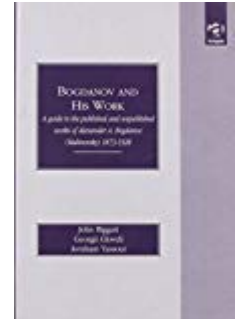


John Biggart, Peter Dudley, Francis King, eds.. *Alexander Bogdanov and the Origins of Systems Thinking in Russia*. Aldershot, England and Brookfield, Vermont: Ashgate, 1998. x + 362 pp. \$72.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-85972-678-5.

John Biggart, Georgii Glovelli, Avraham Yassour. *Bogdanov and His Work: A Guide to the Published and Unpublished Works of Alexander A. Bogdanov (Malinovsky) 1873-1928*. Aldershot, England and Brookfield, Vermont: Ashgate, 1998. vii + 495 pp. \$85.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-85972-623-5.



Reviewed by David G. Rowley

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Alexander Bogdanov (1873-1928) -- scientist, philosopher, economist, physician, novelist, poet, and Marxist revolutionary -- is mostly ignored by general histories of Europe and Russia and generally appears only as a minor character in the more specialized works of Russian philosophy and the Russian Social-Democratic movement. Yet it seems that no one who becomes familiar with his work fails to be utterly impressed by it. Most Bogdanov scholars believe him to be one of the most creative and profound European thinkers of his age.

Bogdanov was an original philosopher who attempted to reconstruct Marxism upon a modern epistemological footing (replacing Plekhanov's correspondence theory of knowledge with a sophisticated reinterpretation of Ernst Mach's Empiriocriticism).[1] His conception of the role that culture would play in building Communism bears a striking resemblance to Antonio Gramsci's no-

tion of cultural hegemony.[2] Most importantly of all, in his *Tektology: Universal Organization Science*, Bogdanov ambitiously proposed that all physical, biological, and human sciences could be unified by treating them as systems of relationships and by seeking the organizational principles that underlie all systems. His work anticipated in many important ways Norbert Weiner's *Cybernetics* and Ludwig von Bertalanffy's *General Systems Theory*. [3]

Bogdanov also had the potential of making important and humane contributions to Russia. His idea of Proletarian Culture suggested a non-violent path to Communism,[4] his political principles were far more moderate than Lenin's,[5] and his contributions to the theory of economic planning, if taken into account by Soviet planners, might have produced a viable and humane economic system.[6] Bogdanov was a practicing medical doctor throughout his career and helped to

organize the Soviet Union's pioneering Institute for Blood Transfusion. (He died in the course of an experimental transfusion in which he exchanged his blood with that of a patient.)[7] Finally, Bogdanov was a poet and a novelist --once again a pioneer -- in the genre of science fiction. [8]

Nevertheless Bogdanov's fame in the West has never extended beyond a rather small group of specialists on Russian and Soviet intellectual history. Perhaps because he was an active Marxist revolutionary, he was ignored by his contemporary European philosophers and scientists, and his impact on the development of Western philosophy and science was nil.

In the Soviet Union, conversely, Bogdanov was very well known indeed -- as a Bolshevik pariah. Ever after their famous break in 1909, when Lenin engineered Bogdanov's ouster from the leadership of the Bolshevik faction, Lenin relentlessly attacked and denigrated Bogdanov's ideas. He saw to it that Bogdanov's philosophy would always be branded as false, anti-Marxist, and anathema for Russian Communists. Bogdanov's works were published in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, but their influence is difficult to gauge. Because the accusation of "Bogdanovism" was career-ending, anyone who had been influenced by Bogdanov's thought would have attempted to conceal it.

Thus, the general tendency of works on Bogdanov has been to consider the "might-have-beens." How much more humane might the Communist regime have been had Bogdanov's political, cultural, and economic ideas been put into practice?

The ease of Western research on Soviet history has always depended on not only accessibility to Soviet archives but also the interests of Soviet archivists and bibliographers. The fact that Soviet historians took a negative view of Bogdanov was not important in itself (Western and Soviet scholars often disagreed on points of interpretation);

what was crucial was the lack of interest in the gathering of information on Bogdanov's life and unpublished works. Research on Bogdanov's career was extremely difficult.

Like many another aspect of Russian life and culture, it was only at the end of the Brezhnev era that Russian scholars began to take an interest in Bogdanov and finally to appreciate his contributions to science and philosophy and his potential contributions to Soviet society.[9] In the late 1980s two international conferences on Bogdanov (the first in Moscow and the second in London) brought Russian and Western scholars together, and the Institute of Economics of the Russian Academy of Sciences established an International Commission on the Legacy of A. A. Bogdanov.

This collaboration of Russian and Western scholars has produced two volumes that will begin a new era in Bogdanov-studies: the first a bibliography and handbook for research, the second, an appraisal of Bogdanov's contributions to science.

I cannot find words adequately to praise John Biggart, Georgii Gloveli, and Avraham Yassour's collaborative work: *Bogdanov and His Work: A Guide to the Published and Unpublished Works of Alexander A. Bogdanov (Malinovsky) 1973-1928*. This exhaustive bibliography, archive guide, and research handbook more than fulfills the most utopian dreams of any scholar interested in the life and thought of Bogdanov.

The book begins with three introductory chapters. In "The Rehabilitation of Bogdanov," John Biggart surveys not only the evolution of attitudes toward Bogdanov in the Soviet Union and Russia but also Bogdanov historiography and bibliography in the West. Georgii Gloveli outlines the chief features of Bogdanov's intellectual development in "Bogdanov as Scientist and Utopian." Finally, Nina S. Antonova and Natalya V. Drozdova describe and discuss the "Collection of the Central Party Archive."

The heart of the work is a chronological bibliography of every known piece of writing to have come from Bogdanov's hand -- not only his published writings (including books, articles, book reviews, and letters to the editor), but unpublished notes, letters, drafts, and even cartoons. For each item we are provided the Russian title (if titled), English translation of the title or description of item (if untitled), and where that item can be found. If the item was published, full citations are provided (if an article appeared in more than one journal, all references are given); the archival holding of the draft manuscript, if extant, is also given. For all unpublished manuscripts, complete archival information is provided for both Russian and foreign archives. Whenever one of Bogdanov's books was reviewed or one of his articles commented upon by his contemporaries, those reviews or comments are cited as well. For most of Bogdanov's letters or unpublished manuscripts, an English summary is given (and frequently an English summary of responses to Bogdanov's letters). Cross references are made to previously published bibliographies. The yearly bibliography is followed by "Undated Materials," "Political Cartoons," "New Editions, 1989-1998," and "Works in Translation" (in 22 languages from Armenian to Yiddish).

Three appendices are also invaluable. "Bogdanov: A Biographical Chronicle," by Peter Alexandrovich Plyutto presents the key events of Bogdanov's life, from birth to death, along with sources documenting those events (and, of course, the archival or published location of those sources). In "Aliases and Pseudonyms," Maya Davydovna Dvorkina lists all Bogdanov's aliases in chronological order and indicates the sources of the information. In Appendix 3, "Archives, Libraries, Sources," John Biggart provides a cross-reference to the former and contemporary names of Russian state archives and libraries. He lists and describes private collections of papers relating to Bogdanov, lists the relevant holdings of the Central Party Archive, discusses the nature and lo-

cations of Boris Nikolaevsky's six-volume collection of "Materialy" relative to Bogdanov's struggle with Lenin for the leadership of Bolshevism, lists the full names of the Russian and foreign libraries referred to in the bibliography, notes important relevant reference works, and concludes with a bibliography of publication of scholarly studies of Bogdanov in Western languages.

All in all, this is a monumental achievement. John Biggart, Georgii Gloveli, and Avraham Yasour will have the gratitude of all present and future Bogdanov scholars.

If *Bogdanov and His Work* provides the tools necessary for researching the life and thought of Alexander Bogdanov, its companion volume provides both explanations of why Bogdanov is worth study and suggestions of further avenues of inquiry.

Alexander Bogdanov and the Origins of Systems Thinking in Russia, is the product of a conference on "The Origins of Organization Theory in Russia and the Soviet Union" held at the University of East Anglia, UK in 1995. The Russian and Ukrainian scholars who attended the conference more than confirm the attitudes long held by Bogdanov enthusiasts in the West. Their papers, though disagreeing on certain points of interpretation, are all tributes to Bogdanov's brilliance and creativity.

As the title suggests, the principal interest of the contributors is the nature and importance of what Bogdanov considered to be his greatest achievement: *Tektology: General Organization Science*, but they also comment insightfully and productively on other aspects of his philosophic and economic thought.[10]

The section on Bogdanov's philosophical foundations both evaluates Bogdanov's epistemology (Empiriomonism) and investigates its relation to Russian and Western European thought. To mention a few examples: James White discusses Bogdanov's intellectual debt to Ludwig Noire, and both White and Vadim Sadovsky show that Bog-

danov was struggling with the relation between exterior reality and inner consciousness in very modern ways. Simona Poustilnik discusses Darwin's influence on Bogdanov's thought, and Peter Plyutto compares Bogdanov with the Russian systems-builder V. I. Vernadsky.

The section "Applications in Economics" covers an aspect of Bogdanov's career that has to my knowledge been ignored in the Anglophone academic world—his contribution to the theory of economic planning. Andrei Belykh argues that Bogdanov made a profound impact on Soviet economic thought and particularly on planning in the early 1920s. Saltan Dzarasov suggests that Bogdanov was a forerunner of the theory of convergence because he proposed that economic planning and use of market relations should coexist in a collectivist society.

"General Theory of Systems" discusses the central issues of Tektology, Bogdanov's project to uncover the unity of the physical, biological, and human sciences by analyzing the basic patterns of organization that are common among them. Bogdanov posited a fundamental oneness of reality, asserted that scientific laws and processes are isomorphic among all fields of science, and that the apparent diversity among the various branches of science is due only to narrow specialization and incommensurable terminology. The scholars in this section recognize Bogdanov's *Tektology* as a revolutionary work that anticipated both cybernetics (automatic information processing and control) and general systems theory (the idea that all systems—physical, biological, and social—operate according to the same principles). Some of the most intriguing implications of Bogdanov's thought are raised in Peter Dudley, "Tektology: Birth of a Discipline?" Yunir Urmantsev, "Tektology and GST: A Comparative Analysis," Nemil Gorelik, "Tektology and Organizational Systems," David Schapiro, "A Tektological Approach to Multi-Connectivity and Dualism in Complicated Systems."

One of the most impressive aspects of this book is the stature of the scholars who participated in the conference. Some of the most respected names in Russia appear—indeed, almost half of the contributors are members of the Russian Academy of Sciences. They come from a wide variety of disciplines, including history, sociology, economics, synergetics, systems analysis, and history of the natural sciences. Moreover, it is a mark of contemporary Russian fascination with Bogdanov that both of these works will be published in Russian translation under the auspices of the "International Bogdanov Institute" which was founded late last year in Moscow with the support of the Institute of Economics of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

However, the contemporary emphasis of the contributions somewhat limits the volume's usefulness to historians of Russia. The articles and roundtable discussions were not intended to introduce a Western audience to Bogdanov's thought. They are written by scholars very familiar with Bogdanov's works for other scholars with similar expertise. Moreover, the authors are, for the most part, writing for their Russian contemporaries rather than for western historians of Russia. That is, they are more interested in the validity and present-day usefulness of Bogdanov's ideas rather than in the light that Bogdanov's works cast on Russian society and culture from the early 1890s to the late 1920s.

Western historians will find it of interest in two ways, however.

First, *Alexander Bogdanov and the Origins of Systems Thinking in Russia* provides Western observers a glimpse of contemporary Russian intellectual culture. It is only natural that a work dealing with Bogdanov's Organization Science should approach his work from an objective, scientific viewpoint, but in their comments the authors reveal rather different preoccupations from the cultural and philosophic concerns of the West. Like Westerners they are very interested in question-

ing and deconstructing old paradigms and narratives, but unlike them they seem to take as unproblematic the nature of consciousness and its relation to exterior reality. Vadim Sadovsky, as I mentioned above, does connect Bogdanov's epistemology to problems of post-modernism, but this is an aspect of his thought that receives very little attention from the other contributors. Instead they treat Bogdanov as a realist, concerned less with the problem of how human thought constructs the world than with how the world is constructed *in itself*.

They represent Bogdanov as the last of the nineteenth-century systems-builders, and they themselves are interested not only in systems science but in systems-building (among authors they take very seriously are Nikolai Fedorov, Vladimir Vernadsky, and Lev Gumilev). In this regard it is significant that, although the contributors to this volume cite current Western scientific work in information science and evolutionary biology, they do not place Bogdanov in the context of contemporary Western philosophic and scholarly thought. Instead, they examine his relationship to Comte, Spengler, Spencer, Schumpeter, and Jung. It thus appears that the Russophone academic community is looking for systematic explanations (modeled on the natural sciences) of historical development.

I do not intend this comment as Anglo-American-centric criticism of these Russian and Ukrainian scholars for not sharing Western concerns. I merely point out that they have a different intellectual agenda. Indeed, the West could benefit from their refreshing corrective to the Western belief in a disjuncture between language and reality. The Western postmodern focus on reality as a discursive construction is a project that many in the West find tedious, pointless, and perhaps even socially harmful. Much may be gained from sharing Bogdanov's confidence that the world actually exists, that its basic principles can be discovered,

and that this knowledge can be used to make it a better place.

Second, although *Alexander Bogdanov and the Origins of Systems Thinking in Russia* is likely to be of immediate use mainly to Western evolutionary biologists, information scientists, and systems theorists, it nevertheless may suggest to historians some interesting avenues of research. For example, the frequent references to Russian scholars and thinkers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries will be welcome starting points for those who would like to consider Bogdanov less as a Marxist revolutionary and more as a Russian philosopher and sociologist of knowledge who also happened to be a Marxist.

Perhaps the feature to which scholars should pay particular heed is the short bibliography "Publications in Western Languages" which appears in both volumes. Although not completely up-to-date (it lists only one article published since 1992) it appears otherwise to be fairly exhaustive. Yet it includes only 81 books and articles in English, French, German, and Italian. For a thinker, scientist, and activist of Bogdanov's originality and depth, this is the merest beginning. There is plenty of fertile ground for future research. Students of Russian science, culture, and intellectual life who are seeking topics for master's or doctor's theses will be well served by both these works-but particularly by *Bogdanov and His Work*.

Thanks to the work of Biggart, Glovelli, and Yassour, we can expect a revolution in the field of Bogdanov-studies. Scholars are prepared as never before seriously to seek answers to the question: How Important Was Alexander Bogdanov?

Notes

[1]. For discussion of his philosophy of knowledge, see Eileen Kelly, "Empiriocriticism: A Bolshevik Philosophy?" *Cahiers du Monde Russe et Soviétique*, 22, no. 1 (Jan-Mar, 1981) and David G. Rowley, *Millenarian Bolshevism, 1900-1920* (New York: Garland, 1987).

[2]. Zenovia Sochor, "Was Bogdanov Russia's Answer to Gramsci?" *Studies in Soviet Thought*, 22, no. 1 (Feb 1981).

[3]. For a survey of Bogdanov's thought in this regard see S. V. Utechin, "Philosophy and Society: Alexander Bogdanov," in Leopold Labedz, ed., *Revisionism: Essays on the History of Marxist Ideas* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1962). There are now two English versions of *Tektology*. George Gorelik translated one of Bogdanov's abridgments of *Tektology* under the title *Essays in Tektology. The General Science of Organization* (Seaside, California: Intersystems Publications Limited, 1984). A full English translation of the 1989 Russian edition has also appeared: *Bogdanov's Tektology*, Book 1, forward by Vadim N. Sadovsky and Vladimir V. Kelle. Edited, with an introduction by Peter Dudley (Hull, UK: Center for Systems Studies, 1996).

However, Bogdanov's insights into systems science had no real impact upon the West. It seems certain that Norbert Weiner was unfamiliar with his work, and Nikita Moiseev (in his contribution to *Alexander Bogdanov and the Origins of Systems Thinking in Russia*) is the only scholar who asserts that Ludwig von Bertalanffy "must have known of Bogdanov's work." The consensus holds that Bertalanffy did not.

[4]. See David G. Rowley, "Lenin and Bogdanov: Epistemology and Revolution," *Studies in East European Thought*, 48, no. 1 (March 1996).

[5]. See Zenovia Sochor, *Revolution and Culture: The Bogdanov-Lenin Controversy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988).

[6]. See the articles by Andrei Belykh and Saltan Dzarasov (listed below) in the volume under review.

[7]. See Douglas W. Huestis, "The Life and Death of Alexander Bogdanov, Physician," *Journal of Medical Biography*, 4, no. 3 (1996).

[8]. Loren R. Graham and Richard Stites, eds., *Alexander Bogdanov: Red Star: The First Bolshe-*

vik Utopia (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

[9]. In Chapter 1 of *Bogdanov and His Work*, "The Rehabilitation of Bogdanov," John Biggart recounts this process.

[10]. Here is the full table of contents: *Part One: Introduction* John Biggart, "Introduction," Leonid Abalkin, "Bogdanov's Tektology: Towards a New Paradigm."

Part Two: Philosophical Foundations Galina Alekseeva, "Bogdanov and the Development of Science in the Twentieth Century," James White, "Sources and Precursors of Bogdanov's Tektology," Vadim Sadovsky, "From Empiriomonism to Tektology," Natalya Kusminykh, "Monist Philosophy as the Basis of Tektology," Simona Poustilnik "Biological Ideas in Tektology," Peter Plyutto "Pioneers in systems Thinking: Bogdanov and Vernadsky," and Georgii Gloveli "Psychological Applications of Tektology."

Part Three: Applications to Economics Nadezhda Figurovskaya, "The Economic Ideas of Bogdanov," Andrei Belykh, "Bogdanov's Tektology and Economic Theory," Vladimir Maevsky, "Bogdanov and the Theory of Economic Evolution," Saltan Dzarasov, "Plan and Market in Bogdanov's Tektology," and Victor Parmenov "Tektology and Economic Reconstruction."

Part Four: General Theory of Systems Nikita Moiseev, "Tektology in contemporary perspective," Peter Dudley, "Tektology: Birth of a Discipline?" Yunir Urmantsev, "Tektology and GST: A Comparative Analysis," Nemil Gorelik, "Tektology and organizational systems," David Schapiro, "A Tektological Approach to Multi-Connectivity and Dualism in Complicated Systems." Mikhail Kuzmin, "Social Genetics and Organizational Science."

Part 5: Appendices John Biggart "Tektology: Editions and Translations," John Biggart and Francis King, "Profiles of Russian scientists and Philosophers."

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