



On Lenin's *Materialism and empiriocriticism*

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Published online: 28 June 2018
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Abstract

In May 1909, Lenin published *Materialism and empiriocriticism*, a polemical assault on forms of positivistic empiricism popular among members of the Bolshevik intelligentsia, especially his political rival Alexander Bogdanov. After expounding the core claims on both sides of the debate, this essay considers the relation of the philosophical issues at stake to the political stances of their proponents. I maintain that Lenin's use of philosophical argument was not purely opportunistic, and I contest the view that his defence of realism was designed as a philosophical rationale for revolutionary vanguardism, arguing instead that Lenin primarily saw himself as defending the world-view of ordinary rank-and-file Marxists against varieties of philosophical obscurantism. Although of marginal influence at the time of its first publication, *Materialism and empiriocriticism* was later celebrated as a model of philosophical excellence, as the cult of Lenin was fashioned by Stalin. As a result of the text's subsequent prominence, Lenin's manner of philosophizing, with its vitriol and abuse, had a disastrous influence on the subsequent course of Soviet philosophical culture.

Keywords Bogdanov · Experience · Idealism · Knowledge · Lenin · Politics · Positivism · Realism · Science · Truth

Introduction

...behind the epistemological scholasticism of empiriocriticism one cannot fail to see the struggle of parties in philosophy, a struggle that ultimately reflects the tendencies and the ideology of the hostile classes of contemporary society. The latest philosophy is just as partisan as the philosophy of two thousand years ago. The warring parties are essentially—though this may be obscured by new nicknames invented by pedants and charlatans—materialism and ideal-

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ism. The latter is only a subtle, refined form of fideism that stands at the ready, with huge organizations at its disposal, and continues steadily to influence the masses, turning to its advantage the slightest vacillation in philosophical thought. The objective, class role of empiriocriticism can be entirely reduced to serving fideism in its battle against materialism in general and historical materialism in particular. (Lenin 1967–1975, vol. 18, 380 (my translation), 1977, vol. 14, 358)

So concludes Lenin's *Materialism and empiriocriticism*, possibly the rudest work of philosophy ever published. The book was written between February and October 1908, in Geneva and London, and published in Moscow in May 1909, by L. Krumbügel's Zveno Publishing House in an edition of 2000 copies.¹ It appeared under the pseudonym V. Il'in. The work is a defence of dialectical materialism—or Lenin's version thereof—against a form of positivism inspired by the empiriocriticism of the German philosopher Richard Avenarius and the philosophical writings of the Austrian physicist Ernst Mach. This form of positivism had become popular among the Bolshevik intelligentsia. Its advocates included V. A. Bazarov, A. A. Bogdanov, A. V. Lunacharsky, P. S. Yushkevich and N. V. Valentinov, many of whom had contributed essays to the 1908 volume, *Ocherki po filosofii Marksizma (Studies in the philosophy of Marxism)* (Bazarov et al. 1908).

Lenin's principal target was the prodigiously talented Bogdanov, whose writings included *Kratkii kurs ekonomicheskoi nauki (A short course on economic science)* (1897), which Lenin admired, a three-volume exposition of his philosophy entitled *Empiriomonism* (1904–1906), and a science fiction novel, *Krasnaia zvezda (Red Star)* (1908, 1972). Bogdanov was more than an intellectual heavyweight. He had been the leader of the Bolsheviks within Russia between 1905 and 1907, and thereafter Lenin's rival for the leadership of the Bolsheviks in exile. In 1904, Lenin and Bogdanov had made a pact to set aside their philosophical differences, but in 1908 Lenin chose to break with Bogdanov and *Materialism and empiriocriticism* was a means to this end. Lenin was victorious. After days of acrimonious squabbling at a meeting in Paris in late June 1909, Bogdanov was kicked out of the Bolshevik Centre. Thereafter, Bogdanov operated outside the Bolshevik leadership. With Lunacharsky and Gorky, he formed the *Vpered* group, which focused on Party schools and cultural education (he resigned in 1911); wrote a second science-fiction novel, *Inzhener Menni (Engineer Menni)* (1912; included in Bogdanov 1972); founded the science of Tektology, a precursor of systems theory and cybernetics (Bogdanov 1913, 1917, 1922); was a leader of the *Proletkult* movement after the revolution; and did pioneering scientific research on blood transfusions (Kremenstov 2011), which eventually cost him his life, as he died experimenting on himself.²

¹ In Lenin's *Collected works*, a note to the "Letter to his Mother" of December 10th, 1908, observes that the contract was for 3000 copies (Lenin 1967–1975, vol. 55, 504n261, 1977, vol. 37, 662–663n265), but Robert Williams reports that the print-run was actually 2000. Interestingly, Krumbügel had the book printed at the presses of A. S. Suvorin's notoriously reactionary publishing house, where it would be unlikely to attract the attention of the censor (see Williams 1986, 138).

² The extent of Bogdanov's creativity is nicely conveyed in Gloveli (1998).

It is hard to say how much the publication of *Materialism and empiriocriticism* contributed to Bogdanov's political downfall. No doubt, Lenin's efforts to paint Bogdanov as a philosophically suspect revisionist played some part, but the main issues at the Paris meeting were political. Post 1905, Lenin had no patience with the hope, still entertained by Bogdanov and the left Bolsheviks, of widespread armed insurrection among the workers, preferring instead to pursue the social democratic agenda by legal means while rebuilding local party organizations (see Rowley 2016, x–xii). Bogdanov was ousted over such strategic issues, rather than matters philosophical. Moreover, *Materialism and empiriocriticism* seems to have attracted relatively little attention upon its publication, apart from a number of scathing reviews from Russian Marxists (see Valentinov 1968, 245; Pavlov 2017, 62).

After the revolution, the book was published in a second edition—in response to the appearance in 1920 of a second edition of Bogdanov's *Philosophy of living experience* (1920, 2016). German and English translations followed in 1927. It became Volume 18 in Lenin's *Collected works* (Volume 14 in the English edition). It was only under Stalin, as the cult of Lenin gained momentum, that the book was heralded as a central text of Marxism-Leninism, the epitome of the Leninist stage in Marxist philosophy (see Bakhurst 1991, ch. 4). Thereafter, everyone educated in the Soviet Union learnt of this book and its philosophical importance. Bogdanov, in contrast, was largely written out of the history of Soviet thought, except as a foil to Lenin. When I did my research on Soviet philosophical culture in Moscow in the early 1980s, few of the philosophers I met had read much Bogdanov (Vadim Sadovsky was a notable exception). It was not until later that decade that his work began to receive renewed attention, and then largely among Western intellectual historians (e.g. Williams 1986; Rowley 1987; Sochor 1988; Russian publications include Popov et al. 1994).³

In what follows, I shall consider how we should read *Materialism and empiriocriticism* as a work of philosophy. I will then discuss how the text should be approached as a political intervention. Finally, I will explore its influence on the subsequent course of Soviet philosophy.

***Materialism and empiriocriticism* as a work of philosophy**

As a work of philosophy, *Materialism and empiriocriticism* argues for a form of realism against empiriocriticism, though by the latter Lenin means not just Avenarius's philosophy, but any form of anti-realism associated with positivism, pragmatism,

³ Bogdanov's rehabilitation in both Soviet Russia and the West is carefully discussed in Biggart (1998). More recent developments include the publication of Oitinnen (2009) and Kremenstov (2011), and the inauguration of the "Bogdanov Library", edited by David Rowley and Evgeni Pavlov, in Brill's Historical Materialism book series, which will offer English translations of a number of Bogdanov's seminal works. The first volume, *The philosophy of living experience*, appeared in 2016. Others are in preparation. Bogdanov's works began to be republished in Russia in 1989, with the re-appearance of *Tektologija*, followed by a collection entitled *Voprosy sotsializma* [*Questions of socialism*] (1990), presenting a wide sampling of writings from various periods.

and other forms of radical empiricism. For brevity's sake, I will follow his usage. Lenin targets any view that renders problematic the idea that we have knowledge of a mind-independent world, and that embraces a relativistic conception of truth and (what us now called) a constructivist conception of reality.

Lenin maintains that the external world exists independently of our minds and that this world is material in nature (indeed, for Lenin, "material" just means "being an objective reality", "existing beyond the mind" (Lenin 1967–1975, 275, 1977, 260–261)). Our minds are capable of forming representations of the world that portray the world as it is. Contra Kant, "things in themselves" are knowable. Thus, our beliefs about the world can be objectively true; a belief is true when it accurately reflects the facts. Absolute truth is possible, but our theories are often only relatively true. Scientific theories can therefore constitute knowledge of the world. Events in the material world are explained by appeal to causal law, and causal relations are genuine features of reality. The criterion of truth is practice; that is, practice is the means by which we test our theories, the ultimate tribunal at which we determine their correspondence to reality.

The position Lenin is attacking holds that the limits of human knowledge, indeed the limits of what can be thought and said, are defined ultimately by the content of experience. Our conception of the world, of what we call "reality", emerges as we impose order upon experience. Our concepts and scientific theories are devices for structuring and predicting experience. Objects of the material world do not precede experience but are constructions out of experience. We can thus make no sense of things as they are "in themselves", out of all relation to experience. What is "real" is that which we take to be the case, and what we take to be the case—what we hold to be "true"—is relative to our modes of organizing experience. Causal relations, and causal laws, are patterns we read into experience, and on the basis of which we can predict future events. "Mental" and "physical" are terms we use to designate different phenomena in the order of experience, but experience is neither mental nor physical (this position was sometimes called "neutral monism"). The self is not an object of experience and thus, as Mach put it, "the ego must be given up" (quoted in Williams 1986, 45).

Bogdanov's position represents a distinctive variation on this broadly "Machian" position [Bogdanov had translated Mach's *Analysis of sensations* (1st ed. 1897) in 1907 (Makh 1907)]. Bogdanov emphasizes the significance of the social. The basis of objectivity is *collective* experience—the deliverances of more than one viewpoint. Indeed, reality, the physical world, is just "socially agreed-upon, socially harmonized, in a word, *socially-organized* experience" (Bogdanov 1904–1906, vol. 1, 36). Bogdanov recognizes that the conception of the world that emerges from the social organization of experience is an ideological formation and hence a super-structural phenomenon. Following Marx, Bogdanov argues that its source therefore resides in the forces and relations of production, which Bogdanov identifies principally with technology. The concept of class is also given a technocratic spin: Bogdanov distinguishes the "organizer class" from the "executor class". Bogdanov is a thorough-going relativist. He writes, "For me, Marxism includes the denial of the unconditional objectivity of any truth whatsoever, the denial of every eternal truth" (Bogdanov 1904–1906, vol. 1, 36; cf. Bogdanov 2016, 11–12). Truth can be

objective, “but only within the limits of a given epoch” (Bogdanov 1904–1906, vol. 3, iv), that is, relative to an historically-established collective mode of organizing experience. The concepts of “matter” and “spirit” are tools for the organization of experience: “matter and spirit correlate to social activity, the first as its necessary object,⁴ the second as its organising form” (Bogdanov 2016, 64). Although materialism is “closer to the worldview of labour” than idealism, both philosophical stances are ultimately forms of fetishism that represent matter and spirit as “something non-relative or absolute”, existing “for themselves and by themselves” (2016, 64). Finally, Bogdanov, like Mach, rejects the individual self. Just as science has no individual epistemic subject, so the overall organization of experience is fundamentally collective and transcends the individual (Williams 1986, 132). “The individual is only a bourgeois fetish”, Bogdanov reputedly wrote.⁵

Lenin argues that this position is incompatible with Marxism. Marxism, as Engels makes clear, is committed to dialectical materialism, but empiriocriticism is a form of idealism, not materialism, and as such is an affront to common sense and an invitation to fideism and religious thinking. By denying us objective knowledge of an external, mind-independent world, empiriocriticism undermines science and thereby devalues Marxism’s claim to a scientific understanding of history and society, making Marxism’s “truth” merely provisional, historically contingent, and essentially open to revision.

Lenin’s attitude is nicely captured in a letter he wrote to Gorky in February 1908:

No, no, this is not Marxism! Our empirio-critics, empirio-monists, and empirio-symbolists are floundering in a bog. To try to persuade the reader that “belief” in the reality of the external world is “mysticism” (Bazarov); to confuse in the most disgraceful manner materialism with Kantianism (Bazarov and Bogdanov); to preach a variety of agnosticism (empirio-criticism) and idealism (empirio-monism); to teach the workers “religious atheism” and “worship” of the higher human potentialities (Lunacharsky); to declare Engels’s teaching on dialectics to be mysticism (Berman); to draw from the stinking well of some French “positivists” or other, of agnostics or metaphysicians, the devil take them, with their “symbolic theory of cognition” (Yushkevich)! No, really, it’s too much. To be sure, we ordinary Marxists are not well up in philosophy, but why insult us by serving this stuff up to us as the philosophy of Marxism! (Lenin 1967–1975, vol. 47, 142–143, 1977, vol. 13, 448–454)

⁴ Bogdanov (2016, 43) defines matter as the realm of that which resists human labour (the realm of “nature”).

⁵ “Reputedly” because though this is often quoted (e.g. Rosenthal 2002, 73), I am so far unable to locate the source. Williams (1986, 79, 204n45) cites an anonymous pamphlet on proletarian ethics, the style of which suggests it was written by Bogdanov.

Materialism and empiriocriticism as a political intervention

One thing that is certain is that Lenin did not write *Materialism and empiriocriticism* as a work of pure philosophy. It was intended as an attack on his political rivals in the Bolshevik faction. This raises the question of whether we should see the work primarily, or perhaps wholly, as a political intervention, and its philosophical content as entirely subordinate to that end. Commentators are divided. While some maintain that Lenin “apparently attached great importance to philosophical questions” (White 2015, 123), others argue that *Materialism and empiriocriticism* should not be read as a work of philosophy at all (see Rowley 1996, 17n31). Indeed, some go so far as to suggest that the participants on both sides of this debate used philosophical language in an “Aesopian” manner, ventriloquizing their political views through a philosophical idiom to deceive the censor and other political rivals (see Williams 1986, ch. 1).

I think some scholars find it difficult to take the Bolsheviks’ apparent interest in philosophy at face value, because they can’t see how anyone can take seriously the idea that philosophical issues about knowledge and reality could have genuine political significance. But there is surely no doubt that many Bolsheviks were passionate about the significance of philosophy (Pavlov 2017, 51). In Bogdanov’s *Philosophy of living experience*, he presents the doing of philosophy as unavoidable. “All people”, he tells us, “whether they want to or not, *have* their own philosophy”, by which he means a worldview that organizes experience into a coherent system for understanding the world. Philosophy “is a necessary tool in guiding both practice and cognition” (Bogdanov 2016, 13). Since “the philosophy of a class is the highest form of its collective consciousness”, Bolsheviks cannot but address the question of the philosophy of the future. He writes:

This is how we understand philosophy. It is given its soul not by empty lifeless eternity but by living, eventful time. It is the daughter of labour and struggle, and it grows and changes with them. When a powerful class, to which history has entrusted new, grandiose tasks, steps into the arena of history, then a new philosophy also inevitably emerges. That class, the bearer of the future, must forge its own philosophy—a philosophy that becomes an invaluable tool for its general work, for its victory and conquest. (Bogdanov 2016, 10)

This suggests that Marxist philosophy cannot just be taken “off the peg” but must evolve with historical circumstance. Valentinov, discussing his own appetite for philosophy, affirms that philosophy is critical if revolutionary politics is to be informed by a sound worldview and explains his enthusiasm for empiriocriticism as the means to rejuvenate Marxism:

The injection of empiriocriticism into Marxism seemed to me a task of paramount importance. Empiriocriticism would give Marxism the epistemological foundation it lacked and would permit the “elimination” (this word was always on my tongue!) of its weak aspects, while even further consolidating its strong ones. It seemed to me that a purge of concepts had to be carried out in Marxism, similar to the one carried out by Mach in physics and chemistry. All the

fundamental concepts of Marxism, such as “social being”, “social consciousness”, “productive forces”, “production relations”, “class”, “ideology”, and others, had to be submitted to epistemological criticism, and then established as firmly, as exactly, and as clearly as possible. (Valentinov 1968, 22)

That is the way, Valentinov believed, to forge a philosophy fit for the revolutionary proletariat.⁶

What, though, of Lenin's attitude to philosophy? While his opponents' enthusiasm for philosophy may have been genuine, some would say Lenin's interest was entirely opportunistic. On this view, Lenin needed a means to oust his political rivals and he simply used the issue of Marxist orthodoxy to this end, drawing on the views of Engels and Plekhanov in an effort to portray his enemies as muddle-headed revisionists and thereby strip them of power and influence in the faction. His interest in philosophy as such was no less opportunistic than his original pact with Bogdanov. As Rowley (1987, 360) puts it, “the schism of 1909 had everything to do with political tactics and nothing to do with ideology”.

This is a strange reading. Writing a 400-page book of philosophy over nine months is an extremely inefficient way to tackle one's political rivals, especially if one's heart isn't in the philosophy. The argument that Lenin chose to produce such a massive tome to dupe the censor, who took less interest in big books than pamphlets, is also contentious. Lenin could perfectly well have published something more economical in a collection of some kind, as he did with “Marxism and revisionism” in 1908 (Lenin 1967–1975, vol. 17, 15–26, 1977, vol. 15, 29–39). So I am inclined to see Lenin's interest in philosophy as genuine, though of course both he and his opponents saw philosophical views as infused with political content.

So what exactly was the political dimension of the philosophical controversy? The standard reading is that the philosophical dispute pitched Lenin's Jacobinism against Bogdanov's collectivism. As Williams puts it:

Lenin saw revolution as a form of war in which a vanguard party of disciplined professional revolutionaries seized power; the other Bolsheviks saw revolution as a cultural transformation of human minds, so that the masses would think in terms of the socialist collective, not the bourgeois individual. In the formative years of Bolshevism Lenin's “I” competed with the collectivist “we”. (Williams 1986, 2)

Robert Service echoes this reading. He portrays *Materialism and empiriocriticism* as a kind of autobiographical affirmation of the ability of the individual to grasp the truth (and the true path). As such, the book is “a paean to the intellectual” and “the philosophical counterpart of *What is to be done?*” (Service 1985, 182).

Obviously, there is a grain of (relative) truth in this, but it is not quite right as it stands. First, Bogdanov's collectivism was entirely compatible with support for a disciplined vanguard party directed by intellectuals. Indeed, as Rowley observes,

⁶ Though Valentinov admits that his passion for philosophy was such as to sometimes make him ridiculous.

before 1910, “Bogdanov was a fervent polemicist for a disciplined party organization and an aggressive, militant revolutionary program” (1996, 1–2). Revolution might involve a transformation in the social organization of experience, but it didn’t follow that the transformation could occur spontaneously, “from below”. If Bogdanov moved to such a view, he did so only *after* the 1909 schism.

Second, one of the reasons Lenin took exception to empiriocriticism was the fact that it challenged everyday conceptions about the reality of the external world, the individual self, the relation of mind and matter, and so on. Empiriocriticism is an affront to the common sense of “ordinary Marxists” (*riadovye marksisty*), who understand the difference between truth and error, reality and socially-accepted belief, who look to science to reveal how things are, and who are united in their recognition of, and subordination to, the truth Marxism discloses. For Lenin, science deepens our understanding of the shared reality we all inhabit, and of which we have the same basic understanding, whether we be peasants, workers, intellectuals, land-owners, revolutionaries or reactionaries. Philosophy should respect this and not indulge in flights of fancy that would have us revise our ordinary conceptions of what there is and how we know it. In this sense, *Materialism and empiriocriticism* is not a paean to the intellectual, but to the views of ordinary working men or women.

Of course, it is possible to see the affinity between empiriocritical collectivism and (i) political ideologies of direct, mass action (syndicalism and trade unionism), (ii) respect for the party collective over the authority of individual leaders, (iii) the reduction of the economic and political to the technological, and (iv) preference for revolutionary myth-making over allegiance to doctrine understood as the “one truth”. Lenin was clearly preoccupied with the sympathy Russian empiriocritics showed for religious styles of thinking, manifest in Gorky and Lunacharsky’s interest in the foundation of an atheistic humanistic religion, or “Godbuilding”, and Bogdanov’s call for Dietzgen’s ideas to be deployed “to organize humanity for infinite progress and joyous conquest of life” (Williams 1986, 130). Such millennial ideas were common in this period. We see them in Bolshevik interest in Nietzschean conceptions of the superman, Kollantai’s thirst for deification of society (Williams 1986, 99), and Rozhkov’s Fedorovian predictions about science resurrecting the dead (98). Lenin had no time for any of this. For him, the depth of religious thinking in Russia was a symptom of Russian backwardness and a massive impediment to revolution. It was thus something to be destroyed, not fostered and harnessed.

I have been arguing that the philosophical dimensions of the Lenin-Bogdanov controversy were perfectly real. As Pannekoek put it, the issue over the elusive “thing-in-itself”, for example, was whether “human thought is capable of grasping the deepest truths of the world...”. That the philosopher “in the midst of this world of shadows, should have his doubts, is easily understood... But for human beings, who live and act in the practical every-day world, the question cannot have any meaning. The truth of thought, says Marx, is nothing but the power and mastery over the real world” (Pannekoek 1948, 11). Lenin’s aim was to keep Marxism focused on the “practical every-day world” of ordinary human beings, to resist philosophical attempts to transform, rather than deepen, those everyday understandings, to protect them against all forms of mysticism, in a search for power and mastery

over the world, the material character of which is resolutely independent of human consciousness and will.

Those sceptical about the significance of the philosophy in all this, might reflect on the fact that variations on some of the same philosophical issues that divided Lenin and Bogdanov are alive and well in contemporary intellectual culture. It is common today to see progressive political views allied to anti-realist, constructionist or relativist philosophies—for example, in arguments to the effect that particular ethnic or gender identities involve distinctive ways of knowing that the dominant culture fails to recognize—and such views often provoke a backlash from realists, who insist that progressive politics needs to see beyond a divisive, intellectually debilitating relativism. And it is not just progressive politics where such views are at work. It has recently been argued that the “post-truth” era of American politics, with its disdain for objectivity and flirtation with “alternative facts”, is a legacy of postmodernism co-opted by the political right. Epistemology and metaphysics are perhaps not as remote from politics as we have come to imagine.

The legacy of *Materialism and empiriocriticism*

It is one thing to say that Lenin took philosophical issues seriously, another to claim that he should be taken seriously as a philosopher. *Materialism and empiriocriticism* is pretty much bereft of arguments that are not from authority. The assumption is that all philosophy is partisan, there being two and only two “parties” in philosophy, materialism and idealism, and philosophers are to be evaluated in terms of their allegiance to these “camps”. Lenin therefore delivers what Bogdanov called the “method of stupefaction by quotation” to impugn positions by tracing their association with idealism, and then condemning them, not just for inconsistency or incoherence, but for treachery and perfidy (Bogdanov 1910, §19).

The initial reaction to *Materialism and empiriocriticism* was dismay, even from defenders of Marxist orthodoxy. Liubov' Akselrod (Ortodoks) (1929), who reviewed the book for *Sovremennyi mir*, exclaimed, “It is incomprehensible how anyone could write something like this, and not cross it out after writing it; or else, if he had not crossed it out, urgently demand the proofs back and delete all these preposterous and crude comparisons” (quoted in Valentinov 1968, 245).⁷ Gorky was reputedly appalled, writing to Bogdanov that “as far as Lenin is concerned, you are right: he thinks like a priest”.⁸ Gorky took solace only in the fact

⁷ One might respond that Akselrod herself was guilty of rudely criticizing Bogdanov in 1906, when she and Abram Deborin, as students of Plekhanov, endorsed their mentor's vitriolic polemic against Bogdanov in “Materialismus militans” (Plekhanov 1976), the style of which undoubtedly influenced Lenin's manner of philosophizing. See the discussion in Pavlov (2017, 52–61).

⁸ Bogdanov writes (2016, 23), “If religious thinking has *authority* and *tradition* at its foundation, then subsequently it naturally itself becomes a support for both those things. These characteristics are observed in all religions known to history. They are inseparable from one another; they are the essence and soul of the religious understanding of the world. They are connected by a definite, inevitable correlation. To be precise, authority always has a propensity to protect tradition; it is always conservative”.

that at 2 rubles 60 kopeks a book, “Who will read it?” (quoted in Williams 1986, 138).

It’s not clear that very many people did read it, at least at that time. Bogdanov replied to Lenin with “Vera i nauka” (“Faith and science”) (1910), but the philosophical controversy had pretty much died by then. The influence of *Materialism and empiriocriticism* begins in earnest in the post-revolutionary period, when the work was canonized as “a model of irreconcilable party struggle against the enemies of dialectical and historical materialism” (from the Preface to the edition in the *Collected works*, Lenin 1967–75, vol. 18, vii, 1977, 11). In the infamous chapter 4 of the *Short course*, the book is praised for the “tremendous part” it played in the history of the Party, safeguarding the “theoretical treasure” of dialectical and historical materialism “from the motley crowd of revisionists and renegades of the period of the Stolypin reaction”. The *Short course* affirms that:

Actually, the book is something more than a criticism of Bogdanov, Yushkevich, Bazarov and Valentinov and their teachers in philosophy, Avenarius and Mach, who endeavoured in their writings to offer a refined and polished idealism as opposed to Marxist materialism; it is at the same time a defense of the theoretical foundations of Marxism—dialectical and historical materialism—and a materialist generalization of everything important and essential acquired by science, and especially the natural sciences, in the course of a whole historical period, the period from Engels’s death to the appearance of Lenin’s *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*. (*History* 1939, ch. 4, pt. 1)

As such, *Materialism and empiriocriticism* became a central text in the construction of Stalin’s cult of Lenin, the expression of the Leninist stage in Soviet philosophy and a model for all Soviet writing in the genre. With this, immense damage was done, not so much by the substance of Lenin’s philosophical views, but by the manner and style of his philosophical writing. Bertram Wolfe comments:

Lenin’s angry moral tone, dim echo of anathema and excommunication, has become the model for the official polemical style employed in the most subtle fields of abstract thinking and scientific and philosophical discussion. Lacking Lenin’s strong intellect and originality, lacking his “weakness” for a Gorky or a Lunacharsky, and possessing infinitely more power and zeal to enforce their anathemas and edicts of excommunication, innumerable disciples hurl their fragments of text and torrents of epithet. (1962, 517)

By 1951 we read in *Pravda* (reviewing the latest edition of the *Short course*) that empiriocriticism was the work of “so-called Austro-Marxists” who “betrayed the working class of Austria, by preparing first the victory of the Austrian fascists in Austria, and then the direct annexation of Austria by Hitlerite Germany” (quoted in Valentinov 1968, 258). Valentinov comments:

When one reads such things, this transformation of the epistemological ideas of Mach, Avenarius, and Bogdanov into a weapon used by kulak wreckers, or a means of preparing for Hitler’s annexation of Austria, one

has the feeling of being among lunatics. One might think this is only a nightmare—but alas, it is reality. (1968, 259)

Although Soviet philosophy after Stalin attained a degree of intellectual credibility, it never shook off the influence of *Materialism and empiriocriticism*. Lenin's book could not be criticized, except perhaps by reference to the superiority of Lenin's later views preserved in his *Philosophical notebooks* (Lenin 1967–1975, vol. 29, 1977, vol. 38). The latter comprises texts no less controversial than *Materialism and empiriocriticism*. While for some thinkers they are a font of insight, others see them as, in Robert Service's words, "the part-time jottings of a man who would not have passed a first-year philosophy examination" (Service 2000, 244). However, they did enable Soviet philosophers to think beyond the limitations of Lenin's simple-minded realism and seriously entertain the Hegelian ideas which the *Notebooks* took seriously. But Lenin's first book had cast such a spell over the Soviet tradition that even the critical Soviet Marxists found it hard to dismiss, preferring if they could to find some friendly interpretation of its significance. Even Evald Ilyenkov, shortly before his death, chose to defend "Leninist dialectics" against the "metaphysics of positivism" (Ilyenkov 1979, 1980).⁹ If Ilyenkov saw Lenin's book for what it was, he was unable to bring himself to say so. And that tells us a lot about the place of the text in the collective consciousness of the October Revolution.

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⁹ It has been argued, that Ilyenkov's defense of Lenin against Bogdanov was really a means to criticize positivism and the fetishism of technology in Soviet culture during the enthusiasm for the "scientific-technological revolution" in the 1960s and 70s (Bakhurst 1995, 164). But even if this is so, Ilyenkov is still unfair to Bogdanov. As Gloveli comments, the accusations of technocracy and the subjugation of the individual, so often brought against Bogdanov, are ill-founded: "For Bogdanov, the industrial worker would not be the 'living machine' of Taylorian theory: collectivism and industrialism did not exclude but rather presupposed 'the singularity of individual experience and talent, and a blending of these individual experiences into an integral whole'" (Gloveli 1998, 54, quoting Bogdanov 1919). Bogdanov also warned against the working class exchanging "the yoke of capitalism for the yoke of engineers and scientists" (Gloveli 1998, 56). His vision required the transformation of the proletariat into a new organizing class able to master its world through its knowledge of universal laws of organizational science. This presupposes collectivism, but not the diminution or subjugation of the individual.

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