

# Alexander Bogdanov's *Red Star* utopian world: educational perspectives

STEFANOS DESPOTIS

*Department of English Language and Literature  
National and Kapodistrian University of Athens  
Greece  
steven.desp@gmail.com*

## ABSTRACT

*Alexander Bogdanov's Red Star remains to this day a peculiar document of science fiction literature. Combining imaginative writing with political agitation, Bogdanov's work manages to articulate the feeling of awe in front of rapid technological advances, and diverts this energetically towards a utopian vision of the future. This essay will be informed by an exploration of the genres of utopian literature and science fiction, drawing on the historical circumstances of Bogdanov's work, and his relationship to socialism. The historical and theoretical encounters of socialism and utopianism will be touched on, in order to highlight the various affinities these two genres may have. Last but not least, these considerations will be paired with some initial inquiries on the possibilities, and usefulness of integrating this text, within the field of education.*

## KEYWORDS

*Science fiction, utopian literature, socialism, education*

## RÉSUMÉ

*L'œuvre "Étoile Rouge" d'Alexandre Bogdanov reste à ce jour un document particulier de la littérature de science-fiction. Combinant l'écriture imaginative et l'agitation politique, l'œuvre de Bogdanov parvient à articuler le sentiment d'émerveillement face aux rapides avancées technologiques, et détourne celui-ci énergiquement vers une vision utopique du futur. Cet essai s'appuiera sur une exploration des genres de la littérature utopique et de la science-fiction, en s'appuyant sur les circonstances historiques de l'œuvre de Bogdanov et sur son rapport au socialisme. Les rencontres historiques et théoriques entre le socialisme et l'utopie seront abordées, afin de mettre en évidence les différentes affinités que ces deux genres peuvent avoir. Enfin, ces considérations seront accompagnées d'une première enquête sur les possibilités et l'utilité d'intégrer ce texte dans le domaine de l'éducation.*

## MOTS-CLÉS

*Science-fiction, littérature utopique, socialisme, éducation*

## INTRODUCTION

The genres of science and utopian fiction have occupied a distinct space in the literary field. Due to their particularities in terms of form and subject matter these genres have, through the passing of time, developed a kinship exactly concerning these above two aspects of literary production. This kinship has been predominantly expressed through various intersections,

which in their turn have been the matrix of different configurations and thematic encounters. This essay will examine one of these encounters of science fiction and utopian literature; that is, Alexander Bogdanov's *Red Star*, an early 19th century socialist scientific utopia (Bogdanov, 1984). I will argue, however, that this novel, due to the partisan position of its author as well as its production during unprecedented shifts in Russian political and social life, manages to escape strict definitions of these respective genres exactly due to this historical complexity. Indeed, this work, while sharing characteristics and embracing the influence of its predecessors, simultaneously breaks with the narrative conventions of its time providing a nuanced example of a science fiction utopia which problematises utopia more than science fiction, both in terms of its internal form and its external, social utility. Interestingly, we can also see that this novel can pose some interesting questions, and can potentially act as a starting for point for an exploration of how all the above can be useful in the field of education, given the wide range of interests and beliefs of its author (De Ruyter, 2006).

### ALEXANDER BOGDANOV'S RED STAR: EXPLORING A UTOPIA IN DANGER

In order to provide a clear presentation of *Red Star's* innovations it is primarily necessary to expand on the characteristics of one of the genres within the tradition of which this novel makes its contribution. It is significant that the author refers to his work as a "Utopia" in the title: Lars Kleberg writes that "since Thomas More, 'utopia' has meant both the ideal, imagined place and the narrative about that place, i.e., both ideological project and literary genre" (Kleberg, 1984, p. 210). To be sure, a utopian literary text in many ways bears closer resemblance to a political tract than other types of fiction such as popular romances, since it produces a more or less clear image of a different world, an alternative form of social being, and it frequently establishes that image as an objective while also providing instructions on how to reach it. This perspective could be very interesting in regards to the field of education, as it could allow for a discussion on both a historical, and a sociological level, when investigating societal development. This applies for mainly two reasons: on the one hand, it can potentially transcend the usual interpretations and confrontations, which are ideologically charged, and oftentimes reduced to stereotypes; on the other hand, it allows for the use of examples, or pathways which are not bound by, reality, and can in fact be used to critique it (Leonardo, 2003).

Two very popular pieces of utopian literature of that time, Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward, 2000-1887* (2003) and William Morris's *News From Nowhere* (2009), published in 1888 and 1890 respectively sparked wide-ranging debates around the nature of society and the individual, technology, industry and the town-country dichotomy that could not be contained in strictly literary publications. Although radically different from each other in terms of temperament, style, and their visions of the future, both novels chronicle the encounters of a protagonist with politically, socially and economically advanced future counterparts to their historical circumstances, and juxtapose these societies with their respective realities, riven by class struggle and conflicts. These societies have achieved unprecedented levels of internal unity and external harmony, with universal egalitarianism and pacifism as their main characteristics. It is these experiences that allow for the protagonists to redouble with optimism, return to their own time and place and usher in the new age of humanity. The example of *Red Star* comes to complicate this legacy.

It was William Morris himself who said that the "only safe way of reading a utopia is to consider it as the expression of the temperament of its author" (Morris, 1994, p. 420). Alexander Bogdanov was a Russian polymath and member of the Bolshevik faction of the

Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP), with interests that Mark B. Adams rightly characterises as “by modern standards... remarkably diverse - medicine, psychiatry, blood research, science fiction, Bolshevism, sociology, social psychology, economics, art, philosophy, the philosophy of science” (Adams, 1989, p. 2). What is more, the time that the novel was written in is indicative of the influences that work either consciously or mediated within its narrative. Written in 1908, *Red Star* appears to draw heavily from the political turmoil of the 1905 revolution in Russia, namely a largely liberal and anti-autocratic revolution that also serves as the backdrop of the Bogdanov’s work. It was indeed a period of radicalisation and of experimentation in forms of workers’ control: various groups bypassed concessions such as the formation of a national parliament and the drafting of a constitution and pushed towards the formation of worker’s councils, that is soviets, which were ultimately suppressed (Fitzpatrick, 2017). First and foremost, therefore, it is important to note that Bogdanov’s work appears to be informed by these rapid developments, which can be seen primarily in *Red Star*’s narrative. In the very beginning of Leonid the protagonist’s recounting of his experiences, Bogdanov immediately describes the setting wherein the plot unfolds: “It was early in that great upheaval which continues to shake our country and which, I think, is now approaching its inevitable, fateful conclusion” (Bogdanov, 1984, p. 24). What is more, Leonid is presented as a seasoned member of the RSDLP, an activist and a scientist. A survey of the author’s biography reveals certain affinities between the author and Leonid. While similarities of a novel’s protagonist and its author in no case give a work the status of an autobiography, this essay argues that such resemblances are symptomatic of the novel’s historically constituted and idiosyncratic character. More specifically, in reference to research in reading habits in Imperial Russia, Richard Stites maintains that “the urban lower classes were far more interested in adventure tales than in polemical propaganda”, and, therefore, that “utopia was seen as Bogdanov (through the eyes of his hero) as a weapon in the arsenal of revolution: a snapshot of man’s future that would inspire [the worker] more deeply than could the arid words of party programs” (Stites, 1984a, pp. 4-5). Regarding this peculiarity of the utopian text, scholarship around this subject tends to be in agreement (Graham, 1984; Jensen, 1982). Thus, these insights reveal an aspect of *Red Star* that distinguish it from other examples of the genre; it is not merely a literary work which, albeit it being politically charged, has a relatively broad historical role. Instead, it appears that Bogdanov’s work resembles more an intervention than a suggestion, while the images of a different society that it presents have the use of political education of the working class, and agitation for revolution. This attitude towards the proletariat as a revolutionary subject and, at the same time, an object of intervention was a programmatic attitude of Bogdanov’s Bolshevik comrades that was as popular as it was controversial, and which demanded, according to Lenin’s pamphlet *What Is to Be Done?*, that a Social-Democratic consciousness “would have to be brought to [the workers] from without” (Lenin, 1984, pp. 118-119).

The novel effectively reflects this outlook in an inter-planetary level. Russia in the beginning of the twentieth century is a place where “the pulse of life throbs stronger... and, more than anywhere else, people are forced to look to the future” (Bogdanov, 1984, p. 42). In *Red Star*, the Terrans’ solar system neighbours have taken an active interest in the struggles of the Earth’s population towards a more fair society and have sent Martian representatives so as to extend an invitation to Mars, a civilisation that has reached communism through a prolonged historical process. There, a member of the human race will familiarise themselves with the structure of Martian society, their achievements in the realms of science, technology, and the organisation of labour in order to impart this knowledge towards the advancement of the revolutionary cause on Earth, and, in particular, the revolutionary situation of 1905 Russia. This task falls upon Leonid who embarks on a journey with the Martian mission aboard an etheroneph, a vehicle powered by ‘minus-matter’, a substance that counteracts the

forces of gravity, and is capable of interstellar flight. On Mars, Leonid follows a path that is encountered frequently in utopian novels, where through his acquaintance with Martians such as Netti, his doctor, or Enno, a rather artistically inclined person, he becomes fully acquainted with Martian history, social policies such as the existence of Children Colonies where children are living and are taught collectively until adulthood; art institutions such as the Museum of Art, which function as research and educational institutes, much unlike the “sculpture and picture galleries ... peculiar to capitalism, with its ostentatious luxury and crass ambition to hoard treasures” (Bogdanov, 1984, p. 74); and last but not least hospitals where there is given the opportunity to the members of Martian society to end their lives on their own accord and with dignity.

The space afforded by this essay is limited and therefore an extended analysis of the characteristics of Martian society would be uneconomical. However, specific reference to aspects of Martian history is indeed significant, since it not only illuminates Bogdanov’s theoretical principles applied in literary form, but also broadens our view of the ways in which these principles ultimately complicate and contribute creatively to the genre of utopian science fiction. Adams observes that “Bogdanov’s utopia... is both a class conflict and a planetary tale” (Adams, 1989, p. 5): truly, this remark reintroduces the political objective behind this work. Alexander Bogdanov, apart from being a committed and serious activist, as his time in prison and in exile highlight, was also a Marxist (White, 1981). After a conversation taking place between Leonid and Menni, a leading figure of Martian society and the one who convinces Leonid to embark on the journey to Mars, Leonid studies Martian history textbooks and frames the process that led Martian society to communism: “The course of history on Mars was in certain respects gentler and simpler than that on Earth. Naturally there were wars between different tribes and peoples, and there was also a class struggle. However, the wars played a relatively minor role in Martian history and ceased altogether rather early, while the class struggle resulted in far fewer and much less violent clashes of brute force than on Earth... Slavery was entirely unknown on Mars. There was very little militarism in their feudalism, while their capitalism surmounted the division into nation-states at a very early stage and produced nothing comparable to our modern armies” (Bogdanov, 1984, p. 53).

This lengthy passage illustrates exactly Bogdanov’s distinctive relationship with the practical-theoretical tools of Marxism. His mastery and eloquence in historical materialism is well documented in his *A Short Course of Economic Science* (Bogdanov, 1925); it is, therefore, quite interesting to witness such a creative use of an otherwise frequently rigid, at the time, mode of interpretation of history. The author of *Red Star* still utilises the conceptual framework of Marxism, namely the understanding of history through humanity’s intervention on the natural environment through labour, and the chronicling of human activity in relatively distinct modes of production corresponding to the level of development of the means of production and reproduction of human existence, as well as the relations of production that accommodate them. However, while on Mars there have been distinguished epochs of human activity, the course of history has been radically different. On the one hand, this creative reimagining of class struggle and the road to a classless society allows for the introduction of an interesting novelty: the dominant force behind the progress of society is not class struggle itself, which assumes an almost secondary role, but topography and the natural environment. The general absence of large mountain ranges and other geographical obstacles have allowed for a much more facile unification of humanity, in political as well as in sociolinguistic terms (Crossley, 2012, p. 69). On the other hand, the problematisation of historical materialism has replaced what Darko Suvin calls the “anticipatory alternative” with the perils of contingency, producing a new set of circumstances which, as I will show below, also endangers the project of utopia itself (Suvin, 1971, p. 144). In general, the uses of utopian thinking, and cultural

production, in education has been well documented (Halpin, 2001). However, more specifically, here the prospects for the field of education here are plenty, since there is arguably a wide range of conclusions to be made, in regards to our understanding of historical processes, natural phenomena, which could lead to student empowerment (Roemer, 1996).

What Leonid soon discovers through his interactions with the Martians is that, although they are much more advanced both in material and superstructural terms, they are at the same time troubled by a plethora of problems the gravity of which is only matched by their complexity. Indeed, the main factor that contributed to the unification of the Martian people, namely the natural environment is at the same time their most dangerous adversary: a previous attempt towards an expedition to Earth was decimated by a meteor swarm; the planet Mars can provide scarce natural resources which threatens the Martians on a planetary scale; extended terraforming has triggered uncontrollable effects of climate change, while, unless Martian society is able to make large technological leaps in a short period of time, a severe food shortage is a few generations away. The pervading representation of uncertainty and suspension that characterise a society which has achieved the aims of socialist revolutionaries in Earth, however, is not perplexing. It is important to remember that *Red Star* is published three years after the revolution of 1905 in Russia, a revolution which was also regarded as a striking defeat by socialists. Considering this impasse, Philip E. Wegner suggests that “Bogdanov... gives expression to the sentiments of many in the Russian socialist movement in the aftermath of the failed revolution: the restoration of the Czarist regime seemed to signal the derailing of the engine of history” (Wegner, 2002, p. 107). With this in consideration, the Martians’ menace of extinction indicates and represents a series of events that work against stability; instead, the novel’s narrative spirals towards a climax that has severe repercussions concerning both the nature of utopia on Mars and the protagonist’s fate. Loren R. Graham stresses the facts that the “favourite form of drama on Mars is tragedy”, and that “nervous disorders have not disappeared, but instead are one of the two most common forms of illness”. Most significantly, however, for Graham it is the existence of colonialism and an expansionist tendency on Mars which “has created a Colonial Group in its government and is preparing to create colonies on either Earth or Venus, or both” (Graham, 1984, p. 242). The policy debates on the establishment of these colonies make manifest three features of a utopia in danger: firstly, Mars is, more than ever, presented as an ailing society, one unlike other utopias such as the ones of Morris or Bellamy. Secondly, Bogdanov sketches out the possible outcome of a volatile combination of technological development, the rationalisation of production and of public life, and the disturbing lack of natural resources. Finally, taking the above into account, the reader is provided with an honest demonstration of the contingencies of utopia, but also of the democratic process in general. When Leonid delves into the archives of the library on Mars to find more information concerning the colonial expedition, he encounters a recording with an ominous title: “Proposal of Central Institute of Statistics on Mass Colonization. Target Planet - Earth or Venus. Speeches and Proposals of Sterni, Netti, Menni, and Others. *Tentative* [emphasis added] Resolution in Favor of Venus” (Bogdanov, 1984, p. 109). While Netti’s arguments were ultimately more compelling than Sterni’s, who advocated for the extermination of Earth’s population along with its revolutionary vanguard, the author does not give guarantees that the outcome of the debate could not have been different under another set of circumstances. In this respect, the future of Earth might resemble more H. G. Wells’s *War of the Worlds* than *Red Star*, with the etheronephs’ power source and the blood transfusions that allowed for Martians to live indefinitely making an appearance as their dystopic inversions, namely the Wellsian “heat-ray”, and exsanguination (Wells, 1988).

## DISCUSSION

This essay looked at Alexander Bogdanov's *Red Star* as a novel that, while sharing many of the characteristics found in other examples of the genre, boldly departs from others. This does not occur randomly: the distinctively political character of this work, which could also be characterised as an agitational or propagandistic work in favour of socialism, represents a targeted intervention aimed at the hearts and minds of the Russian proletariat. The extent to which it fulfilled its purpose can be attested by the popularity it enjoyed among its audience: in the Soviet Union it was reprinted at least five times, and it occasionally garnered warm critical appraisal by well-respected figures among the rank of the Bolshevik movement (Stites, 1984b). What is more, I have argued in this paper that the concrete historical circumstances in which this work was written nuance the relationship between socialism and utopia, bringing attention to its limitations and oftentimes its contradictions. However, a complete analysis of this relationship in historical and conceptual depth, as well as a more detailed exploration of how this would relate to the field of education, requires the concentrated attention that inevitably has to be the subject of a different essay.

## REFERENCES

- Adams, M. B. (1989). "Red Star". Another look at Aleksandr Bogdanov. *Slavic Review*, 48(1), 1-15.
- Bellamy, E. (2003). *Looking Backward, 2000-1887*. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press.
- Bogdanov, A. (1925). *A short course of Economic Science*. London: Caledonian Press.
- Bogdanov, A. (1984). Red Star: A Utopia. In L. R. Graham & R. Stites (Eds.), *Red Star: The first Bolshevik utopia* (pp. 17-140). Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Crossley, R. (2012). From invasion to liberation: Alternative visions of Mars, planet of war. In D. Seed (Ed.), *Future wars: The anticipations and the fears* (pp. 66-84). Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- De Ruyter, D. (2006). Whose Utopia? Which ideals? The importance of societal and personal ideals in education. In M. A. Peters & J. Freeman-Moir (Eds.), *Edutopias: New utopian thinking in education* (pp. 161-172). Rotterdam/Taipei: Brill.
- Fitzpatrick, S. (2017). *The Russian Revolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Graham, L. R. (1984). Bogdanov's Inner Message. In L. R. Graham & R. Stites (Eds.), *Red Star: The first Bolshevik utopia* (pp. 241-253). Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Halpin, D. (2001). Utopianism and education: The legacy of Thomas More. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 49(3), 299-315.
- Jensen, K. M. (1982). Red Star: Bogdanov builds a Utopia. *Studies in Soviet Thought*, 23(1), 1-34.
- Kleberg, L. (1984). Utopia and its negations: Literary utopia in Russia before the revolution. *Russian History*, 11(2/3), 209-219.
- Leonardo, Z. (2003). Reality on Trial: notes on ideology, education, and utopia. *Policy Futures in Education*, 1(2), 504-525.
- Lenin, V. I. (1984). *Marx, Engels, Marxism*. Moscow: Progress Publishers.
- Morris, W. (1994). Looking backward. In N. Salmon (Ed.), *Political writings: Contributions to 'Justice' and 'Commonweal' 1883-1890* (pp. 419-425). Bristol: Thoemmes Press.

- Morris, W. (2009). *News from nowhere, or, an epoch of rest*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Roemer, K. M. (1996). Utopian literature, empowering students, and gender awareness. *Science Fiction Studies*, 23(3), 393-405.
- Stites, R. (1984a). Fantasy and revolution: Alexander Bogdanov and the origins of Bolshevik Science Fiction. In L. R. Graham & R. Stites (Eds.), *Red Star: The first Bolshevik utopia* (pp. 1-16). Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Stites, R. (1984b). Utopias in the air and on the ground: Futuristic dreams in the Russian Revolution. *Russian History*, 11(2/3), 236-257.
- Suvin, D. (1971). The utopian tradition of Russian Science Fiction. *The Modern Language Review*, 66(1), 139-159.
- Wegner, P. E. (2002). *Imaginary communities: Utopia, the nation, and the spatial histories of modernity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Wells, H. G. (1988). *The war of the worlds*. New York: Bantam Dell.
- White, J. D. (1981). Bogdanov in Tula. *Studies in Soviet Thought*, 22(1), 33-58.