

**DEATH AND ANTI-DEATH,
VOLUME 1:
One Hundred Years After
N. F. Fedorov (1829-1903)**

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Endnote

* This is a revised version of a paper I delivered at a 1993 conference on Russian Religious Thought at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

CHAPTER THREE

Death And Anti-Death In Russian Marxism At The Beginning Of The 20th Century

Daniela Steila

Since the 1880's, when Georgij V. Plekhanov and his group *Osvobozhdenie truda* abandoned their former Populism and embraced Marxism, the latter was considered in Russia to be not only an instrument of political and sociological analysis, but a whole world-view as well —capable of accounting at the same time for nature and society, of leading humankind in every aspect of life, of answering every question. Marxism, being such a complete, systematic and scientific world-view, could bring political action to success. As the so-called "Father of Russian Marxism" wrote: «To discover the laws, under the influence of which the historical development of humanity takes place, means to provide oneself with the possibility of consciously influencing the process of this development; to cease being a powerless plaything of "chance" and to become its master».[1]

As the revolution failed in 1905, many Russian Marxists felt as they could not trust any more their ideological weapons, but Marxism did not cease to be a comprehensive world-view. On the contrary, many important thinkers and political leaders, especially among the Bolsheviks, wished that Marxism broadened: it should provide not only a "scientific" world-view; but it should embrace the "emotional" aspects of human life as well.

In this context, the question of death became very important. On the one hand, it was evident that death represented a major impediment for a philosophy that wanted to be a comprehensive world-view, accounting for theory and praxis

at the same time. A. S. Izgoev, a very well known intellectual of that epoch, pointed out that one's whole enthusiasm for the future of humanity might vanish, considering that nobody who struggles for the "new world" will be able to see it and enjoy the outcomes of his own efforts.[2] On the other hand, those who embraced a sort of "religious", "emotional" conception of Marxism, could not avoid the question of death: if Marxism as a "religion" was to harmonize the laws of human life and the laws of nature, death seemed to be an unsurmountable contradiction. Writing a letter to the writer Maxim Gorky, Aleksandr Bogdanov resumed both aspects with these words: «The problem of death is interesting and important for both the scientific world-view, and the aesthetical feeling of the world. From those perspectives, it should be considered in connection with spontaneous and conscious development of life, and within the outlines of world beauty, that spontaneously creates itself and is actively created».[3] Death appears to be the irreconcilable contradiction, the unresolvable conflict between nature and humankind, spontaneity and artifice. As such, it became a crucial question to Russian Marxism, both as a "socialism of science" and as a "socialism of feelings".[4]

George Kline, in his major work on *Religious and Anti-Religious Thought in Russia*, emphasized that "Prometheanism" in Russian Marxism showed itself most clearly in the utopia of immortality, as a sort of «secularized and vulgarized» version of N. F. Fyodorov's projects.[5] Actually most of the Russian Marxists who, at the beginning of the 20th century, criticized Plekhanov's strict orthodoxy and moved forward towards a new Marxist world-view, thought that the remedy to the contradiction represented by death was to be collective immortality. Thereby, in Robert Williams' words, «individuals die, but the collective group, class, or party is said to endure eternally».[6]

From such a point of view, to the individual who can consciously feel that she belongs to the collectivity, her own death is no more a limitation or anguish. In 1909 Vladimir Bazarov, an outstanding figure of the Bolshevik movement at that time, wrote: «The problem of personal death for people capable of collective creativity has the same secondary interest as the problem of the ruin of this or that neuron in my brain».[7] A radical change in the concept of individual itself was going on. Bogdanov noticed that the creation of this concept had been a historical achievement of the bourgeoisie, who had secluded «the active human being, full of faith in himself, in order to separate [the individual] from the human herd of the feudal age. But that has been done; nowadays the working class incarnates already a different undertaking. It is a matter of collecting these active atoms, of binding them with a superior tie, and changing their spontaneously contradictory cooperation into a harmonically organized one, merging them into the one rational organism of humanity. Such is the sense of new consciousness, the beginning of which is to be found in workers' organizations».[8] Within bourgeois society, it was therefore natural to consider individuality as an absolute value and, consequently, to regard death as something equally absolute. «According to [bourgeois thinkers], the boundaries of earthly life were the boundaries of individual life. According to us, individual life is an abstraction, the genesis and objective meaning of which we are to study».[9]

The problem of life and death was very often reflected upon by Russian Marxists, especially by those that Robert Williams called «other» Bolsheviks, thereby emphasizing that they were commonly defined by their opposition to Lenin. Actually, pre-revolutionary Russian Marxism was a very lively milieu for theoretical and philosophical discussions, where many different cultural traditions melted together. It is interesting to observe how different sources combined in the debates about the problem of death.

Joseph Dietzgen's Monism

After the failed revolution of 1905, many Russian Marxists tried to reconsider their own world-view, so to include attention to “feelings” and to ideals that could inspire great collective actions. This tendency—which eventually gave rise to “God-building”, the well-known cultural movement that aimed at a “religious” socialism—found support in Joseph Dietzgen's thought, which had in Russian an extraordinary success since 1906-1907. His figure was such as to undoubtedly arise Marxists' greatest interest and admiration: as an humble craftsman, more than once forced to emigration in America for economic and political reasons,[10] he was seen as a self-taught genius who could understand dialectics by himself, independently from Hegel and Marx, as Engels had acknowledged.[11] Marx himself, who actually reproached naïveté and confusion to Dietzgen's works, did not hesitate to define him a «proletarian philosopher».[12] In spite of these authoritative approvals, his works remained almost unnoticed for decades, until his son Eugen passionately devoted himself to their spreading, going so far as to found in Munich a publishing house solely for «Dietzgenian philosophy».[13] In Western Europe, however, Dietzgen's success was especially impressive in Holland, while a few years later his thought became quite known in the States, where it influenced the *International Socialist Review*, and in Russia.[14]

Dietzgen's thought could easily represent that “socialism of feelings” that a disappointed revolutionary Left felt to need. Although he stated to be an atheist, he had always pointed out, on the one hand, the necessity to show the obscure monism implicit within different religious systems, and, on the other hand, the need not to turn social-democratic world-views into a dry scientific formula. Dietzgen presented himself as the prophet of a sort of social-democratic

“religion”, even though he emphasized that «religion has its steady foundation in dogmas, whereas the science of inductive socialism finds it in material facts».[15] He did not deny, however, that «social-democracy lives of *faith* in the triumph of truth, of *hope* for liberation from material and spiritual yokes, of *love* for equal rights for all human beings».[16] From this point of view, social-democratic ideology should not share the cold dryness of science, but should enhance its scientific basis with a richness of feelings and passions. Dietzgen wrote: «Social democracy differs from other, more usual fruits of cerebral activity, because it expresses itself in a *religious* form, as something that pertains to human *heart*. Religion in general has as its task to rescue the tormented human heart from sorrows and misfortunes of our earthy life. (...) Modern Gospel finally promises a real release from our earthy sufferings. “God”, i.e. Good, Beauty, Holiness, becomes a human being, comes down from heaven to earth, no more through a miracle, as it was in ancient times, but in a common, earthy way. We long for the Saviour, we long for the Gospel, God's word, to incarnate. However, he should not incarnate in a single individual, in a certain person; we want, the *people* want to be God's Son».[17]

Dietzgen always choose a somewhat “mystic” language, even while discussing the “scientific foundations” of social-democratic ideology. His *Natur-Monismus*, his firm belief that all the different aspects of being are united in one “totality”, sometimes gave rise to a quasi-religious excitement towards “cosmos”, the harmonious universe that humankind had the task to bring the whole reality to. He wrote: «Conscious and unconscious, plants and animals, good and evil, all the differences and all the oppositions of the world must be acknowledged as *different forms of the same substance*, which, by gradually turning one into the other, gradually threaten each other in their struggle for existence and gradually renew and perfect themselves

through natural selection. The world has come from chaos to human being, who owns his spirit and has the pleasing task and possibility to contribute in his turn to the progress of our world, relatively chaotic yet, through the study and organization of his own forces».[18]

One of the leading figures in Bogdanov's first utopian novel might have been modeled on Dietzgen's thought, when he considers as the meaning of life the fact that «within anyone of us, small fragments of a huge organism, the Whole lives, and everybody lives within the Whole».[19] The protagonist of the novel, a terrestrial revolutionary who finds himself confronted to the superior Martian civilization, compares a Martian book, the first chapter of which «was devoted to the idea of Universe, as a Unique Whole, including and determining everything by itself», to «the works by that worker-philosopher, who in simple and naïve form first expressed the basis of a proletarian philosophy of nature».[20] The hint to Dietzgen must have been manifest to contemporaries.

“God-building”

Since 1907, Marxists' interest in “feelings” and ideals was expressed by a peculiar attention to “religious researches”, a novelty within the traditions of Russian radical *intelligentsia*. Indeed, Marxists' “religious researches” perfectly blended with the general cultural atmosphere of the time. In 1907 Nikolaj Berdjajev, who had already accomplished his “conversion” from Marxism to Idealism and Spiritualism, noticed a new religious consciousness emerging in society, from which socialism itself would not be exempt. He wrote: «socialism aims at the same purpose to which all religions aim, i.e. humankind's liberation from the yoke of nature, of necessity, of sorrow»[21] — death being *par excellence* the symbol of such a yoke.

Exactly in 1907, religion became a topic of lively debates, since a certain Father Cherpin conducted an international inquiry in *Mercure de France* on the future of religion and religious feeling, also interviewing a number of Russian intellectuals. Among them, Maxim Gorky distinguished the necessary demise of the idea of human submission to a supernatural God, from the triumph of religious sentiment, that he defined as «a joyous and proud consciousness of a harmonious tie, binding human beings with the whole universe», «a creative, complex feeling of faith in one's own forces, of hope in one's own victory, of love for life, of wonder before the wise harmony which exists between one's spirit and that of the whole universe».[22]

Gorky's answer gave Lunacharsky the opportunity to publicly declare his own ideas, which he had been already working on in the past few years.[23] According to him, socialism was to be considered as a «religion without god», since it aimed at harmonizing life and nature, humankind and universe, thereby observing the general definition of religion: «Religion is a way of thinking and feeling the world, that psychologically overcomes the contrast between laws of life and laws of nature. (...) Scientific socialism overcomes those contradictions by suggesting the idea of the victory of life, of the subjugation of the spontaneity of reason through knowledge and work, science and technology».[24]

The new God, whose coming was to be announced by socialism, should be a new humanity, overwhelming nature and creating his own fate. Therefore Lunacharsky criticized Gorky's answer to *Mercure de France*, because it seemed to him to show an excessive enthusiasm about universe and nature, an appearance of *cosmism*, i.e. a last residue of traditional religious views.[25] In his opinion, “cosmism” concealed a resignation to supposed superior laws of nature, which socialism, already in Marx's thought, had on the contrary definitely overthrown. According to Lunacharsky,

the “cosmos” was not a pacific and harmonious whole, rather the field of the struggle for existence.[26] The new religion should be «anthropological» and center round work, i.e. human active relationship with the natural milieu, thereby becoming “economicism” much more than “cosmism”.[27]

To Lunacharsky, nature was a confused and mysterious heap of forces and processes, in which only human beings were to bring order through struggle and subjection. He had a quite aggressive idea of the relationship between humankind and nature. On this basis, he considered socialism to be the organized struggle of humankind against nature, in order to subject it completely to reason. A particularly clear example of this view is to be found in a later comedy of his. He compares three different ways of thinking and living, embodied in three travelers: a baron, follower of Schelling’s philosophy, a poet, and a “practical man”, an engineer. Because of a terrible storm, the three of them are forced to look for shelter in the house of a mysterious woman. She, by disguising herself as a phantom, puts the two superstitious ones to flight, and rewards with her love the “practical man”, who did not let himself be frightened. Before the phantom appears, the three travelers talk about their world-views, including their views on nature, and the engineer, who represents the author’s ideas, describes the relationship between human being and nature in terms of violent conquest: «Nature always seemed to me a woman. A great aristocrat. Like the powerful and noble empress of some wild tribe. While the human species seems to me a poor boy without relatives or tribe, ignorant and clumsy... We could say, a small puppy. However, you can see the good breed from its muzzle and paws. He grows up, learns and becomes cleverer. The wild queen can knock him down, roast him, should he fall under her furious hand while he is still weak. But don’t give up, boy! You must grow up and strengthen: then you will device tricks and seize the bad beauty. When you will have seized her, hold her tight, and hug her

passionately... Suddenly she will give in, she will take all her masks and clothes off, and she will say: “My dear”. Well... the story will end up with a wedding, as in any good novel».[28]

According to Lunacharsky, as well as to Gorky, the ultimate aim of socialism would be “humanization of nature”. In Gorky’s opinion, however, it would create a harmonious synthesis, whereas Lunacharsky considered it as a challenge and a conquest. Laws of nature, which Gorky thought to represent the infinite substance of universe, to Lunacharsky’s mind were just «temporary formulae», fit for the practical aim of mastering phenomena and overcoming natural boundaries: «Everywhere human being must audaciously torture nature and overcome its always apparent limits».[29] The overcoming of natural boundaries would have included, of course, the human limit of death.

Lunacharsky actually thought that every living individual continually wins over death: unconsciously through sex, reproduction, children-care; consciously through «his love for his species and culture».[30] Also according to Gorky, it was “species” and especially “culture” that definitely solved the question of death: «the collective does not look for immortality, it owns it»[31], not so much in the biological sense, through identification with the species, but rather because of a common cultural horizon, a common participation in the realization of values and ideas. Gorky wrote: «There shall come days of general enthusiasm of human beings for their past actions, and in the universe, the Earth will be the place of the triumph of life over death, the place where a new art will rise, an art really free to live for the sake of art, to create beauty. Humanity’s life is creation, it is endeavour to win resistance of dead matter, and wish to master all its mysteries and to compel its forces to serve the will of human beings for their happiness».[32]

The thought of death, which obsessed decadent art, in Gorky's opinion was just a sign of its poor creative power, of the decline of the bourgeoisie and of its values. «What is life?» asked the men of letters at that time, and they answered: «everything is nourishment for death, everything. All the good and evil you have done will disappear with your death. Everything and everybody are equally unimportant in front of death».[33] Thereby the bourgeoisie was confirmed in its vain and flimsy way of life, aimed just at pleasure and joy, without ambitions and values. «Lecturing over death is necessary to the bourgeois», Gorky ended up, since «it arises in his soul a sort of quiet nihilism, and nothing else».[34]

On the contrary, Gorky thought death to be an integral part of life, and its presence should not restrict in any way human creative efforts toward ideal. Convinced that there is a basic harmony between single and collective, and between species and nature, Gorky considered death as the other side of life, the necessary means through which life sweeps away everything old and worn out.[35] As says one of the characters in Gorky's novel *The mother*: «The pleasure to live brings as well the necessity to die».[36] Many years later he would write in his notes: «To the new man there is nothing tragic in death, since he knows: such a death is the end of the activity of the slightest particle of energy. Is death tragic? Sound people don't think about it».[37] Precisely the death of individuals would make possible a new world, where death itself would be diminished: «Let's thank the wise nature: there is no personal immortality, and everybody inevitably disappears, in order to give up his place on the earth to people more strong, beautiful, brilliant than we are, people who will create a new, wonderful, bright life and, maybe, will win over the death with the miraculous strength of their united wills».[38]

The Philosophy of Empirio-Criticism

As it is well known—at least thanks to Lenin's polemic against it—in the first decade of the 20th century empiriocriticism had a peculiar success within Russian Marxism. Zurich philosopher Richard Avenarius' and Austrian physicist Ernst Mach's thought especially interested those Marxists we have considered so far. Lunacharsky in particular studied with Avenarius in Zurich, and became an enthusiastic spreader of his thought in Russia. Bogdanov, though he never declared himself *tout court* an empiriocriticist, showed great admiration for Mach. He also wrote the preface to the Russian translation of a work by Mach, a preface which was in turn translated into German and printed in the authoritative review of German social-democracy, *Die neue Zeit*.[39]

Unorthodox Russian Marxists could find in Avenarius and Mach many inspired pages on the need of overcoming the limits of individuals. Avenarius created a very original and peculiar vocabulary, which reminded the psycho-physiological language so familiar to Russian *intelligenciya*, that grew up in the 1860s-70s during the controversy between the official culture and Chernyshevsky's *Sovremennik*.[40] In his main work, *The Critique of Pure Experience*, Avenarius studied not only individuals, but collective systems as well. In his jargon, the term «C-system» meant *grosso modo* each individual's nervous system, in continuous relationship with its milieu. Nevertheless, Avenarius wrote as well about «congregal systems» as higher-order C-systems, «whose elements or parts are human individuals, or, properly speaking, C-systems of human individuals». This peculiar concept defined a «social» system in relationship with its environment: the same relationship of stimulus and answer that connects individuals and their world. The ideal condition for any C-system, according to Avenarius, is a state of

energetic equilibrium, where the ratio of the stimuli to the material exchange is such as to allow the absolute stability of the relation between system and environment. That is, however, an ideal situation which can never be obtained. In reality, equilibrium is continually deranged by "vital differences", as Avenarius calls them. This causes C-systems to look for counterbalance, thus regaining a new, different state of equilibrium. To this aim, it is necessary to set stability up on a new ground, rather than trying to restore previous, already lost, relations. In Avenarius' technical language, the sequence of states through which C-systems overcome a present unbalance is called "vital series". On such bases Avenarius concluded: «If between two or more C-systems there is a relationship of reciprocal suppression of vital differences, i.e. if they form a higher-order C-system, the latter generally finds as favorable conditions for its preservation as the suppression of vital differences is reciprocal (...). On the contrary, conditions for preservation of a higher-order C-system will be as unfavorable, as the relationship of achievement between single systems is less reciprocal and more unilateral».[41] In these views of Avenarius', though abstract and obscure, his Russian followers could feel the charm of a "collectivist" ideal that seemed to be soundly founded on strict scientific bases.[42]

One could find in Mach's works even more unequivocal passages about the overcoming of individual limits. He wrote, for instance: «We must not be deceived in imagining that the happiness of other people is not a very considerable and essential portion of our own. It is common capital, which cannot be created by the individual, and which does not perish with him. The formal and material limitation of the *ego* is necessary and sufficient only for the crudest practical objects, and cannot subsist in a broad conception. Humanity is its entirety may be likened to a polyp-plant. The material and organic bonds of individual union, indeed, have been severed; they would only have impeded freedom of

movement and evolution. But the ultimate aim, the psychical connection of the whole, has been attained in a much higher degree through the richer development thus made possible».[43] According to Mach, the overcoming of individuality clearly involved the idea of a "collective immortality". In his *Analysis of Sensations* he wrote: «We shall then no longer place so high value upon the ego, which even during the individual life greatly changes, and which, in sleep or during absorption in some idea, just in our very happiest moments, may be partially or wholly absent. We shall then be willing to renounce individual immortality, and not place more value upon the subsidiary elements than upon the principal ones».[44] Moreover, in wishing to preserve our individualities beyond death, i.e. to keep our personal memories, we would behave «like the astute Eskimo, who refused with thanks the gift of immortality without his seals and walruses».[45] According to Mach, as well as to Lunacharsky, one could already experience, here and now, a sample of immortality as a scientist, or an artist, or a politician, that is, as individuals who can melt into collectivity through their creative actions. Lunacharsky concluded: «In order to feel like Mach, Pushkin or Marx had been feeling, one must overcome the boundaries of the individual».[46]

Aleksandr Bogdanov too, though altogether adverse to Lunacharsky's and Gorky's religious enthusiasm, shared Mach's refusal of traditional views on individual immortality. In his roman *Inzhener Menni*, one of the main characters argues with the protagonist in dream: «Were eternity offered to you, and light, joy, and love together with it, under the only condition that they existed just for you and for nobody else — clear and tangible like reality, but just a dream of yours? You would reject with contempt such a false happiness, such a negligible eternity! You would say: better is the shorter and heavier, but real life... Now, your

whole real life will endure and go farther. Only that reflex and particle of this life dies, that was yourself».[47]

From this point of view, while discussing with orthodox Marxists the meaning of "truth", Bogdanov criticized Plekhanov's instance of a true proposition: «every human being must die».[48] Bogdanov wrote: «not every protist dies, absolutely not: are the cell that melted with another by joining it, or the one that divided in two by karyokinesis, dead? Yet, they do not exist any more. Who can pledge that forthcoming generations will not find a different way to "work out" life than the one we observe in the violent crises of death? I do not even consider the psychiatrist's experience, who can observe the same man's death *twice* (...) And what about the splitting of personality?»[49] Surely Bogdanov, who worked for a while in a psychiatric hospital as a medical doctor, chose these examples from his own experience.

Science

Unorthodox Russian Marxists relied mostly on natural sciences, especially biology and medicine, to support their firm belief in collective immortality. Lunacharsky thought that the biological concept of species could be used as a scheme of the relation of individuals to the collectivity. In his works one easily finds passages like the followings: «species, humankind, are reality, while the individual is only a partial expression of that essence»; «the biological species exists and struggles for life: individuality is a partial expression of the life of the species, a moment in its existence».[50]

Similar opinions were expressed in an anonymous booklet on *Proletarskaja etika*, published in 1906. Although Lunacharsky criticized it, because of a certain metaphysical character of the ethical criteria it proposed, he was

sympathetic with many of the statements he found there.[51] In particular the author, who signed his work N.N., put forth a sort of "holistic" biological collectivism: «The individual is a bourgeois fetish. (...) An individual organism is just a certain synthetic moment of the general organic process. (...) The same thing we must say of the human psychic as well».[52] N.N. has not been clearly identified, although he surely was connected with the left Bolsheviks milieu. Jutta Scherrer conjectured that he might be Leonid Krasin; I rather think that author of this work might be N. A. Rozhkov, who actually subscribed the Preface: some ideas expressed in the text are very close to those maintained by him in another theoretical work published in 1911.[53]

Nikolaj A. Rozhkov belonged to the same cultural sphere we have dwelled on so far. He was a Bolshevik historian, who tried at first to teach at the Moscow University and support revolution at the same time, thereupon was arrested and even condemned to a period of exile in Siberia.[54] When empiriocriticism was widely discussed among Russian Marxists and philosophical problems mixed up with political and tactical questions, Rozhkov sided with Bogdanov and "critical" Marxists against orthodoxy. In fact, he shared rather energetic than empiriocriticism, going so far as to state that the development of science and medicine would lead, precisely by disclosing the laws of energy, to personal immortality. By mastering energy, Rozhkov thought that humanity would be able to reanimate dead people.[55] The development of knowledge, which would give a chance of immortality, was in its turn both a task and a conquest of the collectivity. This was also understood diachronically, as the course of generations: «we organize, we give an order to our experience through scientific researches, and such organization of experience is not the deal of an individual, but a social one; and it is not a pursuit of our generation, but of the whole succession of generations of our forefathers. The needs of economic life and of technology created this

organization of experience, and this organization became means to preserve and develop life».[56]

Rozhkov was not the only one, among the unorthodox Marxists, to choose *energy* as a central concept. Bogdanov himself, who was the most authoritative figure of that circle, started precisely from that concept in his philosophical thinking: when he first tried to elaborate a "method" for studying nature and society, it was exactly an «energetic method». Overthrowing orthodox Marxist dogmatism, through this new method Bogdanov had tried to set against the «static representation» of nature, which was typical of "scientific materialism", his view of an intrinsically monistic universe of reciprocally intertwined processes, that the law of preservation of energy enabled to connect in a unique interpretation.[57] The "energetic method" was soon replaced in Bogdanov's works by a more original concept of "organization",[58] but he never gave up the idea that there is a physical relation of individuals at the biological level, a unique "fluid" going through and giving life to the whole humankind. Since the beginning of the 20th century, Bogdanov identified it with blood, and considered transfusion as a conscious practice for the enforcing of life, based on the same method applied by nature itself. In his first utopian novel, that dwelled on the perfect socialist society of the Martians, one can read: «You know that nature, in order to increase the aptitude of cells or organisms to life, continually completes the ones with the others. To this purpose a unicellular being melts with another, when its vitality decreases because of the uniformity of its environment, and only in such way it regains a full aptitude to reproduction: the "immortality" of its protoplasm. It also happens among plants and animals: there the vital elements of two different creatures are mixed up, to make the more complete embryo of a third one. Lastly, you know that blood transfusion from one being to another partially conveys vital elements, so to speak, in order to obtain, for instance, a

higher resistance to this or that disease. We go further, and practice blood transfusions between human beings. Each of them can give to the other a great number of elements apt to elongate life. It is nothing more than the transfusion of a human being's blood to another and conversely at the same time, by connecting with a suitable device their blood vessels in both senses. Taking all the necessary precautions, it is not dangerous at all; one individual's blood continues its life within the other's organism, melting with the latter's blood and bringing deep renewal to all his tissues».[59]

From this point of view, the problem of death should be completely reconsidered. To pose the question of individual survival meant by itself giving up to bourgeois individualism, every single life being an abstraction, and the only real life being that of the collective. Common mentality should change, and raise itself to a superior understanding of the living world. Bogdanov noticed that in reality «the concept of living being has changed: it is different in different times. If our ancestors, even the best-educated ones, were told some centuries ago that a human being is a colony of 50-100 trillions of imperceptibly small living beings, wouldn't that seem to them the strangest of metaphysics?»[60]

According to Bogdanov, the overcoming of individuals and, as a consequence, of death as the individuals' limitation *par excellence* would be achieved within the forthcoming collective and the proletarian organizations that foreshadowed it. Immortality was to be concretely realized through «the *change of generations* in nature, as means for the development of life, and the *cooperation of generations* in society, as means for the conquest of nature, of its organization to humankind's advantage».[61] Such a view of nature and society clearly differs from sociological organicism as such, though sharing with it a biologically holistic view of society, in which individuals and groups

play the role of single parts and organs. Nevertheless, according to Left Bolsheviks, the harmony of different organs within society is not at all “natural”, on the contrary, it is something “artificial” or “technical”. The biological image of society as an organism does not describe a “natural” society, but provides a model for the future, “artificial” one. Lunacharsky wrote: «society is, or better becomes a colossal, an infinitely rich organism»[62]. The composition of individual and collective interests takes therefore place within an artificial structure, which aims at being as harmonious and coordinated as a biological organism.

An essential element of such an artificial organism, in Bogdanov’s mind, was *consciousness*. He understood very well the risks that too literal an interpretation of the analogy between humankind and organism would expose to. Bewildered by the perspectives disclosed by his Martian interlocutor, Bogdanov’s protagonist objected: «And you would apparently like to transform humans into beings of that kind, like cells?» The answer is very clear: «No, we do not want that. Cells in organism do not know the whole, which they belong to; therefore, the type of person of today resembles them better. On the contrary, we aim exactly at the full consciousness of human beings as elements of the great working whole».[63] In Bogdanov’s view, the working class was to become a “conscious collective” already during the anti-capitalist struggle. He wrote in the same year 1911: «The struggle for socialism does not only lead to war against capitalism, and to gather forces for it. At the same time this struggle is a positive, creative work: the creation of newer and newer elements of socialism within proletariat itself, in its internal relations, in its usual living conditions: *the working out of a socialist proletarian culture*».[64] In the notebooks of the 1920’s, where Bogdanov wrote down analyses, memoirs, notes for a novel that was never written, where the character of a unique dictator would dominate.[65]

one can find the most bitter observation that, instead of transforming itself into a conscious collective, the proletariat had rather turned into a «herd», keeping its subordinate character and even asking for «absolute leaders». He also wrote: «It can happen that the ideology of creation becomes ideology of stagnation and of self-satisfaction, the ideology of social fighters turns into the ideology of an oppressive soldiery».[66]

The utopia of immortality correspondingly shifted from its collective meaning — the rescue of humankind from his boundaries — to the faith in the development of science and in its chances to extend individual lives. In a work we already mentioned, George Kline juxtaposes a poem of the 1920’s by Vladimir Majakovsky, where he spoke of the «eternally youthful» centenarian who would «*do sta rasti bez starosti*» [live to a hundred without old age], and several statements about the increasing the average life expectancy that were published in Soviet medical journals during the 60’s. «A Moscow medical journal declared in 1961: “To live a long time, even if living forever is denied us, that is a goal that all people are striving for”. A “long time” had been defined by academician V. A. Obruchev as “150 to 200 years on the average”. Another Soviet scientist, Vladimir Keler, asserted in 1966 that the average life expectancy would increase gradually until it reaches one hundred by the year 2000; then, in the twenty-first century, “if wanted, life will be continued for any period, *even centuries*”».[67] The utopia of collective (and only subordinately individual) immortality became in Soviet epoch an element of a widespread excitement for science and its achievements.

After the Revolution, Bogdanov devoted himself to create an Institute for Transfusions in Moscow,[68] where he was able to carry on medical researches in the perspective of his “physiological collectivism”. One of his colleagues, who took care of him after his last experiment, told what follows:

«During 1924-1925 he submitted himself to six two-ways blood transfusions, two of which amounted to 900 cc. During 1926-27-28, he submitted himself to other five two-ways transfusions, three of which of 900 cc each. He always recovered very well from these operations». On March 24, 1928, Bogdanov made the twelfth transfusion on himself «without consultations and on his own initiative», exchanging his blood almost completely with the blood of a young student suffering from tuberculosis and malaria. Bogdanov died few days later, always keeping a very accurate diary of his own reactions.[69] The doubt that it had in fact been a suicide remained unconfirmed. It would have been, though, a sort of coherent suicide: the student who received Bogdanov's blood survived, and therefore *life continued*, as Bogdanov himself would have said, beyond negligible individual distinctions.

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[1] G. V. Plekhanov, *Izbrannye filosofskie proizvedenija*, Moskva, izd.vo social'no-ekonomicheskoy literatury, 1956-1958, v. IV, p. 425. See S. H. Baron, *Plekhanov. The Father of Russian Marxism*, Stanford, Stanford U. P., 1963.

[2] See A. S. Izgoev, «Sostaviteli religij», in *Rech*, 288, 1907, Dec. 6/19, p. 2.

[3] A. A. Bogdanov, *Neizvestnyj Bogdanov*, v. I *Stat'i, doklady, pis'ma i vospominanija. 1901-1928 gg.*, Moskva, Airo – XX, 1995, p.171.

[4] See G. D. Gloveli, «“Socialism of Science” Versus “Socialism of Feelings”: Bogdanov and Lunacharskij», in *Studies in Soviet Thought*, 1991, 42, pp. 29-55.

[5] G. L. Kline, *Religious and Anti-Religious Thought in Russia*, Chicago - London, The University of Chicago Press, 1968, pp. 165-166.

[6] R. Williams, «Collective Immortality. The Syndacalst Origins of Proletarian Culture. 1904-1910», in *Slavic Review*, 1980, 39, 3, p. 389.

[7] V. Bazarov, «Bogoiskatel'stvo i bogostroitel'stvo», in *Vershiny*, 1909, p. 360.

[8] A. A. Bogdanov, *Inzhener Menni. Fantasticheskij roman*, in Id., *Voprosy socializma. Raboty raznykh let*, Moskva, izd.vo politicheskoy literatury, 1990, p. 251.

[9] Id., *Neizvestnyj Bogdanov*, p. 171.

[10] J. Dietzgen first emigrated in the U.S.A. in 1849, to escape political repression; two years later he came back to Europe. He crossed the Ocean again some years later, in order to improve his uncertain economic status. Finally, he went to America in 1884, when his little business went bankrupt because of competition with already industrialized enterprises.

[11] See K. Marx – F. Engels, *Werke*, Berlin, Dietz, 1961-1967, v. XXI, p. 293.

[12] See K. Marx – F. Engels, *Werke.*, v. XXXI, p. 577.

[13] See P. G. Dauge, *Iosif Dicgen*, Moskva, Gos. Social'no-ekonomicheskoe izd-vo, 1934, p. 130.

[14] See A. Pannekoek, «Socialism and Religion», in *International Socialist Review*, 1907, VII, 9, pp. 546-56; F. Adler, «What Is the Use of Theories», 1909, 11, pp. 328-39; M. Hitch, «Dietzgenism», 1907, VIII, 5, pp. 295-300. In 1910 K. Kautsky wrote to G. V. Plekhanov that Dietzgen «was taken seriously only in America» (*Filosofsko-literaturnoe nasledie G. V. Plekhanova*, Moskva, Nauka, 1974, v. II, p. 189). As for Russia, see in particular Petr Dauge's popularization of Dietzgen's thought (P. Dauge, «Moi vospominanija», in *Proletarskaja revoljucija*, 1928, 11/12, pp. 181-222; Id., «K istorii odnogo izdatel'stva», in *Saryj bol'shevik*, 1933, 1, pp. 75-90).

[15] J. Dietzgen, *Schriften in drei Bänden*, Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 1961-1965, Bd. I, p. 309.

[16] J. Dietzgen, *Schriften in drei Bänden*, Bd. I, p. 193.

[17] J. Dietzgen, *Schriften in drei Bänden*, p. 182.

[18] J. Dietzgen, *Schriften in drei Bänden*, p. 215.

[19] A. A. Bogdanov, *Krasnaja zvezda*, in Id., *Voprosy socializma*, p. 153.

[20] A. A. Bogdanov, *Krasnaja zvezda*, p. 129. I do not agree with the English translation, that refers this passage to Bebel instead of Dietzgen (see Id., *Red Star, The First Bolshevik Utopia*, tr. by Ch. Rougle, edited by L. R. Graham e R. Stites, Bloomington, Indiana U. P., 1984, p. 51).

[21] N. A. Berdjaev, *Novoe religioznoe soznanie i obshchestvennost'*, Sankt-Peterburg, M. V. Pirozhkov, 1907, p. 70.

[22] M. Gorky, «La question religieuse», in *Mercure de France*, 1907, April 15, pp. 593-5.

[23] In accordance with Nietzsche, Lunacharsky criticized the faith in the life to come as a pure expression of a weak desire of consolation (see A. V. Lunacharsky, *Etjudy kriticheskie i polemicheskie*, Moskva, Pravda, 1905, p. 296). Nevertheless, already in 1903, reviewing the Russian translation of one of Höfdding's works, he wrote that religious spirit was reconcilable with science and positivism (see Id., «Recenzija: G. Geffding, *Filosofija religii*», in *Obrazovanie*, 1903, 9, p. 100).

[24] A. V. Lunacharsky, «Budushchee religii», in *Obrazovanie*, 1907, 10, pp. 21-22.

[25] At the same time, Lunacharsky appreciated Gorky's answer as an expression of «scientific socialism in its religious meaning: the religion of life, of human being, of his triumphal moving forward» (A. V. Lunacharsky, «Ocherki sovremennoj russkoj literatury», in *Zagranichnaja gazeta*, 1908, 3, p. 5). Gorky tried to answer to Lunacharsky's criticism in a letter he never finished writing (see *Archiv A. M. Gor'kogo*, M., izd. vo Chudozhestvennaja Literatura, 1954-1976, t. XIV, pp. 20-3).

[26] See A. V. Lunacharsky, *Etjudy kriticheskie i polemicheskie*, p. 338.

[27] See A. V. Lunacharsky, «Budushchee religii», 11, p. 32.

[28] A. V. Lunacharsky, *Komedii*, Petrograd, izd. Petrogradskogo Sovieta rabochikh i krasn. deputatov, 1919, pp. 46-7.

[29] A. V. Lunacharsky, «Dvadcat' tretij sbornik *Znanija*», in *Literaturnyj raspad*, Kn. II, Sankt Peterburg, Zerno, 1909, p. 92. According to Lunacharsky, nature would have been completely transformed by human intervention, as far as to include rescue of animals. He even quoted a passage from Paul's Letter to the Romans about the new life of animals in God's kingdom, i.e. in socialist society (see A. V. Lunacharsky, «T'ma», in *Literaturnyj raspad. Kriticheskij sbornik*, Sankt Peterburg, Tovarishchestvo Izdatel'skoe Bjuro, 1908, p. 160; Romans, 8, 18-24).

[30] A. V. Lunacharsky, «Budushchee religii», p. 23; *Religija i socializm*, Sankt Peterburg, Shipovnik, 1908-1911, v. I, p. 44.

[31] M. Gorky, «Razrushenie lichnosti», in *Ocherki filosofii kollektivizma*, Sankt Peterburg, Znanie, 1909, p. 357.

[32] M. Gorky, «Razrushenie lichnosti», p. 403.

[33] M. Gorky, «Razrushenie lichnosti», p. 392.

[34] *Ibidem*.

[35] See M. Gorky, *O cinizme*, in *Literaturnyj raspad. Kriticheskij sbornik*, p. 289.

[36] M. Gorky, *Sobranie sochinenij v vosemnadcati tomakh*, Gos. Izd.-vo khudozhestvennoj literatury, M. 1960-1964, v. 4, p. 309.

[37] *Archiv A. M. Gor'kogo*, v. XII, p. 281.

[38] M. Gorky, «Razrushenie lichnosti», p. 396.

[39] See A. V. Lunacharsky, *Vospominanija i vpechatlenija*, Moskva, Sovetskaja Rossija, 1968, pp. 19-20; *Literaturnoe nasledstvo*, t. 82, Moskva, Nauka, 1970, pp. 550-1; A. A. Bogdanov, «Chego isskat' russkomu chitatelju u Ernst'a Mach'a?», in E. Mach, *Analiz oshchushchenij i otnoshenie fizicheskogo k psikhicheskomu*, tr. by G. Kotljarskij, Moskva, Skirmunt, 1907, pp. III-XII; A. Bogdanov, «Ernst Mach und die Revolution», in *Die Neue Zeit*, Jhrg. XXVI, Bd.I, pp. 695-700.

[40] See A. Vucinich, *Science in Russian Culture*, v. II, Stanford, Stanford U. P., 1970, p. 122.

[41] R. Avenarius, *Kritik der reinen Erfahrung*, Leipzig, Fues (R. Reisland), 1888-1890, §§ 337-8.

[42] See the debate between Lunacharsky and Bogdanov: R. Avenarius, *Kritika chistogo opyta v populjarnom izlozhenii A. Lunacharskogo*, Moskva, izd. S. Dorovatovskogo i A. Charushnikova, 1905, p. 59; A. A. Bogdanov, *Empiriomonizm. Stat'i po filosofii*, Moskva, izd. S. Dorovatovskogo i A. Charushnikova, 1904, p. 103 note.

[43] E. Mach, *Popular Scientific Lectures*, tr. by T. J. McCormack, La Salle (Illinois), Open Court, 1986, p. 235 note.

[44] E. Mach, *The Analysis of Sensations and the Relation of the Physical to the Psychical*, tr. by C. M. Williams, New York, Dover Publications, 1959, p. 25.

[45] E. Mach, *The Analysis of Sensations*, p. 25 note. Lunacharsky repeated this comparison (see A. V. Lunacharskij, *Religija i socializm*, p. 44 note).

[46] A. V. Lunacharskij, «T'ma», p. 155.

[47] A. A. Bogdanov, *Inzhener Menni*, p. 277.

[48] G. V. Plekhanov, *Izbrannye filosofskie proizvedenija*, Moskva, Izd. vo social'no-ekonomicheskoj literatury, 1956-1958, v. III, p. 218.

[49] A. A. Bogdanov, *Empiriomonizm. Kniga III*, Sankt Peterburg, izd. vo S. Dorovatovskogo i A. Charushnikova, 1906, pp. VIII-IX.

[50] A. V. Lunacharsky, «Budushchee religii», 10, p. 24; «Meshchanstvo i individualizm», in *Ocherki filosofii kollektivizma*, pp. 334-335.

[51] A. V. Lunacharsky, «Proletarskaja etika», in *Vestnik zhizni*, 1906, 6, columns 14-23.

[52] N. N., *O proletarskoj etike (Proletarskoe tvorcestvo s točki zrenija realisticheskoj filosofii)*, Moskva, Kolokol, 1906, pp. 36-37.

[53] Cfr. J. Scherrer, «La crise de l'intelligentsia marxiste avant 1914: A. V. Lunacharskij et le Bogostroitel'stvo», in *Revue d'Etudes Slaves*, 1978, LI, p. 213.

[54] See *Istorija Moskovskogo Universiteta*, Moskva, MGU, 1955, p. 391; *Bol'shaja sovetskaja enciklopedija*, izd. 2-oe, Gos. Nauchnoe izd. BSE, 1949-1958, v. XXXVI, pp. 617-8. Later Rozhkov sided with Mensheviks and after 1917 Revolution he became openly anti-Bolshevik.

[55] N. A. Rozhkov, *Osnovy nauchnoj filosofii*, Sankt Peterburg, M. Stasjulevich, 1911, pp. 129-132.

[56] N. A. Rozhkov, *Osnovy nauchnoj filosofii*, pp. 66-67.

[57] See A. A. Bogdanov, *Osnovnye elementy istoricheskogo vzgljada na prirodu*, Sankt Peterburg, Izdatel', 1899; *Poznanie s istoricheskoi točki zrenija*, Sankt Peterburg, izd. S. Dorovatovskogo i A. Charushnikova, 1901.

[58] See his short autobiography in *Dejатели SSSR i revoljucionnogo dvizhenija Rossii*, Moskva, Sovetskaja enciklopedija, 1989, p. 362.

[59] A. A. Bogdanov, *Krasnaja zvezda*, p. 158.

[60] A. A. Bogdanov, *Inzhener Menni*, p. 251.

[61] A. A. Bogdanov, *Neizvestnyj Bogdanov*, p. 171.

[62] A. V. Lunacharsky, «Meshchanstvo i individualizm», p. 253.

[63] A. A. Bogdanov, *Inzhener Menni*, p. 251.

[64] A. A. Bogdanov, «Socializm v nastojashchem», in *Vpered*, 1911, col. 68.

[65] See P. A. Pljutto, «Vremja i ljudi (Iz arkhivov A. A. Bogdanova)», in *Sociologicheskie issledovanija*, 1992, 11, pp. 133-142.

[66] RCCHIDNI [Rossijskij Centr Chranenija i Izuchenija Dokumentov Novejshej Istorii], fond 259, op. 1, ed. chr. 48, l. 43; l. 46 ob.

[67] G. L. Kline, *Religious and Anti-Religious Thought.*, pp. 165-167.

[68] The Institute survived its founder and, after Bogdanov's death, it was named after him. In 1937, however, when struggle against *bogdanovshchina* revived, the Institute "loose" its old plate with its full name while moving into a new place. The old name was restored only in 1990. See V. Jagodinskij, «On byl chudozhnikom mysli», in *Moskovskaja pravda*, 1989, July 23, p. 3; G. D. Gloveli, N. K. Figurovskaja, «Tragedija kollektivista», in A. A. Bogdanov, *Voprosy socializma*, pp. 26-27.

[69] A. A. Bogdanov, A. A. Bogomolec, M. P. Konchalovskij, *Na novom pole*, M., 1928, p. XIII; XX-XXV.

CHAPTER FOUR

Death And Anti-Anti-Death: A Cultural Exploration

Giorgio Baruchello

On the Desirability of Death¹

In the present work, I shall offer a succinct **cultural exploration** of a particular approach to the issue of death. Specifically, I shall highlight, summarise, and compare a number of religious and philosophical lines of thought, all of which share the notion that **death** is, can, or even ought to be **a positive given** of human existence.² In this sense does my title speak not solely of "death" but also of "anti-anti-death," for I focus my attention on the possibility of death being a *desideratum* (or even a *desiderandum*), and not, as it is commonly heard, a hopeless doom, an unavoidable tragedy, or, more rarely, a fact of no actual importance.

As a consequence, I shall exclude from my work all the positions that bring forth a variously formulated denial of death, either as a nightmare to be kept as far-off as possible, or as a condition of which nothing is known, and *ergo* about which nothing has to be done. An instance of the former kind of denial is the cult of Isis, which was extremely common throughout the Roman Empire at the dawn of the Christian age, and which centred upon the regular performance of rituals aimed at insuring good health, sexual power, and, above all, longevity. An instance of the latter kind of denial is the Epicurean "four-part cure," namely the doctrine teaching how not to worry about the gods, the ills of life, unfulfilled desire, and, above all, about death.³