

An introduction on the politicization of arts in Imperial Russian left-wing movements: from Western models towards original developments

Vlad-Florin Toma¹

Keywords: Imperial Russia, left, aesthetics, social realism, utopian socialism, narodism, classical Marxism, orthodox Marxism.²

Abstract

Although the politicization of artistic content has been around us since Antiquity, a much more refined approach towards this segment came to shape during the nineteenth century, as philosophical, doctrinary and ideological thought became much more complex. Across Europe, during these times of ideological strifes, art has started to regain attention, but this time in political circles, on all sides of the political specter, as a tool to further and enhance various political agendas. Usually overlooked by historians in favour of studying more contemporary phenomenons such as Soviet-era Socialist Realism head-on, the basis for a politicised direction in arts by the left-wing movements in Russia was established much earlier than the postrevolutionary period. Due to a lack of first-hand articles on this certain aspect, this paper will be centered around the idea of a disseminator of general considerations, that is based upon text analysis of different fundamental political or philosophical works that hold

¹ Vlad – Florin Toma is currently a Ph. D. candidate of the Doctoral School of Political Science, at the Faculty of Political Science, University of Bucharest. His areas of academic interest are comprised of subjects such as: History of evolutions in left-wing political discourse of Nineteenth – Early Twentieth Century Balkan, Central and Eastern European areas and History of Bessarabia under Imperial Russian Rule (contact: tomavladflorin1998@gmail.com).

² Orthodox Marxism is a different direction from what we known as Classical Marxism. While Classical Marxism is comprised only in the borders of the existing theories of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Orthodox Marxism is a direction that tries to anticipate Classical Marxist concepts that weren't formulated thoroughly, but in the lines of original Marxist ideas only, thus the term "Orthodox" in the name (from Greek: ortho- "right" doxos- "belief"). See to these sources for an introduction on this phenomenon: Glaser, Daryl; Walker, David M., (eds.) *Twentieth – Century Marxism: A Global Introduction*, London, Routledge, 2007, pp. 1 – 28, Shandro, Alan, *Lenin and the Logic of Hegemony: Political Practice and Theory in the Class Struggle*, Leiden, Brill Publishing, 2014, pp. 33 – 36, 87 – 91, 100 – 102.

such information regarding the evolution towards political aesthetics in the left-wing intelligentsia or political discourse in the Russian Empire. Given the fact that this concept is still underresearched, the main goal of this study is to give a framework to the main aspects of the prerevolutionary beginnings of political aesthetics or discourse on art in the aforementioned leftist movements. A secondary goal of this research is to create an efficient introduction resource for students or other interested readers. The paper is structured as follows: The beginnings of such processes from Western models to the Russian case, being represented by the contribution of Nikolay Gavrilovich Chernyshevsky, a view upon Classical Marxist approaches towards art and aesthetics, the birth of Russian Orthodox Marxist theory, starting with the works of Gerogi Valentinovich Plekhanov and ending with the political praxis of Plekhanov's ideas, represented by the actions of Vladimir Ilych Ulianov (Lenin). The authors that have been chosen in this study, especially on the Russian case studies, were selected based on their relevant contributions and impact on theory and practice as a whole, excluding peripheral opinions and contributions (e.g. Pisarev or Dobrolyubov in the Narodnik case).

Art as a new way of life: towards Social Realism as a political aesthetic manifestation, from Western Utopian Socialism to Narodnichestvo.

In addition to the factors of a cultural nature and the radicalizations in the heart of Russian society that determined the artistic germination of some of the visions that would later become the basis of socialist realism, one can observe the existence of a substantial involvement of the political-ideological sphere in the foundation of these directions: an aesthetic influenced by the ideological factor of the left-wing sphere of thought. These aspects do not represent a character of originality in Russian space, being explorations and developments of some concepts coming from the outside. In Russian space starting from the middle of the XVIII century, an extensive philosophical universe began to take shape, this time a secular philosophy. Although the first signs of detachment from theological philosophy appeared during the Rurikid dynasty, specifically in the period of Ivan III Vasilyevich The Great (d. 1462 – 1505), a noticeable schism between the two systems of thought occurred at the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century, a period marked by the reign of Peter I the Great (d. 1682 – 1725).³ With the introduction of Western aesthetics and cultural fashions that formed the first generation of secular intellectuals of modern Russia such as the polymath Mikhail Vasilyevich Lomonosov, a tendency arose to replicate the models newly arrived in the Russian space.⁴ The secular

³ V. V. Zenkovsky, *A History of Russian Philosophy, Volume One* London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953, p. 71.

⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 71 – 72.

Russian intelligentsia, newly forged by the Western model, has quickly embraced this import of science and culture, facilitated by the reign of Peter the Great and his successors. Thus, it was possible to form the secular philosophical scene, which later defined the cultural and political foundations of Liberal Russian thought that would follow. Starting with the "*philosophical letters*" of Pyotr Yakovlevich Chaadaev (first published in 1836), the real awakening of philosophical reflection in secular gnostic systems is manifested.⁵ It can be said that the philosophical work of Chaadaev galvanized a situation that was going in full swing: the intellectual schism between the systems of thought "*Zapadnichestvo*" (*Westernisers*) and "*Pochvoennichestvo*" (*the conservative basis that resulted in the creation of Slavophile current in Russia*), which in turn resulted in the birth of modern Russian intelligentsia.⁶ It is important to note that the Westernisers were probably one of the most developed in terms of thought spectra. Thus, much of the Russian philosophical fruit of this time, derives its origin from the directions of the *zapadniki*, since these philosophical positions allowed access to the opening of new gnostic horizons: Kant, Spinoza, Schelling, Hegel, and others. On this channel of knowledge, the arrival of utopian literature was just a matter of time.

Leftist thought before Marx, has been focused strictly on the practical casuistry of the relationship between man, environment and work, striking problems that were started by the engagement of the wheels of the First Industrial Revolution. The very first mention regarding artists and art *per se* as beneficial factors for this relation, appears in the thought of Claude Henri de Rouvroy, Count of Saint – Simon (1760-1825). In the short fragment "*The role of artists, scholars and industrialists in the great future social transformations*" dated 1824, Saint – Simon in his new vision regarding social space, ascribes to the increased importance of the literati and people of Culture: "[...] in this great enterprise, artists, people with imagination will step into the lead; they will proclaim the future of the human species."⁷ The saintsimonian vision perceives cultural producers as means of encouraging the masses to increase well-being of any kind.⁸ At the same time, this encouragement also serves as a supply of the

⁵ G. M. Hambrug, Randall A. Poole, *A History of Russian Philosophy 1830 – 1930: Faith Reason, and the Defense of Human Dignity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 31.

⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 31 – 32.

⁷ Henri de Saint – Simon, *Rolul artiștilor, savanților și industriașilor în marile transformări sociale viitoare* în C. I. Gulian (ed.) „Saint – Simon, Fourier, Owen”, București, Editura Academiei Republicii Populare Române, 1957, p. 113.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

ideal engine of the masses, where "[...] soon, all members of the society will indulge in pleasures which, until today, have been the prerogative of a very few class;"⁹ The "poetic part of the new system" substantiated by Saint-Simon, boils down only to this previous brief exhortation. Gradually, the idea of the arts as a means of encouraging and stimulating of the physically active social classes is taken up by several theorists of this phase of early socialist system.

Another important figure of French "utopian socialism", François Marie Charles Fourier (1772-1837), brought back in his debate the need for education and the arts in the life of the common man. In 1822, Fourier published "*Treatise on domestic and agricultural association*", or "*The theory of Universal Unity*", an important first step towards the foundation of his most important theory: the Phalansterian utopia, based on the idea of a common way of living that would be influenced by the factor of close interpersonal relations between the inhabitants of the social cohesive unit that had to be the Phalanstere.¹⁰ In this treatise written by Fourier, the most interesting thing for us is the trace of emphasis placed on issues of cultural or scholarly interest. Although the emphasis in his works was not on the direct question of the involvement of people of culture, he raised issues in some similarity to Saint – Simon. Fourier's concern was more that of scientific texts that had to be replicated within the Phalanstere in as many copies and as detailed as possible by its inhabitants, lamenting his contemporary situation of the lack of easy access to modern, high quality scientific materials.¹¹

Meanwhile, early socialist visions have been perpetuated beyond the English Channel, into the industrially booming British Isles. Among the first and most important thinkers in this sphere was Robert Owen (1771-1858), known for his contribution in regards to the creation of the co-operative system. At first glance, a characteristic of British utopian socialism would be that of the lack of an inclination towards issues in the arts sphere, devoting itself more to an attitude focused on issues of a utilitarian, socio - economic nature. Although there is no clear reference in the case of owenian political work concerning the structuring of the arts, the emphasis is on their importance in education and on the evolution of the arts and sciences in relation to the evolution of man in his own social

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 114.

¹⁰ Keith Taylor, *Political Ideas of the Utopian Socialists*, London, Frank Cass & Company, 1982, pp. 115 – 116.

¹¹ Charles Fourier, *Avântul cultural* în C. I. Gulian (ed.) „Saint – Simon, Fourier, Owen” ... pp. 244 – 245.

system. In the work *"The Book of the New Moral World"* Owen dealt with several such issues. In Chapter VII called *"on the new classification of society, according to age and experience, and the eternal laws of humanity"*, Owen offered the idea of a *"sixth class"*, to preserve the wealth produced by the other classes. This *"sixth class"* was meant for devoting their free time to intellectual cultivation or for artistic contributions.¹²

In this melting pot of the Westernizers thought, an interesting direction on aesthetics appears in Russia. The first intellectual to raise the issue of aesthetics in Russia was Vissarion Grigorievich Belinsky, who set out in his articles, issues related to art, namely about the mission of art. Belinski supported the idea that art must be inspired by matters neighboring or familiar to the author's space, in order to gain relevance and ultimately utility.¹³ Even with this *"organic"* perception on arts, Belinsky popularized a term that would become central for the future political aesthetics of Russia: the direct utility of art, but through a practical view, anchored in near and observable realities. With the coming of the 1850s – 1860s, the situation related to the vision of the arts in Russia is changing, being also anticipated by a metamorphosis in the political directions of the already radicalized Russian Liberals.

On May 3 1855, a new work was to radically change the perception of aesthetics in Russian society: Chernyshevsky's dissertation *"The aesthetic relations between art and reality"*, on May 10 he was to give it to an audience in a small hall of the Petersburg Imperial University.¹⁴ The philosophical text strongly draws its origins from the Hegelian work, where Chernyshevsky mentions and categorically supports in the first pages of his dissertation, the concept of beauty formulated by Hegel, starting from the idea that *"the life of the universe is a process of realization of the absolute idea"*, following that the absolute idea, once materialized, it *"decomposes into a chain of defined ideas, and each defined idea, in turn, is fully realized only in the finite whole of the set of objects or living things that it regards, but can never be fully realized in a single entity"*.¹⁵ He continues his dissertation on the definition of the

¹² Gregory Clayes (ed.), *Selected Works of Robert Owen, Volume III, The Book of the New Moral World*, London, Routledge, 1993, p. 292.

¹³ Victor Terras, *Belinskij and Russian Literary Criticism – The Heritage of Organic Aesthetics*, Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1974, pp. 71 – 72.

¹⁴ A. A. Demchenko, N. G. *Chernyshevsky – nauchnaya biografii (1828 – 1858)* [N. G. Chernyshevsky – an epistemic biography (1828 – 1858)], Moskva – Sankt Peterburg, Petroglif, 2015, p. 163.

¹⁵ N. G. Chernyshevsky, *Esteticheskie otnoshenia iskusstva k deistvitelnosti* [The aesthetic relations between art and reality], Moskva, Gosudarstvennoe Izdatelstvo Hudojestvennoi Literatury, 1953, pp. 3 – 132.

Hegelian beauty with a simplification of an excerpt from his philosophies: *"Beauty is that thing which is excellent in its own way"*¹⁶

Chernyshevskian aesthetics posed the question of a new artistic portrayal for Russian painters and artists: the portrayal of the surrounding realities. In the same work, Chernyshevsky raised this issue, that of art as a means of reproducing the real fact: *"So, the first goal of art is to reproduce reality. Without claiming that all these words represent any innovative character in the history of the vision of aesthetics, we, however, believe that the pseudoclassical "theory of nature emulation" that dominated in the XVII – XVIII centuries should be dismissed [...]"*¹⁷ Mostly misunderstood by critics as a form of imitationism or baseless *"photographic reality"*, of a refined *"copy theory"* in the field of aesthetics, Chernyshevsky in his work has criticized this art form made solely on dagherotypic imitation, which would cause public disgust or even detachment.¹⁸ this exercise of aesthetic theory by Chernyshevsky has advocated for an art that portrays reality but does not impose boundaries and does not exclusively represent the space of the artistic imagination. Art shouldn't be a mere copy of what is situated in reality, as some critics have understood his position, but it has to depict unique or certain social facts of life, that are known more or less. Art in Chernyshevsky's political mind, represents a utilitarian, yet organic concept, through which information about society can be spread. Perhaps the most striking aspect of the Chernyshevskian thesis is the conclusion of the dissertation, which we can say it sums up his entire aesthetic vision towards arts:

*"In view of the foregoing thoughts, we have the following view of art: the crucial importance of art is the reproduction of everything that is of interest to a person in life; [...] art refers to life in exactly the same way as history; [...] the first task of history is to reproduce life; the second, which is not the occupation of all historians, is to explain it; [...] exactly the same must be said of art."*¹⁹

Apart from Belinsky, Chernyshevsky has developed a practical side on these theories. His visions on art and aesthetics have been gathered and used in one work: *Chto Delat? (What Is To Be Done?)*, published in 1863. Chernyshevsky's work arose as a direct consequence of the emergence of Turgenev's novel from the previous year, *Otsy i deti*

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 109.

¹⁸ James P. Scanlan *Nikolaj Chernyshevsky and the Philosophy of Realism in Nineteenth – Century Russian Aesthetics in „Studies in Soviet Thought“*, Boston, D. Reidel Publishing Company, vol. 30, nr. 1 – 14, 1985, p. 3.

¹⁹ N. G. Chernyshevsky, *Esteticheskie otnoshenia...*, p. 125.

(translated in the English as "Fathers and Sons"). This was one of the many reactions to a controversial work of literature, that had an emphasis on the intellectual upheavals of the first half of the nineteenth-century Imperial Russia between the Westernizers and the Traditionalists. Among many characters, the person of interest in this work is a certain Evgeny Vasilievich Bazarov, a "nihilist", which is a word created by Turgenev to portray the bazarovian attitude towards society: a man that doesn't believe in any kind of divine or physical authority and he always positions himself against the status-quo, in all its forms.²⁰ The work didn't only affected the leftist positions, but the right wing movements as well, as Turgenev's work is mostly a caricature of the Russian intelligentsia of his times.

In order to counteract the effects produced by the spread of Bazarov's image in Russian society, Chernyshevsky answers with "*Chto delat*". Written between 1862 and 1863 during his arrest, it was published in issues 3, 4 and 5 on 1863 of the literary magazine "*Sovremennik*".²¹ The novel is marked by a strong and symptomatic search for morality in relation to his ideological precepts, thus Chernyshevsky's work on this aspect is closer to the political traditions of the Russian realist novel.²² On the other hand, his way of expressing this search of morality, has much more to do with the legacy of utopian works of the Western protosocialists, which can be described as the effort of building a perfect and isolated world, totally detached from the normal existence of improbability or of hazard, in which contradictions to the world theory are virtually nonexistent. Also, there is a reported lack of mechanisms for achieving the goal of the aforementioned perfect society, which turns the work into an isolated experiment with no practical value but to display certain ideological and doctrinary finalities.

At the heart of Chernyshevsky's novel, besides the main character, Vera Pavlovna, a woman who is in search of her financial independence and who disowns the old customs of the traditional family of her time (e.g. kissing the mother's hand), there is something else important. In one of her dreams, Vera is taken by a "figure of light" to a land called "New Russia" (confused by Vera Pavlovna with the geographical term of "Novorossiia" established by the Russian Empire that encompassed the southern coast of present-day Ukraine), a land

²⁰ Henri Troyat, *Turgenev, translated from the French by Nancy Amphoux*, New York, E. P. Dutton, 1988, p. 76.

²¹ A. A. Demchenko, N. G. *Chernyshevsky – nauchnaya biografii (1859 – 1889) [N. G. Chernyshevsky – an epistemic biography (1859 – 1889)]*, Moskva, Rosspen, 2019, p. 24.

²² Idem, N. G. *Chernyshevsky – nauchnaya biografii (1828 – 1858)...*, p. 163.

with temperate climate beyond the Urals, along the Oka River, a land of plenty, of all possibilities.²³ This place is also geographically isolated from the rest of the world, which it means its a world where Chernyshevsky's ideas could thrive. The mere existence of coffee crops in the Siberian area, beyond the chain of the Urals or some mountains covered with land to expand agrarian capacity, are matters of utopian literature.²⁴ These forms of expression are not new: in the West, Thomas Morus, the author of a book from 1516 called "Utopia", had similar ideas about such egalitarian views or about fictitious technologies with increased efficiency. In the second part of Charles Fourier's "*Theory Of The Four Movements*" from 1808, there was the idea of a "defeat of the Sahara" trough a campaign that was meant to reforest and restore moisture in this land.²⁵ Actually, thus is one of the very first iterations in utopian literature of the theme called "*Man's struggle against the vicissitudes of the Nature*" a narrative that will become popular during the era of socialist realism. The most important in these works is the lamentation of their contemporary world, these works being rather forms of protest against the realities of their times. Morus was protesting many social aspects, but the most accepted theory is that of protesting the internal problems linked to the Reformation of the Church in the pre-modern England.²⁶ Fourier was looking for the perfect formula for communal coexistence and its benefits around the concept of the Phalanstere, and Chernyshevsky, on the other side of the European continent, was looking for counteracting a literary stereotype trough literary protest, while defining his ideological viewpoints in a safe-space environment.

Chernyshevsky's opus and contributions from radical and progressive newspapers of the time, laid the foundations that later led to the formation of the doctrinal, ideological and social idea of *narodnicestvo* (mistranslated in the English as "Populism")²⁷. His position in

²³ N. G. Chernyshevsky, *Chto Delat? – Iz rasskazov o novykh lyudiah* [What is to be done? – from stories about new people], Leningrad, Izdatelstvo „Nauka“, 1975, pp. 284 – 286.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ Charles Fourier, *The Theory of the Four Movements: edited by Gareth Stedman Jones and Ian Patterson*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 175

²⁶ Frank. E. Manuel, Fritzie P. Manuel, *Utopian Thought in the Western World*, Cambridge, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979, f.p.

²⁷ The term "*populism*" is not recommended for usage when it comes to this subject, because it can be mistaken for the recent orientation of certain political positions that have no links with the original movement from ninteteenth-Century Russia. In English, the terms that are more frequent in literature are "*Narodnik*", or "*Narodist*". The term should be totally avoided in Romanian, due to its different interpretation (use the "*Narodnic*" variant). For a better understanding of this difference in terms, see: Pipes, Richard, *Narodnichestvo: A Semantic Inquiry*, in "*Slavic Review*", Vol. 23, Issue 3, September 1964, pp. 441 – 458, and Ely, Christopher, *Russian Populism: A History*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2022, pp. 13 – 34.

Russian aesthetics remained the most influential direction for the decades that followed in leftist circles. Through this and not only, the structures of important cultural – artistic movements that changed the Russian cultural landscape was made possible, from a certain part of the *peredvijnik* movement inspired by the organization in artistic cooperatives and the spirit of change that was manifested in painting other subjects than the ones that were a part of the national pride paraphernalia, with much more social substance (city landscapes, portraits of simple men and women, social events with a heavy impact on the masses), to the writers who began to dedicate their works as platforms for social commentary and criticism.

The narodist movement manifested itself prominently, especially after the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, beginning an entire campaign of spreading agrarian socialist ideals among young Russians.²⁸ Ideologically speaking, the narodist movement was a mixture of ideas and people, including anarchists, nihilists, socialists, etc., with different, more or less radical strategies of action.²⁹ the political objective of the Narodniks was to overcome the stage of capitalism and establish a minimal and autonomous state, organized around cooperative structures called "*artel*", and through these, to subsequently come to a socialist system.³⁰ This movement had an idealistic view of certain aspects of the past, confusing the Russian peasant with the image of the myth of the "*noble savage*": the main form of action of the narodnik organizations was called "*Khozhdenie v narod*" (translated as *Descending among the People*) which implied the descent among the Russian peasantry of young and intellectually prepared people from the main university centers of the Empire, in order to spread elements of socialist-agrarian ideology, in the hope of eroding Imperial authority in the rural areas.

Classical Marxism and it's general concepts on art

The foundation of some first directions of political origin to influence the aesthetic direction on art began to be formed with the emergence of systems of thought established by

²⁸ Inna Kochetkova, *The Myth of the Russian Intelligentsia – Old intellectuals in the new Russia*, New York, Routledge, 2010, p. 20.

²⁹ Marco P. Vianna Franco, *Ecological Utopianism in Narodnik Thought: Nikolay Chernyshevsky and the Redemption of Land*, în „Capitalism, Nature, Socialism”, Routledge, Vol. 32, No. 4, 2021, p. 25.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 29.

Karl Marx (1818 – 1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895). Little debated in the public and epistemic space even before 1989, the issue of aesthetic sensitivities to Marx and Engels still represents a niche topic, rarely noticed compared to the large volume of socio – political literature left behind by the two.

In his terms, Marx defined aesthetic sensibility as a purely human characteristic, which is acquired gradually, through the improvement of work and the understanding of the material world through ideas and activities, thus gaining "artistic competence".³¹ Once "artistic competence" is developed, the processes of aesthetic mastery develop over time, man reaching from the stage of *homo faber* (working man) to *homo aestheticus* (aesthetic man).³² Marx also considered that the key elements of Hegelian philosophy, such as the non-utilitarian value of the arts as a method of satisfying spiritual needs, are based on a system of abstractions or speculations that, in an attempt to understand the world and the profane space, commit the error of imposing an essential configuration on the corporeal that represents the substance.³³

In the Marxian point of view, the development of the artistic sense is a consequence of industrial development and the human psyche in contact with industry. In 1844, in the work "*Economic and philosophical manuscripts*", Marx noted:

*"[...] Human psychology as presented to our senses, and which hitherto has not been regarded in relation to the essence of man, but always, only in the external relation of utility, because – remaining on the plane of alienation – men have always seen in the general existence of man, in religion or history, taken in its abstract-general essence such as politics, art, literature, etc., the reality of the essential forces of man, the generic activity of man. In the ordinary, material industry (- which may be regarded as a part of that general movement, as it may be regarded as a particular part of industry, since, until now, all human activity has been Labor, therefore industry, activity alienated from itself -) we have before us, in the form of sensory, foreign, useful objects, in the form of alienation, the materialized essential forces of man."*³⁴

³¹ Lee Baxandall, Stefan Morawski (eds.), *Marx and Engels on Literature and Art: a selection of writings*, St. Louis, Telos Press, 1973, p. 13.

³² Stefan Morawski, *Marxismul și Estetica*, tr. din lb. poloneză de Claudia Dumitriu și Ion Pascadi, București, Ed. Meridiane, Vol I, 1977, p. 68

³³ Ali Alizadeh, *Marx and Art*, London, Rowman and Littlefield International, 2019, p. 54.

³⁴ Karl Marx, *Desvoltarea economică a simțului artistic în K. Marx – F. Engels „Despre Artă și Literatură”*, București, Editura Pentru Literatură Politică, 1953, p. 33.

The manuscripts of this period perhaps best reveal Marx's vision of aesthetics and the arts, dividing the path of aesthetic development into millennial stages.³⁵ according to Marx, in the first stage, man artistically performs the construction of his objects, thereby expressing his ability and desire to master the material plane.³⁶ over time, the structure of the object becomes the main goal of the artistic process, subsequently an aesthetic contemplation also develops, which is a direct result of previous practice.³⁷ after these generic developments, the higher senses, that of color, of matching and of forms, become a direct result of the evolution of the aesthetic sense, becoming at this stage, defined, conscious and autonomous.³⁸ the rest of the artistic developments are categorized as purely subjective, therefore individual, depending on the artistic capacity of the individual.

The artistic creation of Marx and Engels together with the perception of aesthetics is still connected with the protosocialist heritage, despite their fierce criticism of the directions of the previous ones, which can be found in the ranks of the "manifesto of the Communist Party", where their precursors are perceived as obstacles, retrogrades.³⁹ Despite this, in the saint - simonian or owenian spirit of the protosocialists, but with an addition of materialistic philosophy, Marx in his personal work beyond Engels ascribes to the work of art a value beyond its mere nature as an object of beauty. It should be noted that marxian aesthetics is based on the idea of a synthetic experience of art and aesthetics, a communion between intellectual and emotional, along with practical aspects.⁴⁰

*"Production not only supplies a material of necessity, but also supplies the necessity itself to the material. [...] The art object – like any other product- creates an audience with an artistic sense and able to enjoy the beauty of it. Production therefore produces not only an object for the subject, but also a subject for the object."*⁴¹

Engels had a much more plastic approach in terms of literary study. Engels ' mentions of art are often confined to his political works, there are also references to the mission of the arts in different situations. As, for example, in the text of the unfinished manifesto "The Part

³⁵ Lee Baxandall, Stefan Morawski, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

³⁶ Stefan Morawski, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

³⁷ *Ibidem*

³⁸ *Ibidem*

³⁹ *Ibidem*

⁴⁰ Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, *Manifestul Partidului Comunist*, Bacău, Ed. Vicovia, 2014, pp. 112 – 135.

⁴¹ Karl Marx, *Creația artistică și percepția estetică* în K. Marx, F. Engels „Despre Artă și Literatură” ... p. 36.

Played by Labor in the Transition From Ape to Man" of 1876, the engelsian position on the arts is in good measure similar to Marx's position to a point. What is fascinating in the case of this theorization of the evolutionary development of man is the "labor" factor as the main determinant of human physical evolution. What is relevant to our research is that by the same "work" factor, in relation to the physical and mechanical evolution of the human body's artistic evolution is also justified:

*"Only through work, through adaptation to new experiences, through the inheritance of the special development of muscles, ligaments, and over a long period of time, a development of bones, and through this ever-renewed inherited finesse, and (thus) new skills taken up by which the human hand reaches the high degree of perfection that has allowed the creation of Raphael's paintings, Thorwaldsen's statues, the music of a Paganini."*⁴²

The differences between the two theorists are relatively minor, being reduced more to the way they interpreted the evolution of man: marxian thought raised the psychological question of the cognitive evolution of the human being, engelsian thought raised the mechanical question, of evolution from the physical point of view as a result of a genetic inheritance of ancestors who practiced different labor. However, Marx and Engels never composed an exact theoretical framework on aesthetics, limiting themselves to these fleeting mentions. Therefore, the contribution of the original Marxist theory on cultural aspects is rather difficult to capitalize on, since most of the ideas about art of those who continued Marxist theses, the Orthodox Marxists, started only from the theory of historical materialism, not developing on the margins of previous ideas. The treatment of aesthetics and artistic theories in Marx and Engels works is in a permanent correlation with the idea of labour, relevant in economic criteria, class struggle or evolution in relation to the "work" factor. Although Marx had a distaste towards early socialist thinkers such as the above-mentioned Saint-Simon, Fourier and Owen, calling them as "utopian" he has acknowledged the relevancy of the relation between mind and labour.

Russian Orthodox Marxism on art: Plekhanov, the theoretician

⁴² Friedrich Engels, *The Part Played by Labor in the Transition From Ape to Man*, New York, International Publishers, 1950, p. 9.

Marxist influence in the Russian space, especially during Chernyshevsky's activity, was nonexistent, a thing which was confirmed by Engels in an addition to the article "On social relations in Russia" in 1875. In this text, Engels argued that Marxist theory did not penetrate into Russia, amid an "intellectual blockade".⁴³ Also, through Engels, we have a small description of Russian populism, where he considered Chernyshevsky to see in the Russian peasantry "[...] a mean of transition from the existing social form to a new higher stage of development".⁴⁴ Engels also took into account Karl Marx's vision, illustrating a passage from the two men's correspondence concerning the synthesis of Chernyshevsky's political ideas.

Both practically and theoretically, the Russian left until the 1870's was formed exclusively from the fracturing and radicalization of some liberal tendencies within the great political-philosophical family of the zapadniks, without any marxist admixture. In the Russian space after 1860, Marx's works began to circulate in restricted frames and illegal libraries of this movement in Imperial Russia. This fact is confirmed by the works of Maksim Gorky, in his autobiographical trilogy, especially in the literary work "My Universities", where he visited such a library with forbidden works, among many others including Marx, during his time in Kazan among students influenced by the Narodnik movement.⁴⁵ This is, however, an exception to this case. Before Gorky's confirmation, we have a first manifestation of a marxist theorist from Imperial Russia, in the person of Nikolai Ivanovich Ziber. A figure often left in a shadow cone in the studies on the foundation of Russian Marxism, Ziber is one of the formers of Marxism in the Russian space, not only through his scientific contribution but also for the popularization of these ideas through his works. He graduated from the Law Faculty of Kiev University in 1863 and encouraged by one of his professors, Nikolai Kristianovich Bunge, who would later become Minister of Finance under Emperor Alexander III, would pursue an academic career in economic research⁴⁶ In 1871, Ziber completed his master's degree in economics, defending his dissertation at the University of Kiev, entitled "David Ricardo's theory of value and capital in relation to recent

⁴³ Friedrich Engels, *Adaos la articolul „Despre relațiile sociale în Rusia”*, în K. Marx, F. Engels „Despre Artă și Literatură” ... p. 299.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ Maksim Gorky, *My Universities*, translated by Ronald Wilks, Bungay, Penguin Press, 1979, pp. 36 – 37.

⁴⁶ James D. White, *Marx and Russia – The Fate of a Doctrine*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, p. 23.

research and explanations".⁴⁷ The work was well received by Marx himself, given that Ziber had not only relied on an analysis of Ricardo's theses in the light of marxian views, but also on a positive reaction to the first edition of "*The Capital*" in German, published in 1867, thus, Ziber popularized Marxian theory, predating Danielson's translation of the same book in Russian, in 1872.⁴⁸

Although Ziber was in reality the first marxist theorist in the Russian space, the one credited with the title of "*Father of Russian Marxism*" is Georgy Valentinovich Plekhanov (1856-1918). During his education at the Voronezh Military College in 1868 – 1873, young Plekhanov gets to read Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer, and his readings will lead him to the path of a militant atheism.⁴⁹ In 1873, Plekhanov abandoned his military career for political reasons, as the army was conducting arrests in the countryside against the narodniks who had already started their "*Khozhdenie v narod*" campaigns, thus refocusing on the Medical Academy, and later on his studies at the Petersburg Mining Institute.⁵⁰ He left these studies as well in order to join a much more engaged political career within the left, being the part of leftist groups, such as "*Zemlya i Volia*".⁵¹ After the failed Congress of Voronezh of 1879, the movement has fragmented between those who searched to follow the agenda of "*Narodnaya Volya*" (The People's Will) and the newly-formed, non-violent group called "*Chornyy Peredel*" (The Black Repartition), in which Plekhanov had a leading role.⁵² During this period, it is supposed that he read Marxist works and with the collapse of the Narodnik movements after the assassination of Emperor Aleksander II, his political compass has moved towards Marxism.

Plekhanov remained as one of the most prolific of the Orthodox Marxists, publishing a series of manifestos and political texts that secured his fame and authority on the newly built stage of Russian Marxism. In our situation, it is the texts related to the question of the arts that concern us. In this case, Plekhanov was very active, being one of the

⁴⁷ A. V. Anikin, *Put iskanii: Sotsialno-ekonomiceskie idei v Rossii do marksizma* [*The Road of Searching: Socio-economical ideas in Russia before Marxism*] Moskva, Politizdat, 1990, p. 387.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁹ A. S. Berezhanski, G. V. Plehanov – *ot narodnicestva k marksizmu* [G. V. Plekhanov – *from Narodnicism to Marxism*], Voronezh, Izdatelstvo Voronezhskogo Universiteta, 1990, p. 5.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

⁵¹ James D. White, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

⁵² David M. Saunders, *Russia in the Age of Reaction and Reform 1801 – 1881*, New York, Longman Publishing, 1995, p. 335.

few Marxists who gave importance to the artistic problem. From here, what we call the "*Chernyshevsky factor*" infiltrates Russian Marxism, that of the importance given to the arts and the study of aesthetics by Plekhanov and subsequently, by his followers. Plekhanov's inclination towards the study of the arts begins with the series of articles "*Pisma bez adresa*" ("*letters without an address*"), published at the crossroads of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, between 1899 and 1901. Three in number, they address the problem of looking at the arts in the view of Marxist dialectics, to an anonymous character, addressed at the beginning of the first letter with the appellation "*Dear Sir! I will have a discussion with you about art.*".⁵³ In the first letter, the subject of our analysis and perhaps the most significant of them, Plekhanov makes a critique of Count Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy's vision of the arts and what art represents. Starting from a quote from Tolstoy's book, "*Chto takoe iskusstvo?*" ("*What is art?*"), Plekhanov tries to reduce Tolstoy's definition of the arts to the idea that „*Art represents people's feelings, while the word expresses their thoughts*".⁵⁴

Plekhanov rethinks the idea of art and iterates:

“According to Graf Tolstoy, art begins at the moment when man, seeking to convey to other people a feeling experienced by himself, and provokes it once again, is expressing it through certain known external signs. I for one believe that art begins when man once again evokes the spleen and the thoughts that he lived under the surrounding reality, giving him a certain expression in images. It can be said without a doubt that in the vast majority of cases he does these things, aiming to convey to other people what he has rethought and felt. Art is a social phenomenon.”⁵⁵

By recognizing art as a phenomenon of a social nature, Plekhanov has reconfirmed the theory put forward by Chernyshevsky in 1855 related to art and its usefulness. In the chernyshevskian sense, art represented a form of reproduction of the realities relevant to man, collected from his environment. Plekhanov through these lines does nothing but to reanimate Chernyshevsky's theory, but this time, infused with Marxist rhetoric. The first letter continued in this direction of the space of marxian thought by comparing idealistic, respectively materialistic interpretations of history. As an example, the Saint-Simon's

⁵³ G. V. Plekhanov, *Pisma bez adresa [Letters without an adress]* în „*Estetika i Sotsiologhiia Iskusstva v dvukh tomakh – tom I*”, Moskva, Izdatelstvo „Iskusstvo”, 1978, p. 144

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 145.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*.

interpretation of the formation of the ancient Greek state system is given. Viewed through the idealistic lens, Plekhanov quoted Saint-Simon as saying that "*the religious system served as an example to the political system*", basically, "*the latter was created in the likeness of the former*"⁵⁶ he confronted within these lines the "*idealistic*" thinking of the protosocialists with the materialistic vision, Plekhanov claiming that "*the Republican Olympus of the Greeks was a reflection of their social order*".⁵⁷ this conception of historical materialism is an indisputable mark of Plekhanov's development of Marx's theses, thus falling within the tagma of orthodox Marxists. An interesting fact in expressing the plekhanovian opinion related to art and taste, is constituted by its appropriation to the works of the British biologist Charles Darwin. In this first letter Plekhanov devotes an important role to him, being very generous in the matter of citations from the works of the British scholar. Starting from a reference to "*The origin of species*" related to the sense of beauty in animals in relation to the selection and reproduction capacities, Plekhanov mentions that in fact, this spirit of pleasing our gaze with things beautiful to us, would start exclusively from our evolution as a species.⁵⁸ by adhering to the ideas of historical materialism, Plekhanov justified his interests of a theoretical nature related to this subject, considering that previous ideas have the power to impact the present. His thesis argued that literary, artistic and philosophical ideas could be copied or repudiated, depending on the current view of the past.⁵⁹

A contribution of Plekhanov that would mark the movement of Russian Marxism towards cultural directions was his work on Chernyshevsky, published in Petersburg in 1910. This represents a re-instrumentalization of Chernyshevsky, for his re-use in the materialistic theses of orthodox Marxists. This fact denotes the direction of interest of Russian Marxists to art. At least in Plekhanov's case, Chernyshevsky's reinterpretation proved useful to the generations that followed him, drawing inspiration from his vision. In the opinion of a certain Vladimir Ilych Ulyanov, better known after his *nom de guerre*, Lenin, said that "*Cernyshevsky was still far from breaking ties with idealism*", treating his vision of

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 146.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 147.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 149 – 150.

⁵⁹ Daniela Steila, *Genesis and Development of Plekhanov's Theory of Knowledge, - A Marxist between Anthropological Materialism and Physiology*, Dordrecht, Springer Science, 1991, p. 76.

social evolution as *"utterly idealistic"*, looking on a different perspective of an Orthodox Marxist with a more radical agenda.⁶⁰

The most famous work on the subject of aesthetics ever written by Georgi Valentinovich Plekhanov was *"Iskusstvo i obshestvennaia zhizn"* (*"Art and Social Life"*), published in 1912. As the title describes, Plekhanov's thesis was written as a study on the relationship between the functions of art and social life, namely how it impacts artistic transformations. It is important to note that this study is the first of its kind to be strictly confined to the literary area. Starting with citations from Pisarev and Chernyshevsky and with a criticism of a poem by Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin, Plekhanov raises the question of identifying the social conditions and of any nature of the formation of *"art for sake of art"*, a phrase taken from the Chernyshevsky thesis *"Estheticieskie otnoshenia iskusstva k deistvitelnosti"* of 1855.⁶¹ In the sense of the plekhanovist vision, one can observe an important first direction, that of the ossification of the Russian leftist aesthetic eye through a conservative stance on portrayal and execution of the work of art. Plekhanov presents himself to be against artistic abstractions or reductions on the ego and the divine in poetry. In the case of the problem of poetry, he attacks the decadentist poet Zinaida Nikolaevna Hippus, part of the literary and philosophical group that was called at that time *"Troebратство"* (*"Brotherhood of the Three"*).⁶² Plekhanov condemns this decadentist poem for the introspective style of Hippus's lyricism, but especially for her *"individualism"*, which in his eyes *"reaches an extreme limit"*.⁶³ Individualism, even through arts, is perceived by Plekhanov as a threat against creating a unified mentality, a mentality that is needed for solidifying socialist values. Plekhanov's criticism is also reflected on the *"so-called cubists"* and their *"lightning - fast methods of creation"*, blaming the lack of message and the banality of ideas behind their works of art.⁶⁴ This tendency to harden aesthetic concepts will still be observed in all representatives of orthodox Marxism in Russia. Abstractisation of art is seen as a way that could cause the erosion of basic artistic values and clear meaning, thus a conservative stance regarding portrayal has been taken into consideration. At the same time,

⁶⁰ V. I. Lenin, *Observații pe marginea cărții lui G. V. Plehanov*, în V. I. Lenin, „V. I. Lenin, Opere Complete, vol. 29 – Caiete Filozofice”, București Editura Politică, 1966, p. 519

⁶¹ G. V. Plekhanov, *Studii de teoria artei tr. în lb. română de Janina Ianoși*, București, Ed. Univers, 1978, pp. 210 – 214.

⁶² *Ibidem*, p. 263.

⁶³ *Ibidem*, p. 264.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 275.

this cultural manifesto considers the existence of “*Art for the sake of art*”, in the same chernyshevskian manner, while adding a new concept: “*art for the sake of money*” as a form of degeneration of artistic creation by the vices of the capitalist society.⁶⁵

Finally, Plekhanov's work is marked by a strong contradiction: despite the fact that he had previously criticized various forms of artistic exposure, he had reproached Anatoly Lunacharsky for the fact that beauty is a purely subjective aspect, there being objectivism in the research of the arts.⁶⁶ Such contradictions should not surprise us, since Georgi Plekhanov had no training or qualifications in the field of arts or aesthetics. In fact, with Plekhanov, we note a special aspect. Art in the sense of Russian Marxism begins to take a different path from the aspect of Chernyshevsky, prioritizing political finalities rather than the artistic qualities, being influenced by the idea of class struggle or aspects of materialistic philosophy, combining it with the Narodnik character of Russian art, first theorized in a broader aspect by Chernyshevsky.

Russian Orthodox Marxism on art: Lenin, art and political praxis

As Plekhanov began his rise from the Narodnik movement to marxism, another fate would be directed to Russian Marxism: Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, better known after his *nom de guerre*, Lenin. Born on April 22, 1870 in a small provincial town on the banks of the Volga, called Simbirsk (the present-day city of Ulianovsk). In a political and psychological portrait of Lenin made by Robert Service in his study, “*Lenin, a biography*”, one can read about a person who had the strength and ability to suppress the expression of his emotions, acting with extraordinary calmness even after the death of his brother Aleksandr, hanged by the Imperial authorities for carrying out an attack.⁶⁷ this did not mean that he lacked the ability to express himself furiously, having an intense and emotional tone in political interactions, a flame maintained by his radicalism.⁶⁸ He had an austere personality, his traits being reflected in his narrow vision related to political or ideological issues.⁶⁹ From an

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 283.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 286.

⁶⁷ Robert Service, *Lenin – A Biography*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2000, p 7.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 73.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

ideological standpoint, Marx was not his first influence in political directions but the work of Nikolai Gavrilovich Chernyshevsky, in particular, what was published in the Narodnik journal "*Sovremennik*".⁷⁰ After the execution of his brother, he read Chernyshevsky's utopian novel "*Chto delat?*", from where he structured his political discourse in the lines of Rakhmetov, one of the radicals that were alongside Bazarov in the plot.⁷¹

His closeness to Marxist theses was most likely facilitated by his atypical friendship with Plekhanov, a relation marked by either by collaboration, misunderstandings or contradictions. Ulyanov was very particular when it came to his political inspirations. He had a habit of binding very strong attachments to his political and philosophical sources, even holding portraits of Marx, Engels and Chernyshevsky in his own house.⁷² His fantasy of Marxist doctrine went so far as he reached to treat Marxism as an absolute and indisputable truth, which could not be contradicted by any other thesis.⁷³ Marxism for Lenin became, ironically, a surrogate of religion, a concept to which he had a categorical revulsion and considered it incompatible with Marxist ideas, as will be observed next.

Lenin, because of his lack of political perspective and not only, had many opponents, both politically and philosophically, and managed to lose a number of opportunities that would have facilitated his political actions. With Lenin, political attitudes and those related to the arts begin to intertwine, thus developing a fusion between political and aesthetic from these periods, a fusion produced under the impact of plekhanovist theses. The rise of this phenomenon we are talking about can be identified in two important stages: the conflict between Lenin and the last Narodniks in Russia and the unofficial schism between the vperiodists and the Bolsheviks.

In the tenth issue of the 1893 Narodnik journal "*Russkoe Bogatstvo*" (*Russian Wealth*) Nikolai Konstantinovich Mikhailovsky, an important intellectual pillar of the mid to late Narodnik movement, published the article "*Literatura i zhizn*" ("*literature and life*"). Mikhailovsky's article called for the narodnicist controversy with "so-called Marxists or social

⁷⁰ Alain Besancon, *Originile intelectuale ale leninismului*, București, Humanitas, 1996, pp. 181 – 182.

⁷¹ *Ibidem*, p. 182.

⁷² Robert Service, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

⁷³ Dmitri Volkogonov, *Lenin – A new biography*, translated and edited by Harold Shukman, New York, The Free Press, 1994, p. 362.

Democrats".⁷⁴ ⁷⁵ Mikhailovsky addresses a "gentleman called V. V.", related to the Marxists criticism of economic issues in the rural area, where the narodniks had various active cooperations. In one of the lines of "Russkoe Bogatstvo", Mikhailovsky assures that the efficiency of their system is supported by "statistical data", finally offering the prospect of a future debate between Narodniks and Marxists. Ulyanov's deeply negative reaction resulted in the publication of the 1894 pamphlet "Chto takoe <<Druzia Naroda>> i kak oni voyuiut protiv Sotsial – Demokratov? - Otvet na stati <<Russkogo Bogatstva>> protiv marxistov" ("Who are the <<Friends of the People>> and why do they fight against the Social Democrats? - Reply to articles against Marxists in <<Russkoe Bogatstvo>>). As Lenin was never interested in composing a study of aesthetics and art, glimpses of this marginal interest in his political work can be seen. With this work, interesting aspects of Lenin's vision of aesthetics and the arts are revealed to us. For example, within the work "Chto takoe druzia naroda...", we observe such an intervention. In his criticism of Mikhailovsky's publications, an interesting fragment appears:

"Listen to what follows: "our task is not to retreat from our national depths, which (the nation) is eminently original, but nor to translate the civilization of the West into our country in toto, along with all the contradictions that fragment it. We will have to take what is good from where we can; and whether or not it is ours is not a matter of principle, but one of convenience. [...] " Sure, how simple it is! "Take" everything good from everywhere – and everything is done! From the medieval forms " take "the worker's possession of the means of production, and from the new (from the capitalists)," take " freedom, equality, enlightenment (education) and culture. And there's nothing to talk about. Here the whole use of the subjective method in sociology is as clear as the light

⁷⁴ In this political era, the term "Social – Democrat" was interchangeable with the term "Socialist". In the last decade of the Nineteenth Century, after Kautsky's "Erfurter Programm" has been published, a form of separation between terms has occurred. Even though Kautsky promoted these ideas on the same Orthodox Marxist standpoint, the new programmatic document was promoting new tactics for an adaptation to the Capitalist society and political discourse, through the idea of parliamentarism. In Russia, a change towards similar results has been rendered as useless, as Imperial Russian political discourse was a monopoly of Pro-Imperial positions and censorship against any political concepts that were antidynastic in nature, such as the political left, was in effect. For a better understanding on the phenomenon of censorship in the Russian Empire, consult the following titles: Charles A. Ruud, *Fighting Words – Imperial Censorship and the Russian Press, 1804 – 1906*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2009, pp. 181 – 236, Frederic S. Zuckerman, *The Tsarist Secret Police in Russian Society, 1880 – 1917*, London, Macmillan Press, 1996, pp. 3 – 30, 100 – 122, 143 – 164, 182 – 201.

⁷⁵ N. K. Mihailovski, *Literatura i Jizn (Literature and Life)*, in „Russkoe Bogatsvo“, Sankt – Peterburg, Tipografia B. M. Volfa, 1893, p. 138.

of day: sociology begins with a utopia – the possession of the Earth by the worker – and indicates the conditions for achieving what is desired, that is, "taking" what is good from one side and the other".⁷⁶

These lines show his closeness to orthodoxist thought in regards with Marxism, but especially to how he saw "objective" sociological organization. Also, that "ossification" of cultural ideas does not come directly from the plekhanovist view. This was more, a consequence largely felt in Lenin-style Russian orthodox Marxists, who did not question Marx's theses but repackaged them in different contexts and concepts. Lenin cataloged all the literary and cultural development of Russia up to that time as a non-proletarian product. In an 1894 article "*Kultura i antagonizm klassov*" ("*culture and antagonization of classes*"), Lenin spoke of the fact that absolutely any product of Russian culture up to that time, was an eminently bourgeois result.⁷⁷ Lenin vehemently ignored the artistic advances on social lines of itinerant painters or narodnik writers, such as Vladimir Galaktionovich Korolenko, that through his short stories, presented glimpses of the invisible society that did not often reach the homes of those who could afford the purchase of books or art. In another short article, "*Klassy i Literatura - Materialistichesky vzglyad na otnoshenie burzhuazii k literature*" ("*Classes and Literature – the materialist view on the bourgeoisie's attitude towards literature*") from 1894, he continued his attack on the post-narodniks, this time, from positions of interpretation of the role of literature, considering the collaboration with the kulaks to be harmful in the short and the long run.⁷⁸ In theoretical regards, Lenin doesn't show a degree of originality or even of intellectual autonomy in aesthetic thought, preferring to use the aforementioned theses founded by Plekhanov.

The second stage, the conflict between the bogdanovist faction (also named "*machists*", named after the founder of the empirio-criticist theory, Ernst Mach⁷⁹ and the

⁷⁶ V. I. Lenin, *Chto takoe <<Druzya Naroda>> i kak oni voyuiut protiv Sotsial – Demokratov? – Otvety na stati <<Russkogo Bogatstva>> protiv marxistov*, Moskva, Izdatelstvo Politiceskoi Literatury, 1969, p. 89.

⁷⁷ V. I. Lenin, "*Kultura i antagonizm klassov*" in M. Lifšit (ed.) "*Lenin o Kulture i Iskusstve*", Moskva, Gosudarstvennoe Izdatelstvo Izobrazitelnyh Iskusstv, 1938, p. 45

⁷⁸ V. I. Lenin, *Klassy i Literatura – Materialisticheski vzglyad na otnoshenie burzhuazii k literature*, in. M. Lišfiť (ed.), "*Lenin...*" p. 45.

⁷⁹ Also named "*machists*", named after the founder of the empirio-criticist theory, Ernst Mach or "*vperiodists*" after the left-wing journal used by the group called "*Vperyod*", (*Forward*), this movement has been marked by the adhesion of it's founding trio: Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Malinovsky (known as Bogdanov), Anatoly Vasilievich Lunacharsky and Aleksey Maksimovich Peshkov (better known as Maksim Gorky). They militated for a leftist position that included a form of religious syncretism, as plain Orthodox Marxist literature couldn't be popularized efficiently to the Russian masses. The main ideas of this group have been gathered and organized by

Bolshevik group is one of the most visible foundations of the welding of aesthetics to the area of politics, within the ideological struggle of the factions within the Social Democrat Workers Party of Russia. The revival of the idealistic direction in the philosophical logic of some factions of the party gave the materialism advocated by Plekhanov and Lenin new energies.⁸⁰ they were pushed to respond to these disputes not only to preserve the memory of Marx, the two of whom were known for their loyalty to Marxist theses, but also to combat those who abandoned the main Party line of materialism in some sort of intellectual revenge.⁸¹ Despite this, Lenin preferred not to cause an official schism within the Party, in order not to affect the unity of the party as a whole and not to encourage other trends that could divide the already fragile Socialist Movement.⁸² Towards the end of a letter sent to Maxim Gorky, dated 7 February 1908, we are confirmed this fact of avoiding the official schism, arguing that disputes of a philosophical nature should be kept away from party work.⁸³ in 1904, Aleksandr Bogdanov published the first volume of his work, *"Empiriomonism"*. In the previously mentioned letter, sent to Gorky, Lenin expressed his position on the thinking of the machist faction:

*"I read carefully the philosophers of our Party. I read carefully the empiriomonist Bogdanov and the empiriocriticist Bazarov, Lunacharsky, etc – - and they make me give all my sympathy for Plekhanov! You need some physical strength not to get carried away, as Plekhanov does! His tactics are the apogee of ineptitude and villainy. Anyway, in philosophy, he supports the good cause."*⁸⁴

In his effort to discredit the idealistic positions of the recently-formed machsit faction, Lenin in 1909 published the work *"Materializm i Empiriocrititizm – Kriticeskie zametki ob odnoi reakcionnoi filosofii"* (*"Materialism and Empiriocriticism – critical notes on a reactionary philosophy"*), at the publishing house Zveno in Moscow.⁸⁵ It is worth mentioning that this work of Lenin is marked by a special language, different from a work that was intended to

Lunacharsky, thus publishing the work *"Religia i Sotsializm"* (*Religion and Socialism*). Zenovia Sochor has published a relevant book on this aspect in 1988, called *Revolution and Culture: The Bogdanov – Lenin Controversy*.

⁸⁰ G. M. Hambrug, Randall A. Poole, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

⁸¹ *Ibidem*.

⁸² *Ibidem*, p. 268.

⁸³ V. I. Lenin, *To Maxim Gorky, February 7, 1908*, in V. I. Lenin, *"V. I. Lenin, Collected Works"*, Volume 34, Letters November 1895 – November 1911", Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1977, pp. 381 – 382.

⁸⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 381.

⁸⁵ Tamas Krausz, *Reconstructing Lenin – An Intellectual Biography*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 2015, p. 131.

be philosophical in nature, because of the huge number of attacks against the bogdanovist representatives.⁸⁶ As a testimony to this language, there are a series of letters between him and his sister, Ana, where some thoughts about the reactionaries of the Social Democrat Party are captured, among the lines that were concerned with ensuring the publication of errata for the aforementioned book. The first letter, dated December 19, 1908, contains Lenin's response to the moderation of his expression, agreeing to rein in his position "*towards Bazarov and Bogdanov; as for Yushkevich or Valentinov, nothing should be censored, unless the editor demanded it*".⁸⁷ In another letter to Anna, Lenin notes in the postscripts that he had renounced the diminution of language towards Bazarov and Bogdanov, as the author had "*totally broken relations with them*".⁸⁸ In the text of 1909 Lenin's work, we do not find the question of art discussed, except for an interpretation by Chernyshevsky, which is recommended as an addendum for the fourth chapter of the work. This is based on a preface of the third edition of 1888 to Chernyshevsky's main aesthetic work of 1855. Even in this situation, Lenin seeks to place Marx's theses on a pedestal. Lenin declared about Chernyshevsky that he "*failed to raise, or rather, because of the backwardness of Russian life, he could not rise to the level of dialectical materialism of Marx and Engels*".⁸⁹

One of Lenin's lessons learned from Chernyshevsky and Plekhanov was to give purpose to art and literature. The purpose given by Lenin was, of course, a political one, serving a political revolution. However, the revolutionary was much more culturally moved by his conservative side, just like Plekhanov. In this case, one can observe a matter that we cannot detect from his political works: his artistic taste and inclinations in matters of art. Besancon said in "The intellectual origins of Leninism " that Lenin's tastes are dated by a perfect stability, being for the most part synonymous with those of the generation of 1860, marked by the works of Pushkin, Turgenev, Tolstoy, Goncharov, etc.⁹⁰ This is evident from the correspondence between Lenin and the writer Maxim Gorky, letters that represent the most telling example in this situation. Between the style of realists such as Turgenev and

⁸⁶ Christopher Read, *Lenin – A Revolutionary Life*, London, Routledge Publishing, 2005, p. 90.

⁸⁷ V. I. Lenin, *To his sister, Anna, December 19, 1908*, în V. I. Lenin, „V. I. Lenin, Collected Works”, Volume 37, Letters to Relatives, 1893 – 1922”, Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1975, p. 402.

⁸⁸ V. I. Lenin, *To his sister, Anna, March 9, 1909*, în V. I. Lenin, „V. I. Lenin, Collected Works, Volume 37...”, p. 414.

⁸⁹ V. I. Lenin, *Materializm i Empiriocrititsism – Kriticeskie zametki ob odnoi reaktsionnoi filosofii*, Moskva, Izdatelstvo Politiceskoi Literatry, 1969, p. 502.

⁹⁰ Alain Besancon, *op. cit.*, pp. 180 – 181.

Gorky, the differences are relative, but Lenin's need for Gorky did not take the form of satisfying aesthetic needs, but also political aspects. In a previously cited letter dated 7 February 1908, Lenin wrote to Gorky the following:

*"The relevance of intellectuals in the party is decreasing; news is coming from all sides related to the intelligentsia leaving the party. Good riddance to those bastards!"*⁹¹

Lenin has a different behavior from Gorky. This need of Lenin for Gorky stems precisely from that factor previously expressed by him: the Bolsheviks had no relevant representatives from the intelligentsia on their side in this Party struggle of ideas with the machists. Bringing into the ranks of the Bolsheviks an internationally recognized writer at that time would have increased the prestige of the faction. Also added here is Gorky's long activity as a gazetteer, to which Lenin was not indifferent. He tries throughout the letter to persuade Gorky to publish in Bolshevik newspapers, even with the promise of a large editorial autonomy, such as the inclusion of literary debut and literary criticism, justifying that literary work must *"tighten up with Party work that would have a systematic influence on the Party!"*⁹² Despite all Lenin's efforts to co-opt him into the Bolshevik movement, Gorky was not attracted to Bolshevik rhetoric, and Lenin's attempts were fruitless. Lenin expected similar help Gorky provided to the entire movement when he collaborated to open the legalist newspaper *"Novaya Zhizn" (New Life)* in 1905.⁹³ The effect was not the one Lenin has expected, Gorky even resisting Lenin's attempts through a series of articles and attacks on newspapers that supported Leninist rhetoric (*Proletari, Novaya Zhizn*), showed that the political and intellectual loyalties of Gorky were on the side of the Bogdanov and Lunacharsky. After December 1913, no further attempt by Lenin to contact Gorky is noted, and there was a hiatus in correspondence between the two until 1917.⁹⁴

Conclusions

In the end, we can say that there is a clear trajectory of politicization of arts in Imperial Russian leftist circles. It is revealed that this metamorphosis towards political

⁹¹ V. I. Lenin, *To Maxim Gorky, February 7, 1908...*, p. 379.

⁹² *Ibidem*, p. 381.

⁹³ Tovah Yedlin, *op. cit.*, pp. 95 – 98.

⁹⁴ Robert C. Williams, *The Other Bolsheviks – Lenin and His Critics 1904 – 1914*, Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1986, p. 57.

rationale is not an *ex abrupto* event, as many scholars might portray the post-1917 artistic scene. The Western “*utopian socialists*”, the first inspiration in this cultural space in such regards, had very few takes on art and literature, but when these fragments are studied, one can consider that they are not restrictive in nature and very simplistic, being boiled down to their utilitarian purpose, yet not denying the expression of individuality in artistic content. The mobile of these theories, which is the utopian project, holds the political considerations of the theorists, but not in a partisan manner, but rather in a perennial state of conservation. After the idea of a direct utility in arts has been popularized in the 1840’s by Belinsky, Chernyshevsky has revitalized these concepts, his originality being marked by giving to the work of art some sort of a didactic or moral purpose, as a vehicle for social awareness and social commentary. In the ideas of Chernyshevsky there is no mention regarding any mechanisms that could cause an eventual ossification of style or an overly political discourse, yet through certain social descriptions that can be made in accordance to his indications, we can safely assume that a political discourse can be started on such grounds. In his literary praxis though, Chernyshevsky makes a return to the utopian sphere, where political ideas are enclosed in a world devoid of any kind of intervention against his own views on politics. His position in literature is much more partisan, giving the fact that “*What is to be Done*” has been written as a direct reaction to Turgenev’s social criticism. Apart from his own and Belinsky’s aesthetic perspectives, he makes a return to the utopian writing as a safe-space for enshrining his own views on many aspects, from politics to economy. Marx and Engels can be credited for the foundation of a materialist view of arts in general. Although their theories lack aesthetic depth, being much more anchored in political, economical or even biological practicalities, they opened the door to the Orthodox Marxists materialist approach towards arts. Plekhanov’s sizeable contribution is the one that created the first, fully weaponized aesthetic discourse in Russia, before Lenin. Considering that Plekhanov’s position on art cannot exist without opposition of arts against an economic system (i. e. capitalism), beyond the logic of materialist conceptions and in the absence of a certain aesthetic equilibrium that should be established, in order to crush individualistic expressions, his political stance is obvious and utilitarian, giving a clearer perspective on the relation between arts and politics in the eyes of “*The Father of Russian Marxism*”, a view that will be inherited later on by Lenin himself: political thought should lead artistic creation.

Lenin's case is strictly limited to the literal practice of the theories of Marx, Engels and Plekhanov. Thus, Lenin's cultural criticism, was strictly limited to the lax relationship between ideology and culture that the Narodniks practiced and their artistic praxis that was much more closer to social life. In his dispute with Mikhailovsky, Lenin ignored the progress of social art in Russia, a progress that was a reality facilitated by a combination of political, economical and now, social factors. At the same time, he tried to bring artistic expression closer to the Party line, thus trying to transform art into one of the many appendages of the Party, one that would bring it relevancy. Although his plan has failed during this part of the Party struggle, a same envision of arts as a part of the main Party line will be brought again in discussion after the events of November 1917 and during the "*Great Turn*" of the first part of the 1930's, when Socialist Realism, the epitome of this long process of politicization of arts, will play it's part as a Party-lined manifestation in aesthetics, that was supposed to create a link between Party's will and the people.