

Arseny Zhilyaev

# Optimists of the Future Past Perfect

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Death to Utopia! Death to faith! Death to love! Death to hope! thunders the twentieth century in salvos of fire and in the rumbling of guns.

Surrender, you pathetic dreamer. Here I am, your long-awaited twentieth century, your “future.”

No, replies the unhumbled optimist: You, you are only the present.

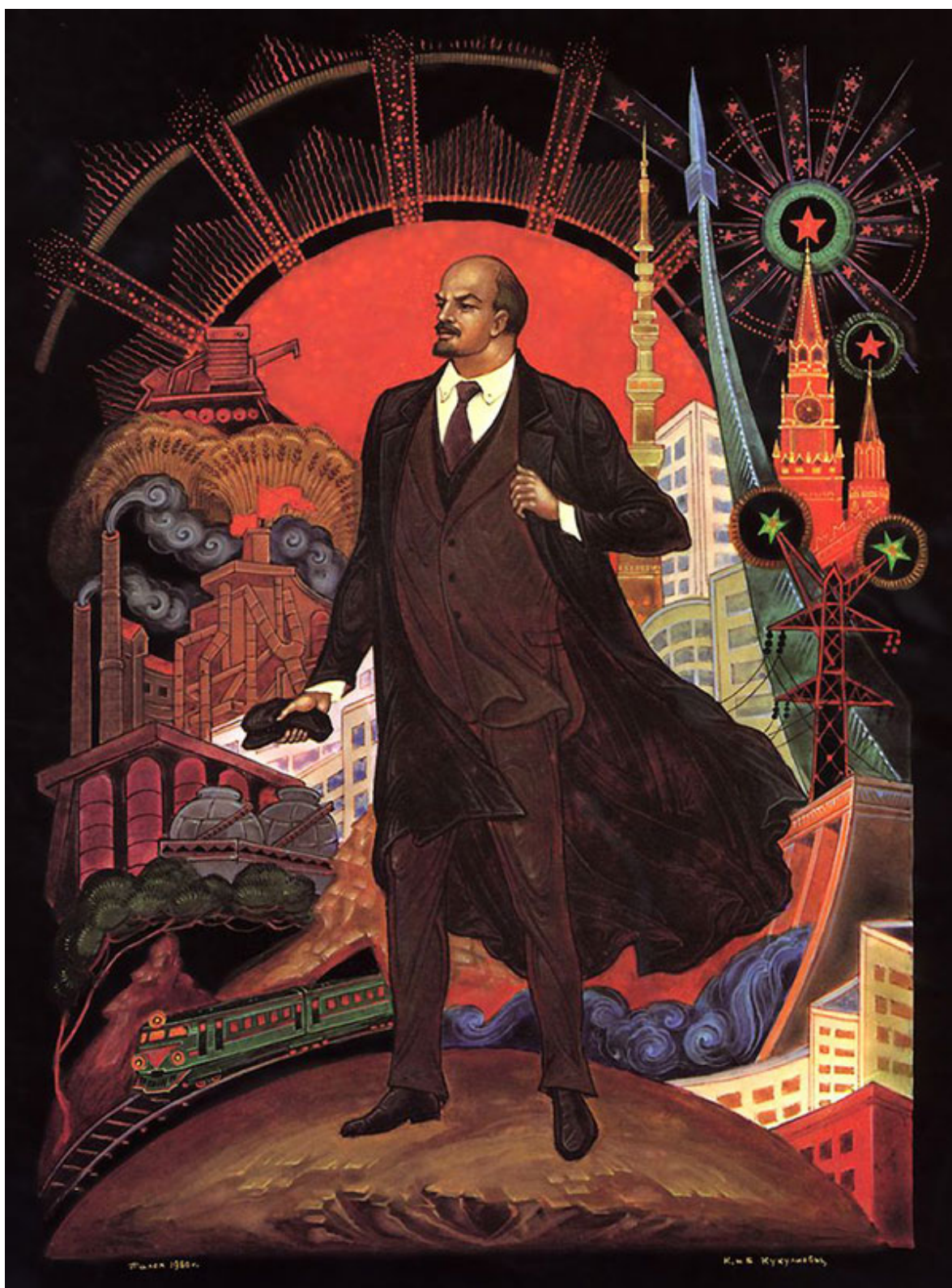
– Leon Trotsky, “On Optimism and Pessimism, On the 20th Century and on Many Other Issues”

In his short essay “On Optimism and Pessimism, On the 20th Century and on Many Other Issues,” Leon Trotsky gives a brief, “unscientific,” as he puts it, classification of optimists and pessimists in relation to the past, the present, and the future.<sup>1</sup> The revolutionary castigates the optimists of the past as helpless nostalgic grumblers and the optimists of the present as self-righteous philistines. According to Trotsky, only a pessimist of the present, who is at the same time optimistic about the future, is worth talking about. The past is interesting to him only insofar as it relates to the unsatisfactory state of affairs in the present. In Trotsky’s description of the optimist of the future, we are dealing with a revolutionary and, in general, Marxist view of the world in relation to the time vector. The world is historical, and so is its assessment, which largely depends on how successful the practice of its optimization is.

Interestingly, despite the fact that Trotsky describes certain catastrophes in his 1901 text, he does not concede to the idea of pessimism about the future. At the time, the possibility of a catastrophe or collapse on a global scale was not regarded as something relevant or desirable for a revolutionary. But more than a hundred years later, it is the pessimist of the future who is becoming one of the main vehicles of hope for changing the world. An eloquent testimony to this is the popularity of the aphorism usually attributed to Jameson and then Žižek: “It is easier for us today to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism.”

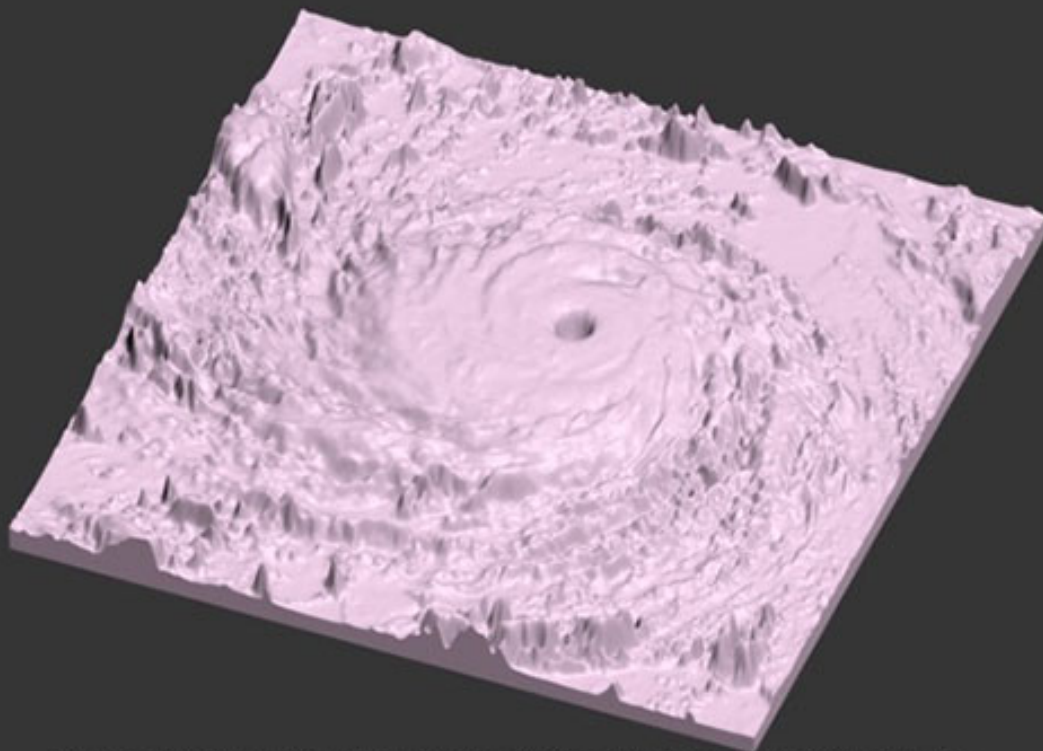
This popularity reveals not only the weakness of liberation movements today and the lack of optimistic visions of the future. The idea of apocalypse as deliverance, as a paradoxically optimistic solution to our current problems, also speaks volumes about the ontologization of the injustices inherent to capitalist relations. It is nearly impossible to imagine that capitalism has both a starting point and an end point – a moment when it will morph into a different system of relations. In other words, it appears to be a totally natural state of things, deeply rooted

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An illustration by Boris and Karelia Kukulieva from the book *Son of Russia* (1982).

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Pasha wrote: «Everybody wants to own the end of the world.»  
If you start your presentation at MoMA  
with this, an audience will be yours. I promise

Robert Pasternak, *History After Art*, 2037 or 2047. Video still.

in the nature of the world. And if humans are incapable of carrying out social revolution, can we really expect them to carry out a revolution in the very essence of the world? A pessimistic outlook on the possibility of such radical transformation has become commonplace. The daredevils who challenge this pessimism and argue that social injustices can and should be remedied number only a few.

Even more surprisingly, just when Marxism put forward its own solution to the question of optimism, yet another kind of optimism took root: the optimism of the Russian cosmists, which focused on the future past perfect – aiming to bring back, revive, and transform the past.

The question of optimism has to do with more than a psychological assessment of the world. It also has to do with the possibility of congruence, and with the best possible state of being for things in the world. Capitalism replaces the optimal state of things with infinity – above all, with the infinity of growth and accumulation. At the same time, under capitalism it is precisely the nonoptimal state of the here and now, the bad infinity of the present, that is declared to be the optimal state. Hand in hand with the Christian Reformation, capitalism destabilized the familiar finiteness, circularity, and rigidity of feudal hierarchies. Along with a process of economic coercion that wrenched people away from a familiar pace of life in a familiar setting, capitalism also initiated the immanentization of eternity.

Thanks to the Reformation, God gradually migrated to earth, a relocation that made him more accessible, comprehensible, and logical. The process of divine transaction was intensified accordingly. In place of the delayed gratification that righteousness used to earn believers in the afterlife, one could now be rewarded for one's virtuous deeds in the here and now – or, alternatively, penalized for failing to conform to the entrepreneurial spirit of the day. Previously, the Christian absolute was understood as endless; infinite being was located in the afterlife, in the world to come. With the advent of capitalism, people began to think of God as a state of affairs existing in the present and incorporating the future, thus engendering a sense of unending presentness. The laws governing God's judgment slowly transformed, taking the form of the justness and naturalness of economic coercion. Injustice and evil were in turn ascribed to human weakness, which is not always capable of acting in accordance with the logic of the optimal organization of the world. This is when absolute optimism was born. It is also when the idea of the best possible world emerged, the one described philosophically by

Leibniz and mocked mercilessly by Voltaire in *Candide, or Optimism*.

In the Age of Exploration, circumnavigation of the globe spatially duplicated the eternity of present time. From that moment onward, the surface of the earth had no boundaries – yet at the same time, it turned out to be a closed-loop infinity. The universe, however, still seemed boundless. But the subsequent scientific revolution would limit the infinitude of the universe, framing it as a matter of knowledge and measurement rather than divinity.

The transition from a geocentric worldview focused on internal resources to a heliocentric, outwardly directed system implied the emergence of infinity in the here and now. However, this infinity was relocated from earth to a set of galactic clusters. Our planet became one of innumerable dependent planets revolving eternally around the energy hubs of their solar systems, forever drawing closer or pulling away from them. And if these planets could speak, they might utter a saying popular in 1990s Russia (the era of so-called “wild capitalism”) among former Soviet citizens forced into ceaseless business activity, much like peasants who had to alternate agricultural labor with periodic migration to the city for work: “You gotta move” – *go round and round* in the original Russian – “if you want to survive.” This saying was perhaps a subconscious echo of Galileo's famous dictum “*Eppur si muove*” (“And yet it moves”).

As is well known, God's return to earth and his eventual replacement by the invisible hand of the marketplace ultimately led to his death. Any link with the infinity of the afterlife promised by Christianity, whose very existence used to determine the present, was now broken. This rupture also undermined the inner links connecting things to themselves. The arrival of the endless here and now liberated humanity from the closed nature of being, but it did so by expanding the space of coercion. Capitalism requires the quantification and abstraction of the world, which becomes meaningful only within a rigid framework of formal congruencies. Any one thing becomes in principle exchangeable for any other thing.

From a psychological point of view, the quantification of life was perceived as its alienation, which complemented the destruction inflicted by infinity as it swept into the static state of the old world. What was once living, breathing matter now turned into an assemblage of numbers, not only deprived of authenticity and its own substance, but also renouncing any illusion of submission to heavenly authority. Both the divine law promoted by the Church and secular power alike always displayed a certain degree of personification and discreetness



regarding their motives. They were open to dialogue, even if this dialogue was not carried out on an equal footing. Their actions were open to interpretation, and were thus graspable, enabling one to find a proper place in this mutual relationship. Numbers, however, are intrinsically cynical. They do not equivocate in a relationship built on submission; they leave no room for ambiguity, and they defy any attempt at psychologizing their motives. Quantification clearly tells us that the misery of wage labor has nothing to do with either personal greed or your boss's sadistic streak. It is not a matter of God's wrath as embodied by the Inquisition, but a simple and trivial matter of math, a relationship built on calculation: "Nothing personal, just business," as accountants say. Some try to escape this banalization of the world by turning to fascism, which personifies numerical coercion by projecting it onto racial differences, and which seeks to overcome the trauma of infiniteness through a return to a prior state of finiteness, to a primordial authenticity. Today's fundamentalist religious organizations function according to a variation of this logic, but in place of personification they sacralize numerical reality, returning responsibility for this reality to God.

The Marxist project seeks neither to humanize nor to deify numbers. It advocates real infinity, in contrast to the false conception of infinity understood as a limit to development embodied by capitalism itself. It is well known that sooner or later the development of the

forces of production under capitalism is bound to clash with the system of labor relations. So in order to develop any further, these forces of production would have to be transformed through revolution. The abolition of this limit to development must establish a dictatorship of the proletariat, which in turn rationalizes and optimizes the production process, reactivating infinite growth. Thus, communist rationalization and optimization, with the help of planning, regulation, and the distribution of justice, must complete the process of quantifying the world that was unleashed by capitalism, transforming it from a process-in-itself to a process-for-itself. In Marxism, this total quantification of the world will overcome alienation and return things to themselves.

Nikolai Chernyshevsky, one of the key figures in the formation of the Russian liberation movement, described the transition from capitalism to socialism by referring to the theory of rational egoism. According to Chernyshevsky, both capitalism and socialism are based on the primacy of egoism, which is an innate human quality. However, at some point the development of any individual ego seeking to obtain greater satisfaction of its needs is bound to come face to face with the needs and desires of others. In other words, sooner or later human egoism is bound to find itself in the situation known in game theory as "the prisoner's dilemma." This model suggests that ignoring the needs of others leads to a paradoxical unselfishness, and cooperation yields better results (and better



Ilya Repin, *Barge Haulers on the Volga*, 1870–73. State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.

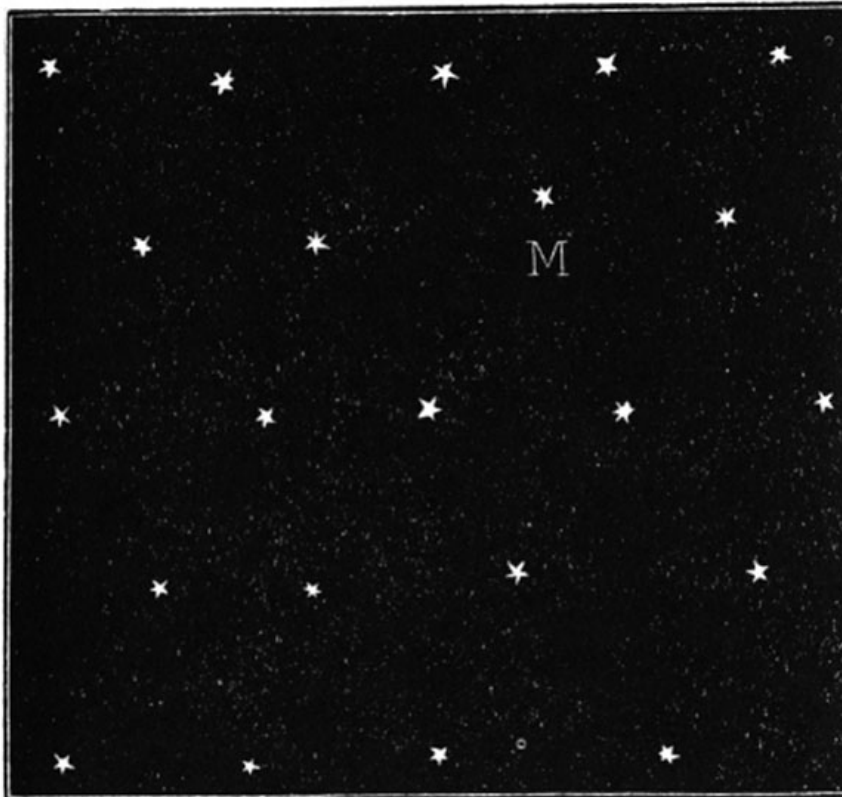
serves selfish ends) than the stubborn desire to pursue one's selfish goals alone, which leads to failure.

According to Marx, capitalism does not actually hold infinity as a limit; the promise on which it never delivers turns out to be a self-deception. In order to achieve unlimited growth, capitalism needs to go beyond its confines and morph into communism. Ignoring this fact leads to the absolute optimism ridiculed by Voltaire and Trotsky. The death of God, instead of making everything possible (as shown in Dostoevsky's novels), makes everything impossible (as illustrated by Lacanian theory). Whereas previously it seemed that God was necessary to keep order, to keep things as they were (thus implying that after God's death things would be liberated from their limits), now it is obvious that things are held back due to the logic of capitalist relations. A thing is a thing only because its meaning is assigned to it within the logic of commodity-money relations. The ultimate infinity is an abstract possibility that is never realized because of capitalism's limits. And in this sense, the false infinity of "endlessly building capitalism" that governs the life of many post-Soviet countries is a very characteristic phenomenon.

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If we go back to Trotsky's classification, we can say that the Marxist approach calls for a critical pessimism with regard to the optimism of the eternal present. It also calls for critical pessimism vis-à-vis optimism about the future, which is supposed to supplant false transitory hopes for a true and lasting presence. Intuitively, we can guess that by extending the present into the future and by transforming capitalist selfishness – or capitalism-in-itself – into its dialectical opposite – communism, or egoism-for-itself – we do not gain access to absolute growth and complete congruence. Rather, this transformation subordinates these to the dictates of the present on some higher level.

Examples drawn from history seem to confirm this assumption. Was the Bolshevik party not an optimistic party here and now? It was a party of brilliant tacticians, not strategists – chess players, but not lovers of the game Go. In other words, members of the party were people who, just like most other progressive forces in their own time, could only rarely afford to appeal to something beyond the already given state of affairs. But because of this, the Bolsheviks were lucky enough to organize a revolution. Unfortunately, the post-1917 history of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party is a



Kepler's Figure "M" from *Epitome*, showing the world as belonging to just one of any number of similar stars.





Giacomo Balla, *Numbers in Love*, 1920.



Gustav Klutsh, *Principles for the Scientific Organization of Labor*, 1925.



history of a race in the present, a record of endless attempts to catch up with the ever-elusive capitalist limit. It is not a record of the first ever successful attempt to venture into the open space of the infinite.

Another solution to the problem of capitalism's unfulfilled promise of infinity can be found in the philosophy of Russian cosmism. It was born around the same time as the Marxist project. Both doctrines have a lot in common in their intentions towards humanity and in relation to objects. But it is also possible to compare Marxism and cosmism as two examples of anti-philosophy, which seeks above all not to build an integrated intellectual system, but rather to organize the practical aspects of life by engaging in the intellectual clarification of the current state of affairs. However, the two doctrines differ in the kinds of solutions they suggest. One proposes a communist return of the infinity of growth through the rationalization and intensification of production, that is, the acceleration of progress. The other also offers the rationalization of production, but not with the goal of achieving even greater growth than possible under capitalism, but rather for the sake of stopping this development once and for all at the moment when humans succeed in mastering time. Cosmists regard progress not as a goal or an end in itself, but rather as a necessary sacrifice that is an integral part of humanity's struggle to survive and evolve. Real development, they believe, can only begin after humanity triumphs over death and learns how to resurrect the dead. This vision suggests that the future becomes the reconstruction or restoration of the past, and the arrow of time bites its own tail.

Cosmism offers an escape – a means to break free from the capitalistic race – that undermines from within the eternal present, the optimization of the here and now. In a sense, the possibility of mastering time insists on rationalizing communist rationalization, since the latter limits its intentions to adjusting the success of the development process. But the process itself is accepted as a given, as an axiom that is not subject to rationalization. In other words, under communism, the things of the world, despite being restored to an accordance with themselves and with the infinity of growth, do not become fully realized, do not become optimized *for themselves*.

Few thinkers have attempted to analyze the similarity between these two projects for the liberation of humankind. However, by the early 1900s, a range of “heretical” undercurrents could be discerned among the Russian Marxists, especially in the faction of Bolshevik “God-builders” headed by Bogdanov, Anatoly

Lunacharsky, and Maxim Gorky, who together organized a worker's school on the island of Capri, Italy. The school was fiercely criticized by Lenin, and finally closed because of him. The faction was dissolved and its main theorist, Bogdanov, was expelled from political activity. But traces of the God-builders could be found in the Proletkult, a movement of cultural producer-workers (poets, writers, actors, etc.) initiated by Bogdanov. Bogdanov was also director of the Institute of Blood Transfusion, which put forward its own ideas for achieving the unity of the people in a classless society, a society without racial, sexual, or age limitations, and with the possibility of the radical extension of life expectancy.

When Paul Kammerer, a well-known biologist associated with neo-Lamarckism, was invited by Lunacharsky to visit the USSR in the 1920s, his agenda was similar to that of the God-builders. Kammerer studied the possibility of inheriting acquired features of organisms known to be excluded from Darwin's evolutionary theory. He also experimented with the prolongation of life. Kammerer believed that there was no such thing as “natural death,” because death is always violent – it's just that sometimes our nature itself acts as a killer. Both aspects of Kammerer's scientific research could be extremely useful for the young proletarian state keen on engineering a new human being, immortal and imbued with the high culture necessary for living in a communist society. These were the necessary cosmist additions to Bolshevik Marxism.

Among the followers of Nikolai Fedorov's philosophy, there were other conscious attempts to interact with Bolshevism. They included the postrevolutionary activities of the Russian religious philosopher Valerian Muravyov. He is mainly known for his only lifetime publication, *The Mastering of Time*, written during his short stint at the Central Institute of Labor, which was created by the Proletkult poet Gastev for the purpose of bringing about the scientific organization of labor, or SOL (in Russian: Nauchnaya Organizaciya Truda, or NOT) and its subsequent rational optimization.

In his book, Muravyov developed his colleagues' intuitions, but gave them a universal scale. Combining the theory of Cantor sets, Bergson's philosophy of duration, and some conclusions from Einstein's theory of relativity, Muravyov proposed a project of ultimate time optimization, which can be understood as the increasing compression or condensation of the organization of life.

According to Muravyov, under capitalism there is planned development (the first derivative of time). Communism involves the acceleration of

planned development (the second derivative of time). Muravyov's cosmist project depicted the prospect of further acceleration, potentially up to the limit of our universe (the third and further derivatives of time). To achieve this goal, Muravyov insisted on the final quantification of the world and the development of a "universal productive mathematics" that would be used to manage it.

If one attempted to describe the process of the mastery of time, one might say that it is like extending the principles of SOL not only to human activity, but to all being as a whole. One could call this process the ontologization of time management – or even the management of life, because for Muravyov time is an expression of life changing. As examples of this kind of management, Muravyov pointed to the reversibility of chemical reactions, which allow us to destroy or recreate the same substance, as well as to the incredible skill of the proletariat, which accelerates work faster than might seem possible. That is, the mastery of time is understood as conscious management aimed at increasing the complexity and organization of life, as opposed to degrading it or throwing it into chaos.

Without the communist rationalization of the production process, which takes the first step towards the management of life, the realization of Muravyov's vision would not be possible. It is not surprising, then, that Muravyov, who was in fact sharply critical of the Bolsheviks, obtained his position at the Central Institute of Labor thanks in part to Leon Trotsky. The cosmist and the revolutionary first came into contact in 1921, when Muravyov, realizing the significance of the transformation initiated by the Communist Party, wrote a letter to Trotsky. This text, preserved in the archives of the FSB, enables us to better understand the logic of combining Marxism and cosmism from the point of view of the latter:

Yes, the political victory of the Soviet government is complete. But this is not sufficient if we are to talk about building on a grand scale. To do this, it is necessary that the whole subsoil of life should change, so that in fact there is a profound revolution in all relationships, all perceptions, all modes of life ... I see a sort of army around me, ready for battle, but standing still ... While I see a skillfully created mechanism, it must create its own life, turn itself into an organism. Only then will we be able to say whether it was born for real or not, whether it is real or an illusion.<sup>2</sup>

According to Trotsky's classification, then, the optimist of the future is merely an improved version of the self-satisfied inhabitant of the eternal present. Only an optimist of the future past perfect can complete the mission of the human species to transform the capitalist universe and enter the space of infinite cosmic life. The infinity of development, promised by capitalism and embodied in its Marxist rationalization, needs to take the next step. That's why Muravyov says of cosmists: "We are more Bolshevik than the Bolsheviks themselves ... The revolution is not revolutionary enough for us. It is too narrowly focused on political tasks, whereas we want a cosmic revolution of the world."<sup>3</sup>

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**Arseny Zhilyaev** is an artist based in Moscow and Venice. His projects examine the legacy of Soviet museology and the museum within the philosophy of Russian Cosmism.

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1  
Available at marxists.org  
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1901/xx/20thcent.htm>.

2  
Valerian Muravyov, *Questions of Philosophy*, 1992, #1, 100–01 (in Russian).

3  
G. P. Aksenov, “The Searcher of The Last Truth,” foreword to *The Mastering of Time* by Valerian Muravyov, 1998, 8 (in Russian). In the original Russian, the first sentence of this quotation appears in French: “Nous sommes plus bolchevistes que les bolcheviques memes!”