] It is particularly evident and undeniable in the sphere of transformation of the ideological relations” (Yushkevich, 1910, p. 81).

² On this topic, see, for example, Soboleva (2018).

³ The term was introduced by Plekhanov (1976).

⁴ The term belongs to the Vladimir Bazarov, who writes: “The modern ‘militant’ idealism is interesting almost exactly as ‘militant’, as idealismus militans, who sees its mission in restoring the vivid concrete linkage between forgotten words of metaphysicians and the current socio-political agenda” (Bazarov, 1910, p. 152).

However, neither Marx nor Engels left behind a doctrine in the form of a complete philosophical system. In theory, the Marxism of its founders was limited to the philosophy of history and sociological and economic analyses of contemporary society. To serve as the foundation for the new philosophy of the proletariat, thus, Marxism required further supplementation and elaboration. Therefore, to develop a new system of Marxism, the adherents of this system had to look for compatible philosophical theories that could fill the theoretical gaps and help to create a Marxist ontology, epistemology, and ethics. Such was the logic of the majority of Russian Marxists, including its most famous and influential theorist Georgy Plekhanov. In Plekhanov's words: "The contemporary ideologist of the working class has no right to be indifferent to philosophy. Especially here in Russia" (Plekhanov, 1906, p. V).

Debates on Spinoza from 1925–1932

This view—that a proper Marxist philosophy needed supplementation and elaboration—was dominant not only within pre-revolutionary Russian Marxism, but also within Soviet Marxism. In the early years of the USSR, we find two significant philosophical debates on this subject. The first is widely known, namely, the debate between the "mechanists" and the "dialecticians" on the question of what conception of philosophy could provide the best basis for Marxism. The focus was on the dialectics. The "mechanists" (Kliment Timiryazev, Liubov Axelrod, Ivan Skvortsov-Stepanov, and others) did not deny the validity of dialectics, but held that Marxism had no need for a special philosophy, since it had overcome the abstract philosophical stage and advanced to the stage of scientific knowledge, which was already developing according to objective laws. In contrast, the "dialecticians" (Abram Deborin, Grigory Tymyansky, Yan Sten, and others) argued that dialectical philosophy as a meta-discipline was becoming increasingly relevant and was necessary for analyzing, generalizing, unifying, and directing all spheres of human knowledge and practical activity.

The need to develop a Marxist theoretical philosophy also stimulated an interest in the history of philosophy. It is for this reason that Russian Marxists were attracted to Spinoza. In his relevant critical analysis of the early Soviet Spinoza-debate, George L. Kline emphasizes that

Soviet Russia, during the past quarter century, has witnessed a remarkable renaissance of interest in the philosophy of Benedict Spinoza. [...] and Russian Spinoza literature has exceeded, in quantity if not in quality, that of any country in the west. In the period from 1917 to 1938, 55,200 copies of Spinoza's works were published in the Soviet Union (as compared 8,000 copies during the period from 1897 to 1916). [...] Available statistics on Soviet Russian Spinoza literature — are incomplete, but the following minimum list will give some idea of its extent during the last thirty years: Nine books on Spinoza have been published, totalling some thousand pages; 46 articles in philosophical and literary journals, totalling over 600 pages; 19 chapters or sections of

books (histories of philosophy, collections of philosophical essays, etc.), totaling about 450 pages.). (Kline, 1952, p. 1)

When considering this body of work as a whole, we see that the role of Spinoza's theory served primarily to establish materialism as the basic principle of Marxist philosophy. Plekhanov took the decisive step in this direction when he pronounced Spinoza to be the founder of materialism by identifying Spinoza's substance with matter. According to Plekhanov, all the French materialists of the eighteenth century considered themselves to be Spinozists. From there, he traced the line of succession to Feuerbach and, ultimately, to Marx and Engels, who, in his opinion, "have never left the point of view of Spinoza in the materialistic period of their development" (Plekhanov, 1956, p. 360). Thus, Plekhanov came to the conclusion that Spinoza's theory, when freed from its theological and metaphysical wrappings and understood as fundamentally naturalistic and materialistic, was the historical predecessor to dialectical materialism, and that Marxism was in fact a "variety of Spinozism." Plekhanov commanded authority among his philosophical followers and held political power. And thus, his view concerning Spinoza's materialism took root in Soviet Marxism once and for all. Even the well-known critic of Soviet Marxism, Evald Ilyenkov, endorsed this position.⁵

The extensive and enduring debates among Soviet philosophers on Spinoza's philosophy continued in the years leading up to and during the widely celebrated Spinoza jubilees of 1927 and 1932 (marking, respectively, the 250th anniversary of Spinoza's death and the tercentenary of his birth). In his overview of these debates, George L. Kline distinguishes four competing positions. One group embraced the continuation and elaboration of the Plekhanov tradition from the 1920s, including Abram Deborin, Ivan Luppel, Grigory Tymyanski, and Lev Mankovski, among others. The opposite position was represented by Lyubov Akselrod (Ortodoks), Shandor Varyash (Sándor Varjas), Bernard Bykhovski, Vladimir Sarabyanov, and others. The "orthodox" middle position was taken up by Mark Mitin and Pavel Yudin, among others. The fourth strand, the so-called revisionist Marxism, included Alexander Bogdanov, Nikolay Valentinov, Vladimir Shulyatnikov, and others. Kline points out that the views of these groups with regard to Spinoza's philosophy are

not mutually exclusive or exhaustive, and that their differences are to a considerable extent differences of emphasis, although there are certain basically opposing interpretations, as we shall see. The four schools may be likened to overlapping discs whose outer extremities are separate, but whose central portions coincide in a substantial core of materialistic Marxist doctrine and attitude. The natural tendency of the various groups has been to emphasize their differences for reasons of polemical efficiency and clarity. (Kline, 1952, 18)

In general, Kline's assessment of the debate is correct, but with one important exception concerning Alexander Bogdanov, one of the harshest critics of the

⁵ See Ilyenkov (1999) [1965].

Marxist interpretation of Spinoza's doctrine à la Plekhanov.⁶ When looking at Bogdanov's works together, *Poznanie s istoricheskoi tochki zrenija* [Cognition from a Historical Point of View] (1902), *Empiriomonizm* [Empiriomonism] (1904–1906), *Prikljuchenie odnoi filosofskoi shkoly* [Adventures of One Philosophical School] (1908), *Padenie velikogo fetishizma. Vera i nauka* [The Fall of the Great Fetishism. Faith and Science] (1910), *Filosofija zhivogo opyta* [The Philosophy of Vivid Experience. Popular Essays] (1913), and *Predely nauchnosti rassuzhdenija* [The Limits of Scientific Reasoning] (1927), we see how his views developed in stages over the early decades of the twentieth century. In what follows, I will focus on two essential arguments of Bogdanov's theory, one of which is methodological and the other which is systematic, without taking into account the chronology of the development of these views.⁷

Methodological aspects of Bogdanov's approach to Spinoza: the argument against a dogmatic reading of the history of philosophy

Bogdanov did not develop his views of Spinoza systematically, but expressed them in a number of scattered references, usually in connection with his work on other philosophical or scientific problems. In his paper *Predely nauchnosti rassuzhdenija* [The Limits of Scientific Reasoning], written in 1927,⁸ he advanced what can be called the *methodological argument* against Plekhanov's interpretation of the concept of substance in Spinoza's theory, which offers us special insight into the perspective of Soviet studies on early modern philosophy. Bogdanov pointed out that Plekhanov did not take into account the development of philosophical concepts and, in fact, freely exchanged one concept for another. He writes:

If the present generation discovered that Spinoza's substance was 'matter', the next generation will probably discover that this very 'matter' is a pseudonym for God. How is that possible? Because the word changed its meaning. It is clear that the word 'matter' in Spinoza's time had a completely different meaning, that the content of experience, from which Spinoza proceeded, was entirely different in comparison with the modern content of experience. The situation was quite different then, and the forms of thought, valid then, have now outlived themselves. It is ridiculous to try to translate Spinoza's terms using terms adequate to the contemporary situation. [...] All of Spinoza's terms have lost their original meaning; the only one who can understand them

⁶ Kline did not analyze Bogdanov's views because he believed that the revisionist strand in Russian Marxist scholarship on Spinoza was "shorter and more fragile than the others. It disappeared from the historical scene relatively early and has had but little influence on the subsequent course of Spinoza interpretation" (Kline, 1952, p. 16). In their papers on Russian Spinozism, Maidansky, 2017, Mareev, 2007, and Oittinen, 2014 do not address Bogdanov's position.

⁷ I made the first step in this direction in my paper Soboleva (2012).

⁸ Originally it was a lecture delivered by Bogdanov on 14 May 1927 in the Communist Academy.

fully would be somebody who can travel back to that era, and study it as well as we know the present period; only such a person can do it. To tell the truth, our philosophers do not preoccupy themselves with such efforts. (Bogdanov, 1927, p. 260)

The core methodological idea of this passage is that words and terms do not have a fixed meaning, but, quite the opposite, that every concept, even those used continuously in philosophical and scientific discourses, can have a variety of meanings. This was, for instance, the case with Copernicus's discovery that the Earth revolved around the Sun. If the word "revolves," Bogdanov claims, had only one single meaning, then it could not have been applied to what Copernicus did. In his view, the history of science and philosophy is deeply rooted in the semantic dynamics of the terms at play. From this, it follows that the treatment of historical concepts is a delicate issue that needs to be addressed by taking into account their context and their changes during a given time.

For Bogdanov, Plekhanov's treatment of philosophical terms served as an example of "pure speculation" (*rassuzhdatel'stvo*), which he defined as the "fetishism of words" (Bogdanov, 1927, p. 261). This idea of "verbal fetishism" implies that a word has meaning in and of itself, a "permanent, unconditional meaning" (Bogdanov, 1927, p. 262). The alternative approach to philosophical texts, which Bogdanov both promoted and demanded, required an approach that takes into account the historical "self-development of concepts" (Bogdanov, 1927, p. 257). In other words, it requires, as we would say today, a developed hermeneutical consciousness. Bogdanov appealed to his colleagues to approach all philosophical arguments with "a priori skepticism" and to fight against such "verbal fetishism" (Bogdanov, 1927, p. 262). "But nobody does this," he writes, and continues:

You see almost a hundred terms in one phrase, and none of them are defined, and it is impossible to define them: there will never be enough space. Thus, there is no real struggle against polysemy and the constant substitution of meanings; and there is no understanding that words have meaning not by themselves but that their meaning is constantly changing according to the social environment. This understanding doesn't exist, it must be introduced. But, more importantly, it is necessary to verify every chain of reasoning by means of experience, minimizing the number of verifiable units in argumentation. (Bogdanov, 1927, p. 262)

By arguing against "verbal fetishism," Bogdanov argued against the incorrect application of historical concepts in contemporary philosophical and scientific contexts. At the same time, he also argued against the dogmatization of philosophy—against its instrumentalization and transformation into political doctrine. He warned against this as early as his 1910 pamphlet, *Padenie velikogo fetishizma* [*The Fall of the Great Fetishism*]. In it, he wrote that philosophy based on "verbal fetishism," that is, on idle talk and empty speculation, is akin to a religion that is "firm in its verbal profession of faith, but vague in its concepts" (Bogdanov, 1910, p. 166). In his analysis of Lenin's *Materialism i empiriokritizism* [*Materialism and Empirio-criticism*], which was mostly directed against him, Bogdanov identified those features of

Russian Marxism that transformed it into a quasi-religion. Typical religious thinking distinguishes itself by “*creating the imperious fetishes and demanding obedience from the people*” (Bogdanov, 1910, p. 146)⁹; intragroup relations are based on “obedience, on elimination of one’s own thought and criticism, on rejection of research, on suppression of any possible doubts, on the act of will, directed at cognitive passivity” (Bogdanov, 1910, p. 147); the creators of doctrine are perceived as “the prophets of the absolute truth” (Bogdanov, 1910, p. 160); all dissents are regarded as a “hostile sect, as a hostile religion” (Bogdanov, 1910, p. 218).

In *Padenie velikogo fetishizma [The Fall of the Great Fetishism]*, Bogdanov demonstrated how Russian Marxism manifested all of these symptoms. In the conclusion, he states: “The book that we discussed, by its very tone and its very structure, teaches us *to believe* in professional learning of specialists as this latter teaches us *to believe* in Marx. The first faith is harmful and ridiculous, the second—is harmful and shameful” (Bogdanov, 1910, p. 223). Bogdanov defines Plekhanov’s and Lenin’s version of Russian Marxism as “absolute Marxism” (Bogdanov, 1910, p. 223). According to him, it is faith in the absolute: that is, a faith in the changeless and the only true Marxist worldview, based on the unity of verbal formulas and consecrated with the authority of the classics of Marxism. The core teachings of the “Russian-Marxist church,” as Bogdanov would later call it in 1914, are constituted, firstly, by the “contemplative materialism” of Plekhanov, Lenin, and Akselrod, for whom “a human being with his consciousness acts as a passive product of an external matter;” and, secondly, by faith in the existence of the absolute truth that logically follows from the fact that “if matter is the absolute and indefinable basis of all experience, then the idea of ‘matter’ lies outside any dialectics and represents the unconditional and eternal truth” (Bogdanov, 1995, p. 33; compare Bogdanov, 1913, p. 215).

Bogdanov found a source for this anti-dialectical materialism in Plekhanov’s false interpretation of Spinoza’s doctrine of substance. Its falsity is founded, he believed, in reducing the thesis of the unity of substance to the thesis of the psychophysical parallelism of mind (spirit) and matter. We see the erroneous consequences of this reduction, which can be reconstructed on the basis of various texts by Bogdanov, at several levels. First, we find it in the recognition that “mentality is inherent in matter in general” (Bogdanov, 1910, p. 203) or, in other words, in the recognition of “the general animation of matter” (Bogdanov, 1995, p. 132). Secondly, we see it in the way that mind (spirit) is, in general, understood as a phenomenon that is directly derived from matter (Bogdanov, 1910, p. 184 f). Therefore, the mind turns out to be a receptive instrument in relation to active material substance (Bogdanov, 1995, p. 143; compare Bogdanov, 1913, p. 212). Third, the term *matter* is presented as an absolute concept that is itself not a subject to development, but a *thing in itself* that is given in experience through mere reflection and that provides the ultimate solution to the problem of the essence of things. In the heat of the debate, Bogdanov claims:

⁹ Note: italics in the quote here and throughout the text correspond to the original.

Plekhanov's Spinozism does not belong to Spinoza. To whom does it belong? To the 'Neo-Spinozists' of the eighteenth century, in particular to Diderot, from whom Plekhanov borrowed these views. But Diderot *knew* what his differences with Spinoza were, and Plekhanov, without noticing it, blurted out in one place, that he did not know it: for him 'it is not entirely clear, in what exactly Diderot saw the superiority of the new Spinozism over the old'. On top of that, Plekhanov attributed his ignorance of Spinoza to Marx and Engels, referring to a private conversation with Engels. This is slander and must be rejected. (Bogdanov, 1995, p. 133)¹⁰

Moreover, Bogdanov believed that the contemporary concept of "matter" cannot be interpreted in terms of mechanical substantiality, as Plekhanov believed it could be. In his early works on empiriomonism, following in the footsteps of Wilhelm Ostwald, Bogdanov proposed that energetism be viewed as a new form of monism and, in light of this theory, that the work of consciousness (here is continued to use Spinoza's terms "pleasure" and "pain") should be traced back to the transformation of forms of energy. Later on, in his *Tektologija* [*Tectology*], he advanced the idea of the organizational monism—an idea his contemporaries did not accept. In line with this new turn in his theory, he now interpreted consciousness as a tectological "complex" (system).

However, Bogdanov did observe certain points of contact between Plekhanov's interpretation of Spinoza's philosophy and Russian dialectical materialism. In fact, it should be noted that the development of Marxism in Russia was, to some extent, shaped by inadequate philosophical interpretations of the history of philosophy. Bogdanov could see the serious philosophical and political consequences that flowed from these methodological inaccuracies in the history of philosophy. Of particular importance to him was the tendency towards dogmatism in Russian Marxism.

In the concluding remarks of his last philosophical lecture, *Predely nauchnosti rassuzhdenija* [*The Limits of Scientific Reasoning*], delivered on 14 May 1927, Bogdanov noted that the current discussions taking place in the Communist Academy were illustrative of the very points he was making. As his Soviet colleagues spoke, every one of his propositions was replaced with another. Every concept that he had explained and defined had been substituted for another, not necessary purposefully but based on the methodological background of the speaker. He had been talking about one thing, but the discussion by his interlocutors had been about something else entirely. Bogdanov's critique of the discussions in the Communist Academy served as a kind of diagnosis—a diagnosis of the depressed intellectual atmosphere of Soviet scientific community. James White writes: "Bogdanov's lecture was given in hostile reception by his audience, which is not surprising, since it was in essence a criticism of their way of thinking" (White, 2018, p. 442).

¹⁰ Quoting Plekhanov, Bogdanov refers to his book *Kritika nashikh kritikov* [*Criticism of Our Critics*], correspondently p. 161 and p. 137.

Systematical aspects of Bogdanov's approach to Spinoza: the argument against the psychophysical dualism

What follows is, in my view, Bogdanov's most significant *systematic argument* against Plekhanov's understanding of Spinoza. In *Vera i nauka [Faith and Science]*, Bogdanov examines a passage from the second part of Spinoza's *Ethics* and concludes that Spinoza assigns

at least a large part of the 'mental phenomena', namely, the 'images of things', i.e. intuitions and perceptions, to the attribute of *extension* saying that they arise from the collision of bodies, from the interaction of bodies. He recognizes the modes of thought only as an *affirmation or negation* of something. ... Bodies and intuitions belong for Spinoza to the world of extension; that means that the whole experience, all *empiricism* in the strict sense of the word, belongs to it. Consequently, the parallelism of the 'attributes' of thought and extension is an *ideo-empirical parallelism*. (Bogdanov, 1910, p. 204)

Let us consider in detail what is contained in this quotation. First, by placing intuitions in the realm of extension, Bogdanov argues against Plekhanov's assertion of the psychophysical dualism of mind and body in Spinoza. Instead of a "psycho-physical parallelism," as Plekhanov explained Spinoza's relation, he proposes an "ideo-empirical parallelism." The difference between these views is that, for Bogdanov, human experience is not the result of the impact of physical things on human mind, but rather it results from the interaction of the physical and the psychical. Following Ernst Mach, Bogdanov represents this point of view by declaring the "psycho-physical neutrality of the elements" of experience. However, in contrast to Mach, he believes that human experience is organized not only individually, but also socially.¹¹ The individual psychical experience, he argues, has a subjective character, while the socially organized, intersubjective experience gives us what we call "objective reality" (Bogdanov 2003, p. 233–234). The key point here is that social, "ideologically"¹² organized experience influences our individual perceptions: "Thus, experience is social in its basis, and its progress is the *socio-psychological process of its organization*, to which the organizing individual-psychic process completely adapts itself" (Bogdanov, 2003, 234–235).

Second, by emphasizing that each of Spinoza's ideas contains either affirmation or negation, Bogdanov points out that the content of ideas is always mediated by the action of a subject. In modern parlance, he points out that the intentionality of perception is included in and connected with the intentionality of action. Bogdanov's interpretation in this vein is directed against Plekhanov's understanding of the idea as a mere passive "reflection" of an object. For Bogdanov, in contrast, the subject's perception of an object is based on her or his previous cognitive experience, and this experience affects how the object appears for us. According to him, perception is a kind of interpretation of an object, which is connected with the variety of

¹¹ For more on this topic, see Soboleva (2019).

¹² By "ideology," in a wide sense of the word, Bogdanov means a complex of ideas in a society.

activities of the subject doing the interpreting. Moreover, Bogdanov believes that it is not the idea of an object itself or our simple instinctive reactions to it, but rather the concrete—conscious or unconscious—decision of a subject towards an object that causes our actions toward it. Like Spinoza, he suggests that an idea is a stimulus for action, and therefore, it is connected with human will. The subject is not casually determined in his or her perception by an object, but is always free to understand it and, hence, to act toward it differently. These two aspects explain why, for Bogdanov, the idea of an object cannot be directly deduced from physical circumstances.

The third important point for us to consider in the quotation above concerns Bogdanov's identification of "extension" with experience. His concept of experience has two aspects: it includes content and process. Taking this into account, our concept of the world emerges as a product of our active and productive experience. In this case, "the world of extension" is not separated from thought as something independent from it, but rather it results from the interaction of a thought with the outside world. Here Bogdanov's term "ideo-empirical parallelism" reveals the constructive character of concepts of the world and their dependence on the activity of the cognitive subject: the physical world we encounter in our experience is "in the last analysis established by the mutual verification and co-ordination of the utterances of various people" (Bogdanov, 2003, 21). From this it follows that the very world in which a human being lives is not only the world of external things, but also the world of social interactions, which is no less objective for the individual than the outside world.

Later, in his manuscript, *Desjatiletie otluchenija ot marksizma [The Decade of Excommunication from Marxism]*, Bogdanov returns to this topic when he writes: "So, 'extension' covers not only the material world, but also its vivid, sensual reflections, not just physical experience, but also the most part of cognitive experience. 'Thought' is not merely the 'mental', but rather the *logical* side of the world" (Bogdanov, 1995, p. 133). Here, he again opposes Plekhanov's psycho-physical dualism in his interpretation of Spinoza's theory. Spinoza's "thought" appears here as a kind of deep logical structure of the world that, later in his *Tektologija [Tectology]*, Bogdanov will try to express in terms of universal tectological (organizational) laws. However, in his early works on empiriomonism, he stresses the two-sidedness of the process of cognition, one component of which belongs to the phenomena of "thought" and the other to the phenomena of "extension." In this case, the function of thought serves to organize experience, or, in other words, to constitute the logical structure of reality.

If we accept Bogdanov's view, then the fundamental problem of Marxist philosophy can be formulated not as the problem of the relationship between thought and being, as proposed by Plekhanov, but as the problem of the relationship between individual and socially organized cognition, or between individual and social experience. In fact, this question was central to Bogdanov, and it is this question that his philosophy of empiriomonism aspired to solve.

In this paper, I will not attempt to engage in a substantive discussion and criticism of the individual arguments of Bogdanov's interpretation of Spinoza. However, from the point of view of the history of philosophy, it is worth noting that Bogdanov's dedication to Spinoza's philosophy worked to promote the development of his own

theory. First of all, it is important to stress that in the ideo-empirical parallelism, which Bogdanov ascribes to Spinoza, we in fact see the source of his own theory, which he called “empiriomonism.” Indeed, the functional relationship between the world of ideas and practical experience, expressed by the formula “ideo-empirical parallelism,” is the essential thesis of empiriomonism, which Bogdanov himself describes as “the *cognitive parallelism* between life as a complex of mental events, and its reflection in the socially-organized experience” (Bogdanov, 2003, p. 80). The word “reflection” here should not concern us in this context, as there is no necessary association here with Plekhanov’s and Lenin’s versions of this concept. Instead, Bogdanov considers reflection to be an active and a more complex, stepwise logical process of “substitution” of some mental complexes for other complexes: or, in other words, he understands reflection to be a sequential building up of theory, proceeding from a set of initial observational statements.¹³ Bogdanov introduces the category of “social causality” to demonstrate the dependence of scientific understanding on the social, economical, and technological practices, methods and processes of organizing labor. In his short historical excursion into epistemology, *Poznanie s istoricheskoy tochki zreniya* [*Cognition from a Historical Point of View*] (1902), Bogdanov highlights the correlation between the organization of thinking and that of collective labor. To describe the dependence of social knowledge production from its underlying labor activity, he introduces the concepts of “sociomorphism” and “social system of cognition” (Bogdanov, 1902, 174). His epistemological schema implies that *the organization of labor* impacts the structure of scientific knowledge, as well as the entire historical *system* of social experience.¹⁴

Empiriomonism, in general, seeks to overcome the mind–world dualism inherited from Spinoza and Kant—a dualism that Plekhanov’s mechanistic Spinozism, with its psycho-physical parallelism, could not eliminate. Bogdanov thinks it especially urgent to develop a logically strict and consistent theory of cognition, which is devoid not only of any dualism, but also of any kind of duality. He writes:

For Spinoza, the duality of knowable attributes of the single substance, thought and extension, did not contradict the unity of the system, but for us, the people of the twentieth century, it is an undeniable dualism. The same should become clear concerning all fundamental duality of the ways of cognition. And thus, overcoming this duality is a necessary task of our striving for the ideal of knowledge. (Bogdanov, 2003, p. 13)

Bogdanov’s idea of the unity of the system of experience—expressed in his term “empiriomonism”—offers a way to radically rethink the relationship between extension and thought: that is, between the physical and the mental and, hence, between logic and ontology. Empiriomonism assumes that both the physical and mental belong to the world of experience and constitute human cognition. Both are nothing

¹³ In principle, his idea of substitution anticipates the ideas of the logical positivism of Rudolf Carnap, but, in contrast to it, he suggests that the scientific construction of the world is part of social processes.

¹⁴ Here, I want to highlight the tectological elements in Bogdanov’s empiriomonism. For more on this topic, see Soboleva (2007).

more than either individually or socially organized relations of elements of experience. In other words, any perceptual relation to the world is always conditioned by thought, which has an intersubjective and interactive character. According to Bogdanov, there are no immediate representations that directly reflect reality, as was the case in Spinoza and Plekhanov; on the contrary, all representations are conceptual, and all concepts are determined by the sociohistorical context of human labor. By rethinking Spinoza's concepts, Bogdanov advanced a kind of constructive social epistemology, which seeks to investigate the epistemic effects of social interactions and social systems.¹⁵ In this way, he resolutely distanced himself from Plekhanov, who underplayed the importance of the social dimension of knowledge production and thereby neglected the fundamentally social nature of epistemic activity, cognitive processes, and scientific expertise.

Concluding remarks

Debates over the interpretation of Spinoza's philosophy played a significant role in the formation of Russian Marxism, and the process of its interpretation can serve as a window into the varying versions of Russian Marxism. As Kline correctly formulates, "We may study with profit not only Spinoza in Soviet philosophy but Soviet philosophy through Spinoza" (Kline, 1952, p. 47). As we have seen, we can trace the "absolute Marxism" of Plekhanov and Lenin, as Bogdanov called it (and the validity of this definition was proven by the history of Soviet philosophy), back to Plekhanov's interpretation of Spinoza's theory as *substantial monism*. In contrast, Bogdanov's "critical Marxism," as he himself defined it (Bogdanov, 2003, p. 12), was a creative and nondogmatic Marxism, and was rooted in an understanding of Spinoza's theory as a kind of *methodological monism*. The first was aimed at working out a definitive conception of the world; the second represented the monism of the method and highlighted the variety of the always-in-development mechanisms of cognition. In contrast to Plekhanov's ontological monism, Bogdanov's "critical Marxism" does not offer us a finalized picture of the world, since this would conflict with its understanding the dynamic character of both reality and cognition. Therefore, it can be seen as having significant critical potential. Bogdanov argues that "we must appreciate the tradition of Marx and Engels not in the letter but in the spirit" (Bogdanov, 1908, p. 66). This means Marxism should serve as a regulator and as a method of reflection rather than a set of fixed, constant truths. Within the theory of cognition, Marxism should be preserved primarily as the methodological "idea of a social character of cognition" (Bogdanov, 2003, p. 241).¹⁶

Understanding Marxism as a method does not exclude the possibility that it must remain materialist. However, in this case, its materialism would change: it is impossible

¹⁵ It should be noted that Bogdanov's ideas concerning the social production of knowledge can be seen as a kind of epistemological constructivism and as related to contemporary poststructuralist debates on the same subject.

¹⁶ We may note that this is the same understanding of Marxism that was later demonstrated by the Frankfurt School of philosophy against critical rationalism in the debate concerning the methodology of cognition (Theodor Adorno against Karl Popper).

to determine the nature of this materialism on the basis of Plekhanov's principle of the primacy of matter over mind (spirit). In this vein, as Bogdanov sarcastically noted: "If 'nature' is understood as an inorganic world and the lowest level of life, and 'mind' as the highest stage of life, such as human consciousness, then 'materialism' is inevitable for everyone freed from the nappies of a crude mythology and for everyone acquainted with the situation in contemporary natural science, and, besides, this principle is not suitable as a criterion for determining materialism because of the 'indistinctness' and 'vagueness' of Plekhanov's terms 'mind' and 'matter'" (Bogdanov, 2003, p. 221–222).

Materialism manifests itself in Bogdanov's empiriomonism in the recognition of the fact that collective social experience accounts for all kinds of cognition: for instance, in the connection between "social causality" and scientific theory; in labor methods; and in the development of technology. Indeed, a fundamental feature of social institutions seems to be that they function as instances for the constitution and legitimation of knowledge. However, this theory was not accepted among Russian Marxists. For instance, in Plekhanov's view, "the 'philosophy' which claims that the physical world was created by men is the most thoroughgoing, though of course a very confused, idealist philosophy" (Plekhanov, 1976, p. 257).

Plekhanov's and Bogdanov's interpretation of Spinoza's theory reveal two different paradigms of how to conceptualize the relationship between Marxism and philosophy. Bogdanov's task can be characterized in his own words: "If Marxism was a true scientific theory but with no philosophy organically related to it, it was of course necessary *to justify and to elaborate philosophy from a Marxist perspective*, but in no case to found Marxism on the basis of any particular philosophy" (Bogdanov, 2003, p. 228). Therefore, Bogdanov objected strongly to Plekhanov's attempt to relate Spinoza's philosophy to Marxism in a direct way. He criticizes the kind of approach to which Plekhanov and Lenin devoted their philosophical work, ultimately reducing the rich content of philosophy as such to "the three sources, the three components of Marxism" (Lenin) as the quintessence of "the question on the development of the monist view of history" (Plekhanov), which became a foundation of the dogmatic form of Marxist doctrine. Thus, according to Bogdanov (and in contrast to the Marxist–Leninist thesis), dialectical materialism cannot be directly derived from the history of philosophy as the only one possible legitimate inheritor of European philosophical thought.

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