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II. RUSSIAN CULTURE IN TANSITION: THE TIMELESS AND THE TRANSIENT

Red Golem: Criticism of Industrial Civilization in Soviet Culture and Misticism During the Civil War

E. I. Rabinovich

Ural Institute of Humanities, Ural Federal University, Yekaterinburg, Russia

Abstract

This article describes an early Soviet version of the critique of the industrial culture, based on the works by Alexander Bogdanov and George Gurdjieff. Bogdanov's analysis of Taylorism is explored within the context of the development of the concept of 'proletarian culture'. Terminological apparatus of George Gurdjieff's theory is described as a form of radical criticism of the early XXth-century culture. We also highlight the place of the 'man-machine' metaphor within the intellectual life of the post-revolutionary Soviet Russia.

Keywords: Taylorism, Soviet culture, 1919, A. Bogdanov, proletarian culture, G. Gurdjieff

Corresponding Author:
E. I. Rabinovich

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1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to address some aspects of the early Soviet culture, which was based on the industrial values. We focus on the two famous theories: Alexander Bogdanov's 'Taylorism' and George Gurdjieff 'man–machine' theory.

The cult of the machine and total automation and an inevitable comparison between human beings and machine (both in its positive and negative interpretations) was widespread beyond the early Soviet culture, which is here interpreted as a local variation of the global process. The first decade of the XXth century was marked by the general popularity of Taylorism in the West. Here we are mostly concerned with the version of Taylorism as it was interpreted by Alexander Bogdanov, the main ideological force behind Proletkult art movement.

2. Alexander Bogdanov's 'Taylorism'

Bogdanov describes machine production as an apex of world civilization, achieved, however, by 'turning a worker into a machine' operating a machine [1, p. 5]. Taylor's system, with its goal of increased productivity through the reduction of unnecessary movements, Bogdanov described like this: "First, through precise research, we have to find out how to distribute the worker's seconds and movements so that his work would be as productive as possible. Second, we have to compel and to teach the worker to work exactly like this, and not in any other way" [1, p. 6]. Acknowledging the value of Taylorism, Bogdanov at the same time criticized this system, understandably condemning it as a tool of capitalist exploitation that 'dumbs down' the worker, who in turn 'becomes an actual machine' ('a machine should be governed by an actual human, not by a Taylor's living machine') [1, p. 12].

This 1919 text already demonstrates an ambivalent attitude to the 'man – machine' opposition. On the one hand, describing human as a machine assumes total awareness and total rationalization of all actions, elimination of every irrational force. The latter is understood not so much as an unconscious mind, but rather as a certain 'mechanistic' behavior, a habit, which in early Soviet discourse becomes a marker of the past and a handicap that hinders transformation of the present into a glorious future. Essentially, non-awareness is associated with the body and with the bodily habits in everyday life and work. Therefore, it can be interpreted as a 'throwback' to the past inscribed in the memory of the flesh, muscles and nervous system. Equating human being to a machine, as well as demanding a completely aware and rational behavior, together with a new type of muscle movements, makes it possible to 'format' body memory, thereby wakening up human consciousness that had been slumbering before the victorious thunder of the October revolution. Thus understood, a machine becomes a tutor, an object of worship and mimesis.

However, we also find some negative connotations: the cult of the machine may lead to a man losing his *sapiens* features and becoming a mechanism producing material goods. Bogdanov never even tries to argue that this last scenario is bad, clearly believing it to be self-evident. However, during the next decades Soviet ideologues *would* pose this question, and they would not perceive the negative answer as self-evident (at least, not everyone would).

Such fears, of course, were not unique to the early Soviet culture. In his 1920 play 'R.U.R.', Karel Capek introduces an invented word 'robot' to describe artificially produced beings of flesh, blood and muscles, who surpass humans both physically and

intellectually. However, in their early version they are devoid of a 'soul' (emotions and free will). Capek's robots are ideal Taylorist workers: visually indistinguishable from the human beings, maximally productive, devoid of emotional capacity, they are positioned to provide prosperity both for a capitalist enterprise, and for humanity in general. It appears that Capek was inspired to create his 'robots' by a legend about Golem: a homunculus made of clay, created and magically animated by XVIth-century Prague rabbi Judah Levai (Loew) ben Bezalel. Characteristically, this myth was revived in 1915 with the success of the Gustav Meyrink's novel *Der Golem*, and became famous thanks to its movie adaptation. Incidentally, the earliest known description of how to create a Golem through letter magic, can be found in the works of Eleazar of Worms, a XII-XIII-century Kabbalist [3, p. 141]. However, it was the Prague version of this legend that popularized the idea of Golem.

We see that in its foundations an early Soviet cult of machines, factories and automation was typical for the early XXth-century Western world in general – including positive and negative views on the increasing melding between humans and machines. Despite this common ideological ground, Soviet post-revolutionary cult of the machines developed the increasingly original traits, since the victorious proletarian class was inevitably associated with the machines and industrial production, and industrialization, as a process that increases the amount of machines and proletarians, was seen as a road to a glorious future. Everywhere we encounter the cult of the machine: in design, poetry, painting and cinema. Collectivist age conceives the world not in terms of individuals, but in terms of nations and classes, inevitably including individual machines into this peculiar communalism (*sobornost'*). Gradually, this creates the new symbolical dominants of this era: a workshop, a factory, an industrial compound – regiments of the machines, nations of the machines, classes of the machines. Avant-garde architectural projects create a concept of a residential compound (*zhilkombinat*): a factory producing modest family joys, recreations and sleep. New Soviet parks become 'cultural outdoors compounds'; they are mass-producing the new cultural needs and the means to satisfy them. Even kitchen, which during the NEP era was still considered a pretty traditional sphere of domesticity, becomes a communal *factory kitchen*. Before the first five-year plans, this cult of the machine, although propagated through the artistic expressions, had hardly any influence on the practices of daily life (with the exception of such regions as the mining industrial Urals). Rather, they were a type of symbolic code, where humans were compared to machines, and masses to factories, which, joining together in an ecstasy of alchemical marriage of industrialization, beget a new form of material existence.

3. 'Man–machine' Theory in Early Soviet Period

Early Soviet period produced a number of unique interpretations of the 'man–machine' relationships. Often these interpretations were developed in relatively marginal areas. Let us turn to the arguably most interesting version: George Gurjieff's 'man–machine' theory.

Russian mystic George Gurjieff had first introduced his system to a chosen circle of Moscow and Saint-Petersburg public in 1914. An early version of Gurdjieff's teachings (before he emigrated in 1920), and the methods used in his groups, are known primarily through their descriptions by a writer and journalist P.Ouspensky. Here we are concerned with this early version, which Gurdjieff taught to his disciples during the World War I and the Russian Civil War (from 1915 to 1918).

Despite his eclectic bend, Gurjieff followed the Sufi approach – however, being an early XXth-century figure, he described the issues of spiritual life following the logic (and even literally in terms of) Taylorism. A human in his system is a 'three-storied factory' [2, p. 468] (in has intellectual, emotional and locomotive workshops, or centers) with a very low efficiency. This low efficiency is caused, on the one hand, by the lack of understanding how this 'factory' works, and on the other – by the mechanical character of human bodies. Muscle memory, idleness, bodily habits and the lack of control by the intellectual 'workshop' over the bodily one, all create such a huge loss of energy that the spiritual development becomes impossible. Gurdjieff lists some examples of the useless waste of energy: 'useless… emotions, waiting for possible… troubles, <...> incessant chatter' [2, p. 241]. As a result, 'this factory produces nothing, and all its machines, all its equipment don't serve any goal, but only support its existence' [2, p. 242]. Since the work of such factory, which is only efficient enough to support the status quo, but does not bring any profits, is meaningless, it requires what can be termed 'an external management' to improve productivity and to convert it in a 'spiritual profit'. Only complete control and awareness neutralize meaningless energy expenditure in chaotic bodily activity. It would redirect the newly-freed resources for human self-knowledge and self-development.

Non-rational organization of a 'human fabric' makes it impossible to save enough energy to produce an 'astral' and a 'mental' body, since such a production, based on a human body, requires transformation of 'more crude (in a cosmic sense) materials into the higher ones' [2, p. 242]. This highly peculiar industrialized metaphysics must have seemed to Gurdjieff the most suitable way to explain esoteric doctrines for European people during the Great War. According to Gurdjieff, 'man–machines' don't get an

afterlife. However, someone who has freed him- or herself from the automatism, may hope to achieve an afterlife in their 'astral body' [2, p. 43]. Gurdjieff's originality lies in his belief that 'man is not born with an astral body' [2, p. 44], but rather may acquire such body by overcoming a 'man–machine' automatism.

'Man–machine' metaphor is a starting point for the Gurdjieff's early theory. His diagnosis of the condition of modern humans and humanity at large is stark and uncompromising: "all these people you see around… – they are all machines and nothing else" [2, pp. 24–25]. Gurdjieff described the mechanized slaughter of the World War I and the Russian Civil War as an unnatural phenomenon: "an unconscious activity of millions of the machines has necessarily ended in destruction" [2, p. 71]. Man–machine has no free will and does not act consciously: everything 'happens' to him as a result of external forces. Those thoughts, desires, wants and emotions which inspire people to die and to kill, are not really theirs: they are just a consequence of external influences. Man–machines are capable neither of creative endeavors nor of conscious organization of their life. As a result, Gurdjieff went as far as to exclude psychology from his list of sciences, proclaiming that "to study machines we need mechanics, not psychology" [2, p. 26].

Gurdjieff is not interested in the fate of the humanity – he believes it a waste of effort to try and solve the problems of planetary population of the machines deeming themselves human. At the same time, he believes that, while humanity as a whole is hopeless, some individuals may overcome their machine state through self-awareness ('a machine that knows itself is no longer a machine' [2, p. 26]).

Gurjieff's tools for raising a machine's self-awareness and for the subsequent spiritual work are based on bodily practices, since 'automatism of thoughts and feelings… is based on the automatism of movements, and it is impossible to change one without the other' [2, p. 471]. During the summer of 1918, Gurdjieff began to teach his disciples how to use bodily practices. These were based on conscious awareness and self-monitoring, with the goal of overcoming mechanistic bodily movements, unnecessary movements and muscle strain reducing the efficiency of the human 'factory'. To acquire control over their bodies, his disciples learned gymnastic exercises: for example, rhythmic movements accompanied by music and dervish dances [2, pp. 498–499].

Talking to his disciples, Gurdjieff constantly used the concept of 'progress': it is all but impossible for a XXth-century human to diligently pursue any kind of spiritual practice, if this practice is not described in terms of spiritual evolution. Gurdjieff offers his own original theory, according to which nature resists human evolution because

it contradicts nature's goals. Mechanical evolution is impossible, since every development requires supreme efforts to overcome oneself. This means that mass evolution is impossible, since 'man–machines' are incapable of a conscious effort. Individual evolution is possible in Gurdjieff's theory through a conscious self-development carried out in isolation from the relevant trends of modernity [2, p. 65, 71, 77–80].

4. Preliminary Conclusions

Despite obvious differences between Gurdjieff's theory and Bogdanov's ambivalent treatment of Taylorism, we can also see some essential similarities. The search for a theoretical rationale of an ideological phantom named 'proletarian culture', together with the attempts to construct these culture's content, inevitably lead to the prevalence of these factory and production images: collectivism, physicality (as a result of physical labor – a basic feature of the proletarian worker), and a cult of the machine (mechanisms, production tools). Mass actions, where the participants' bodies move with the exactness of the interconnected machines in a factory workshop, became an ideal implementation of these goals. As such, if we strip Gurdjieff's theory of some of its mystical expressions, we would see a system that, for example, could be easily used for working with the body in theater studios of early Proletkult years – or applied as an ideological basis by clubs in their attempts to develop rhythmic gymnastics. Gurdjieff's 'man–machine' is a carrier of the 'proletarian culture'. Gurdjieff's theory ideally suited its time, functioning as a metaphysics of the proletarian revolution.

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