

Proletkult and the Languages of Modernity

Abstracts

Can the Proletarian Speak?

David Ayers (University of Kent)

In this talk I ask what has become of the question of proletarian speech, especially in Britain today. I approach this by outlining Trotsky's resolute questioning of the possibility of a proletarian culture, and by referencing advocates of Proletkult in Britain in the 1920s who took a line very different from the Bolsheviks. I then recast the well-known question asked by Spivak about subaltern speech as a question of proletarian speech – where 'speech', it is now clear, means something broader – review some of the well-known Hegelian-Marxist and anti-Hegelian tropology framing this question, put pressure on optimistic accounts of proletarian cultural empowerment (Rancière), and conclude with some site-specific questions about the forces which continue to deny working-class access to higher education in Britain.

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Translating Concepts through Graphic Loans: The Case of Guomin in Late Imperial China

Qing Cao (Durham University)

Chinese characters have been present in Japan for over 2000 years. They formed the foundation of the Japanese language. In what Rokuro Kono terms 'the Chinese character cultural sphere', East Asian countries share the same linguistic root of the character that Vandermeersch argues is similar to Latin that provides a crucial repertoire for the formation of modern European languages. Parallel to the historical waves of cultural influence from China to Japan during Tang China (AD618-907) spearheaded by importing Chinese characters, the reverse trend occurred in Meiji Japan (1868-1912) when western culture was introduced to China through Japan encoded in large quantities of *Kanji* that flowed to late Qing China. *Kanji*, as a Japanese term for Chinese character (*Hanzi*), complicates the notion of translation because it shares the same graphic image as *Hanzi*. The double-faced linguistic symbol enables a surreptitious transfer of western ideas to China through *Kanjihanzi*, or 'Chinese characters created in Japan (和制汉字)' where translation is unrecognised due to the identical character form.

The 'graphic loans', as Masini calls them, deplete the original sense of the Chinese characters and reencode them with post-enlightenment European concepts.

This paper examines the intricate interplay between linguistics and politics in the transformation of Chinese empire into a modern state. Using a case study of the term *guomin* (国民) that Chinese cultural leader Liang Qichao borrows from Japan, the paper delineates the translingual journey from the German origin of the word *volk* through its Japanese translation in *Kanji* to Liang's promotion of the term as *Hanzi* in China. The paper argues that in trying to promote the notion of a 'Chinese nation', a term Liang coined, Liang attempts to forge a collective sense of a 'national people' through accentuating the novel idea of *guomin* as a preparation for a modern state. By examining the 'semantic fields' of *guomin* through analysing clusters of nouns surrounding the term, the paper reveals how a whole system of *Kanjihanzi* vocabulary is used by Liang (and his contemporaries) in fashioning a 'national people' that invoked implicitly a European 'conceptual map' constituted by the dominant double-faced graphic loans. The paper concludes with a discussion of the inherent linguistic chasm between the familiar form and alien content of the *Kanjihanzi* lexicon that contributes to a failed communication of post-enlightenment values, as well as a reconstituted but statistic understanding of *guomin* (as translated from *volk*) that prioritizes 'the nation' over 'the people' where people become an instrument to nation-building – a legacy that has persisted in contemporary China.

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Multilingualism and Standardisation: On Gramsci's Interest in Language and Culture

Alessandro Carlucci (University of Oxford)

The writings of Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) have been widely studied and translated worldwide; however, especially outside Italy, his interest in linguistic and cultural themes continues to be insufficiently appreciated and often entirely overlooked. This paper will survey recent studies of those themes, as well as newly found primary sources, in order to identify the shortcomings of the existing scholarship, and to define certain gaps in our knowledge of Gramsci's life and work as questions for future research. In particular, the paper will focus on the role of Gramsci's linguistic interests in shaping his intellectual biography, from his university years to his encounter with Soviet Russia's cultural and political life in the early 1920s, and on Gramsci's contacts with the Proletkult movement.

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Hegemony (Brill, 2013; Haymarket, 2015), which was awarded the Giuseppe Sormani International Prize (2017).

The Epistemological Revolution of Proletkul't

Maria Chehonadskih (Kingston University)

In the early years of Soviet power, a co-founder of Proletkul't (Proletarian Cultural-Enlightenment Organizations) Alexander Bogdanov proposes a programme of the socialisation of knowledge. This implies not only accessibility of education and culture for all segments of society regardless of class and ethnic origin, but also collective ownership, equality of professors and students, and even the appropriation by the people of all achievements of the 'world culture'. A member of the Proletkul't specifies Bogdanov's proposal and calls for the 'proletarianisation of science': similar to Marx, who 'proletarianised the economy', the proletarian culture must proletarianise the natural and social sciences. This implies the following formula: reformulation of all existing knowledge in the proletarian terms. Proletkul't was an independent autonomist platform that competed directly with Lenin's party politics. In 1920 it loses autonomy and becomes a branch of the state institution Narkompros (The People's Commissariat for Enlightenment). The decision was justified with reference to the dominant influence on Proletkul't of the 'foreign bourgeois elements' – 'futurism and Machism' – and a 'decadent philosophy'. The dictatorship of the proletariat was an official ideology, but class science was seen as a philosophical extravagance.

The paper aims to conceptualise the incomplete epistemological revolution of Bogdanov and Proletkul't. Relying on the archival materials, it contrasts the doctrine of socialisation of science with a competing platform of Lenin on refashioning bourgeois culture for the proletarian use. The paper argues that two respective political models derive from there. Lenin's model rests on the 'use value' of the historical past. It proposes to pragmatically use bourgeois knowledge, including Taylorism and management, classical art and education, for the socialist purposes. Therefore, Lenin calls for the Westernisation of the post-revolutionary society. The classism of Proletkul't resisted the influences of Westernisation, which it treated as means to restore capitalism. Bogdanov insists that the proletariat must liberate the past from the bourgeois exploitation by learning from the generations of labour and reclaiming the cultures of the oppressed classes. Therefore, Bogdanov calls for the proletarianisation of the past. The paper concludes by elaborating the idea of the socialisation of knowledge in relation to history, communism and knowledge production.

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‘Ljudski Oder’ and ‘DELO’: The Slovenian Branch of the Italian Section of the International Proletkult Movement

Ravel Kodrič (independent scholar)

In Italy, the experience and the rules of the Soviet Proletkult (A.A. Bogdanov, A.V. Lunačarskij) took root in the workers movement urban center of Turin on the impulse of Antonio Gramsci in the beginning of 1921, but soon spread to other towns invested by the revolutionary wave of 1922, due to the founding of the Italian Institute of Proletarian Culture. Among them was Trieste with the Venezia Giulia region, a large multilingual territory, conquered by Italy defeating the Austro-Hungarian empire. Among the Slovenian and Croatian workers and peasants the Proletkult movement was grafted onto the social democratic tradition and onto the organizational network of the "Ljudski oder" (Popular Stage), founded in 1905 and headed by Ivan Regent (1884-1967). In September 1922, Regent became member of the first provisional Central Committee of the ILCP headed by Gramsci. The weekly DELO (Work) of Trieste, the Slovenian (and partly Croatian) organ of the Communist Party of Italy (PCd'I), became its main informative vehicle and first, if modest, artistic-literary expression. From this early experience stemmed a generation of young left-wing artists born already in the 20th century and at their ease in three or four languages (Slovenian, Italian, Croatian, and German) who, having assimilated the lessons of German Expressionism and Italian Futurism, enriched them with the contribution of the Russian revolutionary avant-garde and specially its constructivist current. Among the most prominent names were: Vladimir Martelanc (theoretician and political leader, Gramsci's collaborator), Srečko Kosovel (poet), Franciska Martinić (poet), Avgust Černigoj (painter and designer), Marij Kogoj (composer), and Ferdo Delak (theatre director).

L'esperienza e i dettami del Proletkult sovietico (A.A. Bogdanov, A.V. Lunačarskij) attecchirono su suolo italiano nella Torino operaia su impulso di Antonio Gramsci sin dai primi mesi del 1921, per poi diffondersi ben presto ad altri centri investiti dall'ondata rivoluzionaria del 1922, con la fondazione dell'Istituto Italiano di Cultura Proletaria. Fra essi vi fu pure Trieste con la Venezia Giulia, territorio mistilingue conquistato al debellato impero Austro-Ungarico. Sul versante sloveno e croato esso vi si innestò sulla tradizione socialdemocratica e sul patrimonio organizzativo del »Ljudski oder« (Ribalta Popolare), fondato nel 1905 da Ivan Regent (1884-1967). Costui sedette, nel settembre del 1922, nel primo Comitato Centrale provvisorio dell'ILCP capeggiato da Gramsci. Il DELO (il Lavoro) di Trieste, organo sloveno (ed in parte croato) del PCd'I, ne divenne il principale veicolo informativo e di, pur modesta, espressione artistico-letteraria. Da essa gemmò una generazione di giovani militanti tri- e quadri-lingui (SL, IT, HR, DE), nati nel XX secolo che, assimilata la lezione dell'espressionismo tedesco e del futurismo italiano, la arricchirono del contributo delle avanguardie russe, con particolare riguardo alle correnti costruttiviste. Appartengono a questo filone, fra i nomi più in vista, Vladimir Martelanc (teorico e dirigente politico, collaboratore di Gramsci), Srečko Kosovel (poeta), Avgust Černigoj (pittore e designer), Marij Kogoj (compositore), Ferdo Delak (regista teatrale).

Early Soviet National-State Building and Language Policy

Konstantin Zamyatin (Durham University)

The “national question” was one of the challenges the Bolshevik face. Even before the 1917 Russian revolution there was a debate among the Marxists how to address the issues. Among ideas was an idea of individual cultural autonomy. The Russian Social Democrats rejected this but disagreed about the form of territorial autonomy. Stalin supported the idea of autonomization and Lenin wrote about federalization. After grabbing the power, the Bolsheviks passed among the first a decree on education of national minorities and in the 1918 Soviet constitution laid down the federalist foundation of the Soviet state. The constitution proclaimed that “The Russian Soviet Republic is organized on the basis of a free union of free nations, as a federation of Soviet national Republics”. The 1922 Soviet constitution turned the state into a Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, creating the space for “national delineation” and “indigenization” as well as the policy of promoting non-Russian languages. The paper discusses early measures of language promotion in the context of Soviet national-state building.

Konstantin Zamyatin is an Adjunct Professor at the University of Turku, Finland. Konstantin’s current research interests are ethnic politics and language politics in Russia and other countries of the former Soviet Union. He currently works on completing a monograph tentatively entitled *Language Policies in the Finno-Ugric Republics of Post-Soviet Russia: Revisiting Revivalism*.