

Boris Groys
**Genealogy of
Humanity**

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Notions of humanity and humanism are put into question today for having disregarded differences between races, genders, ethnicities, and sexual orientations, and as ideological constructions legitimizing the domination of a certain part of the world population over others. This critique is not new. After Edmund Burke read the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, issued by the French revolutionaries in 1789, he famously stated that the only conclusion that he drew was that it is better to be an Englishman than a man. The terror of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars only confirmed his skepticism. Indeed, many post-Revolutionary thinkers such as Joseph de Maistre or Alphonse de Lamartine saw the return of religion as the only means of reuniting humankind and reconnecting with nature: they believed that humanity needed a mediator who could unite people in spite of their differences, and that only God was capable of transcending the world and its divisions to act as such a mediator.

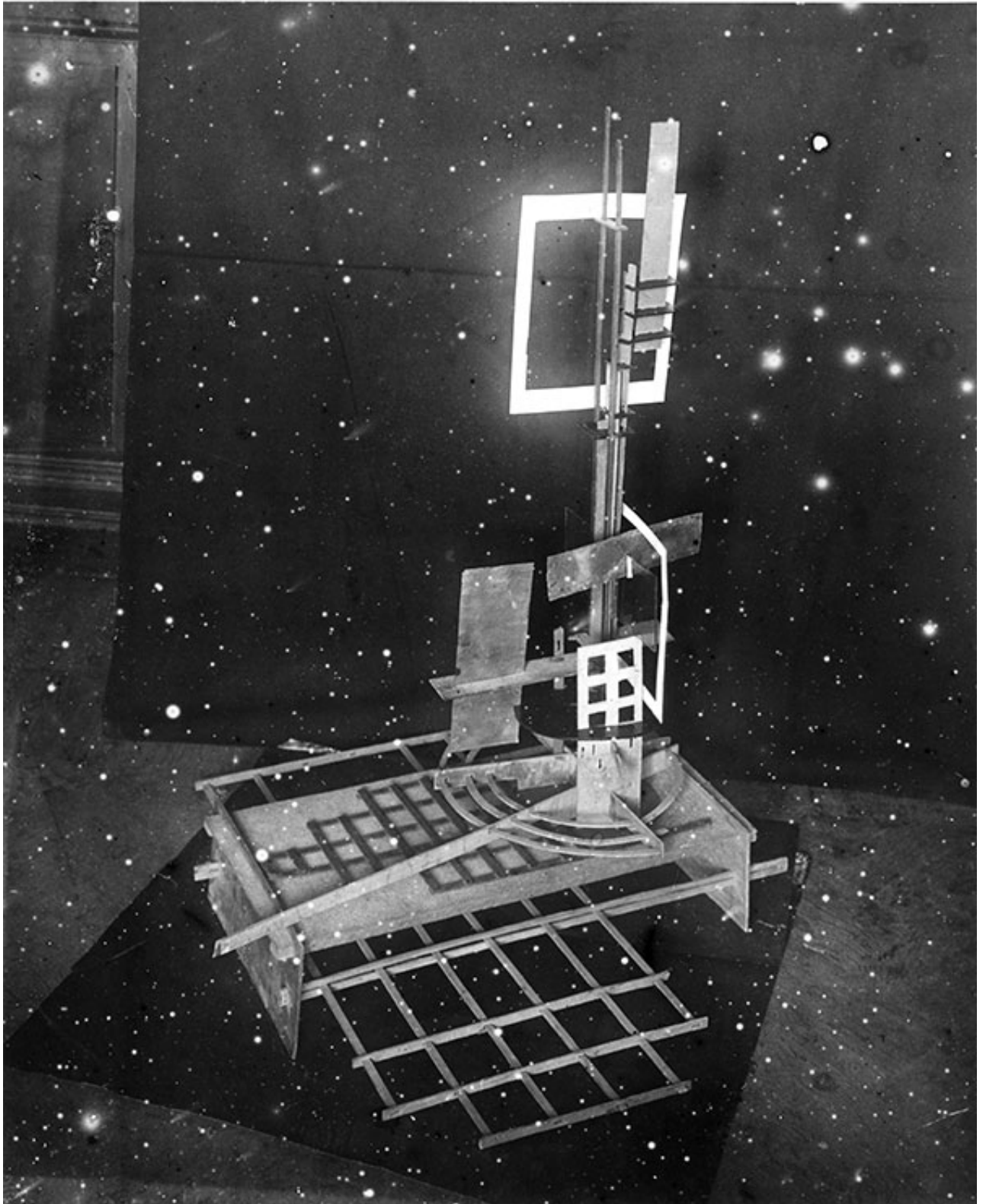
This religious turn was not only characteristic of reactionary thinking seeking to restore prerevolutionary conditions, but also of much progressive thinking that took the French Revolution as its point of departure. German idealism, which posited different versions of spirit as a unifying force, is the classical example. A different project for unifying postrevolutionary mankind can be found in the positivist religious program proposed by Auguste Comte in 1852 in his book titled *System of Positive Polity, or Treatise on Sociology, Instituting the Religion of Humanity*. Through Comte's work we can trace the genealogy of the notion of humanity more generally, but also identify his influence on Russian thought in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century, when, before and after the October Revolution, influential Russian writers crucial to the emergence of Russian cosmism revisited his religion of humanity.

Comte's treatise has an interesting history. Before writing his *Positive Polity*, Comte was already working on a system of positive knowledge. His positivist attitude was extremely consequential – he rejected all transcendent and spiritual tendencies in favor of empirical experience. However, in the years 1844–46, when he was in his late forties, something happened to him: he fell in love with Clotilde de Vaux. She was around thirty years old, and though both of them were divorced, their relationship remained platonic. Clotilde de Vaux had fragile health, however, and died in the year 1846. After her death, Comte embarked upon a process of deifying his beloved. From the very beginning, the religion of humankind was the religion of

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Detail of a painting of Holy Clotilde de Vaux, one of the saints of the Positivist Church founded by Auguste Comte, Chapel of Humanity, Paris.



Gustav Klucis, *Photograph of a Construction*, circa 1920. Collection of the State Museum of Contemporary Art in Thessaloniki, Greece.

Clotilde de Vaux in particular, and of femininity more generally. In his preface to *Positive Polity*, Comte writes that he had begun to work on its main ideas in the 1820s, already then thinking about a form of religious teaching that could replace monotheism after its decline. But only after meeting Clotilde de Vaux did Comte arrive at the concept of positivist religion. Accordingly, Comte dedicates the book to her memory. At the beginning of the book, he establishes the main principle of the new religion: reason must be subjected to sentiment, to feeling. Here Comte redefines the main principle of his philosophy rejecting all spirituality inaccessible to feeling, including reason. Here Comte understands feeling not only as empirical experience, but also as a unifying social principle. Comte, of course, did not forget that Robespierre wanted to install reason as a religion. Thus, for Comte, reason became associated with terror. To prevent such a development, and in accordance with his own experience of platonic love, Comte envisions a society with women as its spiritual leaders. The main, and actually only, day of celebration in this new religion would be the day of Holy Clotilde de Vaux.

Comte writes that only the religion of humanity can be considered a true religion because it implies the veneration of something that undeniably exists: humanity itself. For Comte, it is only humanity that truly exists:

Man indeed, as an individual, cannot properly be said to exist, except in the too abstract brain of modern metaphysicians. Existence in the true sense can only be predicated of Humanity; although the complexity of her nature prevented men from forming a systematic conception of it, until the necessary stages of scientific initiation had been passed.¹

Thus, humanity is the Supreme Being. Of course, the existence of humanity can be endangered, but for Comte, this would only intensify the religion of humanity. Here the extent to which the religion of humanity can be perceived as a religion of love becomes clear.

However, the tone of Comte's *Positive Polity* changes over the course of the book, especially where he discusses communism. Indeed, Comte believes that in communism social sentiment goes too far and begins to undermine the social order based, as we now see, not in love but in astronomy – the cosmic order. Comte reminds us how Newton showed that we live under the same laws of gravity as the celestial bodies. So, according to Comte, the first science on which social order should be based is astronomy. He writes:

It is well to remember sometimes, and to regret, the grave imperfections of an Order which we cannot modify. And yet no wise man would wish to be set free from it; and to see human life not merely loosened from all restraint, but devoid of any fixed object. The craving for this desultory independence is but one of the extravagances of metaphysical self-conceit. The defects which abound in every department of human life should result in prompting us to modify the External Order under its secondary aspects, although its fundamental laws are beyond the reach of our intervention. Even where our power is greatest, the initiative is not ours.²

Here the opposition is formulated between communism and astronomy. Communism can be only initiated as a metaphysical self-delusion that ignores the fact that humanity is inscribed into the cosmic order. The only way that remains open is that of moral self-perfection. Comte describes socialism and communism as attempts to replace moral reform with political reform: an impossible project from an astronomical, cosmic point of view.

Comte became very popular in Russia before 1917. The opposition between astronomy and communism was the actual starting point for Russian cosmism. One can clearly see this in the 1909 book *Religion and Socialism* by Anatoly Lunacharsky, who later became the first Soviet minister of culture. In this two-volume work, Lunacharsky tells the history of the world religions culminating in Comte's religion of humanity. Like his friend and collaborator Alexander Bogdanov, Lunacharsky was a positivist, inspired by the work of Mach and Avenarius.

However, Lunacharsky saw "cosmism" as the main deficit in Comte's positivist religion. Here Lunacharsky manifests himself as a Nietzschean, writing that the universe is not cosmic order but chaos – a place of struggle for domination by different material forces. The world is cruel, he writes, and in a state of anarchy in which each should fight for oneself – and can either win or lose. This celebration of Nietzschean Dionysian chaos is, of course, characteristic not only of Lunacharsky but also of the Russian avant-garde, especially the futurists. Thus, the so-called mystery-opera *Victory Over the Sun*, written and staged by the Russian futurists in 1913 (Alexei Kruchenykh, Velimir Khlebnikov, Matyushin, Malevich), celebrates the imprisonment of the sun, the collapse of the cosmic order, and a kind of cosmic night in which all becomes possible.

Here, indeed, chaos reigns. The usual chains of cause and effect are torn apart and life becomes unpredictable. In this chaos, only strongmen (*silachi*) can survive – actually, the futurists themselves. And the opera ends with the promise that the strongmen will live forever: their reign of chaos will never end.

What guarantees the fulfillment of this promise? Nothing, actually. In his comments on the Hegelian notion of history, Nietzsche criticized Hegel precisely for his attempts to find an ontological guarantee for historical progress. Instead, Nietzsche said, one should concentrate on one's own hopes and expectations, not on possible disappointments and failures. One can find the same figure in the writings of Georges Sorel, who, in a 1907 letter to Daniel Halévy, wrote:

Men who are participating in a great social movement always picture their coming action as a battle in which their cause is certain to triumph. These constructions, knowledge of which is so important for historians, I propose to call myths; the syndicalist “general strike” and Marx’s catastrophic revolution are such myths.³

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Lunacharsky uses the same figure as he tries to synthesize Comte’s religion of humanity, Georges Sorel’s notion of “social myth,” and the Nietzschean *Übermensch*. Common to them is the conviction that the decision to act does not – and should not – be based on any external investigation or reason. We speak here about inner convictions – about myth, religion, and faith in one’s own victory.

But what is victory for humanity? The answer is clear: its existence. As humanity has no goal beyond itself (no God), the goal of humanity is to secure its own existence. If the actual existence of humanity here and now is a fact, its existence in the future becomes a matter of faith, of social mythmaking, of the sociocratic project. But this social myth is necessary for our actions, because if we did not believe that humanity would continue to exist, all our own plans and projects would become unrealizable. Thus, human history becomes monumental history in the Nietzschean sense – moving from one project to another, from one hope to another (and not from one disappointment to another, as in the Hegelian narrative – in the hope that historical reason triumphs in the end, beyond all our human projects). One project of such a monumental history is that of the “common task”



Solomon Nikritin, *Black Square with a White Form*, circa 1920s. Collection of the State Museum of Contemporary Art in Thessaloniki, Greece.

developed by Nikolai Fedorov in the late nineteenth century.

The project of the common task, in summary, consists of the creation of the technological, social, and political conditions under which it would become possible to resurrect, by technological means, all people who have ever lived in the past. Here Fedorov was reacting to an internal contradiction in the theories of progress that dominated the nineteenth century: that future generations would enjoy a happy utopian future at the expense of cynically accepting to exclude all previous generations from the realm of this future utopia. Progress thus functioned as an outrageous historical injustice: an exploitation of the dead in favor of the living, and of those alive today in favor of those who will live in the future. Yet, is it possible to think technology in terms different from those of historical progress, with its orientation towards the future?

Fedorov believed that a technology directed towards the past is possible, and actually already exists. It is artistic technology – especially technology used by art museums. The museum does not punish obsolete individual items with removal and destruction. Thus, the museum is fundamentally at odds with progress:

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the museum loves its items and promises to keep them for a potentially infinite time. Progress consists in replacing old things with new things. However, for Fedorov progress is not dictated by the inner dynamic of technological development itself. According to Fedorov, technology produces new tools either for war or for fashion. Both are connected to the reproduction of mankind by organic means (fashion is used by women to attract men, and war is used by men to conquer women). In other words, technology takes the form of progress only because it remains subjected to organic, animal life and its needs. Technological production serves the biological reproduction of humankind. Thus, when technology is turned around and used not to serve the production of new generations, but instead the resurrection of previous generations, progress will stop. Already Vladimir Solovyov in his *Meaning of Love* states that true love excludes the desire to have children: rather, true human love is the desire for the immortality of the beloved body.⁴ Progress is dictated by the animality in humanity. Here a human still sees oneself not as an emancipated, autonomous individual, but merely as a representative of the human genre, and is thus ready to accept death as a precondition for the



Gustav Klucis, *Lithograph for the cover of Alexei Kruchenykh's Four Phonetic Novels*, circa 1920s. Collection of the State Museum of Contemporary Art in Thessaloniki, Greece.

reproduction of this genre.

The truly emancipated individual experiences oneself, rather, as an artwork that should be protected from decay and annihilation. Accordingly, true technology is the technology of sustainability. Thus, museum technology cares for individual things, makes them last, makes them immortal. The Christian immortality of the soul is replaced by the immortality of things or bodies in the museum. And divine grace is replaced by curatorial decisions and the technology of museum preservation. All of the people living and all the people who have ever lived must rise from the dead as artworks and be preserved in museums. Technology as a whole must become the technology of art. And the state must become the museum of its population. Just as the museum's administration is responsible not only for the general holdings of the museum's collection but also for the intact state of every given work of art, making certain that the individual artworks are subjected to conservation and restoration when they threaten to decay, the state should bear responsibility for the continued life of every individual person. The state can no longer permit itself to allow individuals to die privately, or to allow the dead to rest peacefully in their graves. Death's limits must be overcome by the state. Modern biopower must become total.

This totality is achieved by equating art and politics, life and technology, state and museum. Overcoming the boundaries between life and art is not a matter of merely introducing art into life but is, rather, a radical museification of life. By unifying living space and museum space, biopower extends itself into infinity to become the organized technology of eternal life. Such a total biopower is, of course, no longer democratic: no one expects artworks preserved in a museum collection to democratically elect the curator who will care for them. As soon as human beings become radically modern – understood as bodies among other bodies, things among other things – they accept that state-organized technology will treat them accordingly. This acceptance has a crucial precondition, however: the explicit goal for any new power must be eternal life here on earth for everyone. Only then can the state cease to be a partial, limited biopower of the sort described by Foucault's biopolitics, and become a total biopower.

This can be seen as the last step in the secularization of Christianity, for secularization remains only partial if it merely negates, censors, or prohibits the hopes, desires, and demands for life that religion articulates. It is not enough to say that there is no such thing as immortality, and prohibit people from seeking it out. Rather,

one should show how immortality could be reached by secular means. Russian cosmists inherited and radicalized the Marxist shift from divine grace to secular technology. However, there is one essential difference between the traditional Marxist project and that of the cosmists. Marxism does not raise the problem of immortality: the communist paradise on earth achieved through revolutionary struggle and creative work is understood as a realization of harmony between man and nature – a harmony that secures human happiness, but within the framework of “human nature” – which includes the inevitability of natural death. On the contrary, cosmism denies death the status of natural death – for cosmists, death is always artificial because it can be technologically prevented.

However, artificial immortality is a fragile immortality. It is not ontologically given but merely technologically secured (as is God or gods). But how can it be secured? The answer is obvious: only when the whole of cosmic space is placed under technological control. Here the cosmos is not understood as given, as the cosmos of Greek antiquity that resists the powers of chaos. Rather, cosmic space is interpreted as a huge factory – a field of operations whose goal is to secure living space for resurrected generations. Here the Fedorovian project of the common task calls us to think and act beyond the traditional opposition between order and chaos that dominated the cosmic imagination of the nineteenth century from Comte to Nietzsche. The domain of natural forces and natural laws is to be replaced by technology and social organization. This technology allows the possibility of superseding the old cosmic order not by chaos, but by imposing a new order on the totality of the cosmos. Here again, the question of astronomy becomes central.

In his text “Architecture and Astronomy,” we see how Fedorov deals with the opposition between astronomy and communism established by Comte:

Imagine now that the energy sent to the Earth by the Sun, which presently scatters off into space, could instead be conducted onto the Earth, thanks to a massive configuration of lightning rod-aerostats, implements that will drive solar light to our planet. Imagine that this solar energy, once directed earthward, might alter the density of its new home, weaken the bonds of its gravity, giving rise in turn to the possibility of manipulating its celestial course through the heavens, rendering the planet Earth, in effect, a great electric boat. No sooner will this creation have gazed up to the heavens

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than it will begin sailing the celestial seas, with the sum total of the human race rendered as captain, crew, and maintenance staff of this Earth Ship.⁵

Not only society, but the whole cosmos should become the field for realizing the common task. The forces of gravitation weaken to produce, not chaos, but a chance for humankind to freely move the earth through the cosmic ocean. Sociocracy expands into the universe in its entirety.

The Fedorovian project influenced many Russian intellectuals and artists who became active after the October Revolution. Among them were the representatives of the biocosmist-immortalists – a small political party that had its roots in Russian anarchism. In their first manifesto from 1922 they wrote, “We take the essential and real right of man to be the right to exist (immortality, resurrection, rejuvenation) and the freedom to move in cosmic space (and not the supposed rights announced when the bourgeois revolution was declared in 1789).”⁶ Alexander Svyatogor, one of the leading biocosmist theoreticians, took immortality to be at once the goal and the prerequisite for a future communist society, since true social solidarity could only reign among immortals: death separates people; private property cannot truly be eliminated if every human being owns a private piece of time.

However, the artists of the Russian avant-garde were less impressed by the perspective of immortality than by the promise of free navigation in cosmic space. Especially Malevich understood true liberation as liberation from gravity – as free movement in all directions on earth and through the cosmos. In Malevich’s Suprematism the communist project anticipates its final victory over astronomy.

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1
Auguste Comte, *System of Positive Polity: General View of Positivism and Introductory Principles*, trans. John Henry Bridges (London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1875), 268.

2
Ibid., 408.

3
Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, trans. T. E. Hulme (New York: Peter Smith, 1941), 22.

4
Vladimir Solovyov, *The Meaning of Love* (Hudson: Lindisfarne Books, 1985).

5
Nikolai Fedorov, “Astronomy and Architecture,” trans. Ian Dreiblatt, in *Russian Cosmism*, ed. Boris Groys (Cambridge, MA: e-flux and MIT Press, forthcoming Spring 2018), 56.

6
Kreatorii Rossiiskikh i Moskovskikh Anarchistov-Biokosmistov, “Deklarativnaia rezolyutsiia,” *Biokosmist* 1 (1922): 1–3.