

## Work, Kayfabe and the Development of Proletarian Culture: Professional Wrestling as Potential Proletkult

David S. Moon

University of Bath, UK

d.s.moon@bath.ac.uk

*Analogies between politics and pro-wrestling have a long pedigree and are almost always meant negatively. What if, however, pro-wrestling is standing on its head in such analogies and must be turned right side up again? Building off arguments presented by Warden, Chow and Laine, this article argues that when approached as a specific form of embodied labor, embedded within the industry-specific performance convention known as kayfabe, a truer political analogy might compare pro-wrestling with the Proletkult, the cultural organization born amidst the 1917 Russian Revolutions to develop a new “proletarian culture” and usher in a socialist society. This is not to claim pro-wrestling offers a modern-day mirror of the historical Proletkult. Rather, drawing upon the work of Alexander Bogdanov, the leading intellectual force behind the Proletkult, this identifies pro-wrestling’s latent potential to act as an anti-hierarchical, egalitarian organizational form able to platform human creativity with the goal of developing proletarian culture.*

*Keywords: Proletkult, pro-wrestling, Alexander Bogdanov, kayfabe, body work*

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### **Pro-wrestling as Political Analogy**

Analogies between politics and pro-wrestling are perennial, the practice reaching critical levels with World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) Hall of Famer Donald Trump’s election as President of the United States. With Trump, we were told, “the entire American public sphere turned itself into one big wrestling arena” (Schjørring 23) with “the language and postures of wrestling increasingly apparent among the nation’s highest ranks” (Bateman). Comparing politics to pro-wrestling is clearly meant negatively; as Larry De Garis summarizes, “[p]rofessional wrestling and modern-day politics share a defining characteristic: they’re both bullshit and pretty much everyone knows it” (“The Money and the Miles” 208).

Alternative perspectives on the alleged “pro-wrestling-ification” of politics (Mazer 195) have been proffered, the most interesting by Claire Warden, Broderick Chow, and Eero Laine, who claim “if we watched politics more like wrestling fans then we wouldn’t have a Trump presidency,” and “if we approached work as

wrestlers do ... then we would have a stronger opposition in a political sense” (202). Many will find such claims outlandish; however, I believe pro-wrestling suffers a certain mystification in most analogies with politics, wherein it is standing on its head and must be turned right side up again. Embracing this task, and building from Warden et al., I argue that when approached as a specific form of embodied labor embedded within the industry-specific performance convention known as kayfabe, a truer political analogy might compare pro-wrestling not with Trumpism but with the Proletkult, the cultural organization born amidst the 1917 Russian Revolutions to develop a new “proletarian culture” and usher in a socialist society. This is not to position pro-wrestling as a modern-day mirror of the historical Proletkult (a portmanteau of the Russian “*proletarskaya kultura*,” aka Proletarian Culture) in its Soviet-specific organizational form. Rather, as Nika Dubrovsky and David Graeber have shown, the Proletkult’s value is its legacy as an anti-hierarchical, egalitarian organizational form for the platforming of human creativity, with the goal of developing said proletarian culture. It is within this goal and ethos I see pro-wrestling’s potential as Proletkult.

Embracing this argument, I also embrace the writings of Alexander Bogdanov, the first person to consciously use the term “proletarian culture” (Murray 11), the central intellectual influence behind the Proletkult, and theoretical inspiration for this article’s argument. This article’s advocacy of Bogdanov’s concept of proletarian culture is not strictly Bogdanovist, however, as it does not conceive of a monist proletarian culture emerging from a context of machine labor and increased automation. Pro-wrestling, I argue, *is* proletarian labor, but of a different form than Bogdanov foresaw. Instead, in the tradition of McKenzie Wark, and Paul Mason (195–97), I adopt several key concepts underpinning Bogdanov’s understanding of proletarian culture: (1) the labor point of view; (2) the belief that cultural revolution must proceed political revolution; (3) the need to reenvision past culture rather than abandon or absorb it; and (4) comradely cooperation as socialism’s central element. These are supplemented with Marx’s early writings on the organic/inorganic body, unpublished at the time of Bogdanov’s writing. The thesis presented here is not that the contemporary commercial form of pro-wrestling offers a model for proletarian culture; far from it. Rather, inspired by Bogdanov, I argue the specific nature of its embodied labor form, with kayfabe as its central performative logic, means a form of pro-wrestling organized around the principles of the Proletkult could potentially function similarly by platforming human creativity and developing and promulgating a proletarian culture that advances socialist politics.

This argument is made in several parts. The first introduces Alexander Bogdanov and the Proletkult, outlining key tenants of proletarian culture. The second explains pro-wrestling's status as both proletarian labor and culture. With this established, I turn to the theoretical heart of the argument, introducing and explaining the labor point of view underpinning Bogdanov's perspective. This leads into a reflection on pro-wrestling as labor, specifically as "body work" founded upon an ethos of care, cooperation and trust (here re-engaging with Warden et al.) Supplementing Bogdanov's labor point of view with Marx's early writings on the body, I then illustrate the revolutionary cultural potential inherent in pro-wrestling's specific form of embodied labor. Building from this I extend the argument beyond the workers in the ring to the labor of the surrounding audience, here bringing in the concept of kayfabe as a tool vested with an imminent power for ideological critique. Specifically, drawing upon Laine's work, I argue that kayfabe offers a means via which audiences can appreciate the *labor* of the performance—in the first (capitalist) instance in its exploitative form, but subsequently through a (socialist) appreciation of the artistic *techne*, grounded in comradely cooperation and creativity. The paper concludes with some tentative reflections on the institutional form of a revolutionized, Proletkultist pro-wrestling.

### **Bogdanov and the Proletkult**

The Proletkult emerged in concrete form with the Russian revolutions of 1917. Laying claim to represent proletarian interests in the cultural sphere, autonomous from Communist Party diktat, it sought to develop a new "proletarian culture" via the creation of a vast network of studios in the arts and sciences. Espousing "a grass-roots amateur culture that encouraged the workers to participate in a de-hierarchised creative process" (Bishop 61), the Proletkult became a genuine mass movement during the Civil War, with an estimated peak of half a million participants engaged across 1,381 Proletkult organizations by the close of 1920 (Sochor 129). The Proletkult was ultimately suffocated by a series of decrees from the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party, which led to the Proletkult's integration into the People's Commissariat of Education (Narkompros) and its subsequent termination as an institution. Directly behind this decision lay Lenin's personal fear of Proletkult's autonomy as a potential platform for his old rival Alexander Bogdanov.

Born in 1873 in the Grodno province (now Poland), Bogdanov became a Social Democrat whilst a medical student at Moscow University. Expelled for activist activities, he served time in exile and prison before emigrating to Switzerland in 1904. There he joined Lenin, becoming first his closest ally and subsequently greatest rival for the leadership of the Bolsheviks, until his organized expulsion from

the central committee in 1909. Working alongside Maxim Gorky and Anton Lunacharsky, Bogdanov subsequently headed the new *Vpered* faction of the Russian Social Democratic Party, whose reinterpretation of Marxist theory gave culture a more creative, central role in comparison to Lenin's rigid materialism (Mally 4). It was here Bogdanov developed his conceptualization of proletarian culture, viewing its development as necessary to build the foundations of a socialist society within the confines of the existing capitalist one. When the group dissolved, Bogdanov dedicated himself to philosophical work until, in 1917, alongside Lunacharsky, he founded the initial groups of what would become the Proletkult—an organization that, as Sochor describes, came “as close as possible to being a ‘live laboratory’ for Bogdanov’s ideas” (126).

Bogdanov believed that “[a]rt organizes social experience by means of live images not only in the sphere of knowledge but also in the sphere of feelings and aspirations” (qtd. in Sochor 126). Artistic training thus formed the core of local Proletkult activities, offering a vast array of programs through its networks of studios that included “lecture series, seminars, studios, exhibitions, theatres, orchestras, and even workshops in circus technique” (Mally 124). Its leaders called upon workers to view these studios as “live laboratories” in which to “work out in life” the elements of proletarian culture.

Workers were encouraged to engage with all forms of art—writing music, plays, poetry and novels, producing paintings, sculptures, and prints—within studio environments explicitly designed to be non-patronizing, non-hierarchical, and hopefully supportive in evoking participants’ creativity and encouraging improvisation. Bogdanov saw the bourgeois system as one where individualism and competition are the guiding principles, with workers required to obey and implement orders with no space for their own inventive faculties. Within the Proletkult studios, collectivism was encouraged by replacing hierarchies of authority with such comradely cooperation even “collective authorship” of works. Notably for subsequent discussions, within Proletkult theatres this collective ethos extended to audiences, who were seen as participants, interacting, and responding to the acting with interjections (Bishop 53-54). Also encouraged was the abandonment of specialization, avoidance of formal distinctions and hierarchies among studio members—with equality decreed between all participants—and the synthetization of arts.

Central to Proletkult’s aim was the inculcation, through the studios’ work, of creativity, collectivism, and comradely cooperation (Sochor 132-36), each deemed vital constituting foundations of the proletarian culture necessary to supersede the hegemonic values indoctrinated by the bourgeois system. Were pro-wrestling to act

as a twenty-first century Proletkult it would look little like this twentieth century Proletkult; however, the aims and ethos would remain the same—providing a creative platform for workers to develop a proletarian culture founded on these same principles.

### **Pro-wrestling as Proletarian Labor**

But is pro-wrestling proletarian? My short answer is yes, even if not as Bogdanov pictured. This is not simply arguing that “professional wrestling is a working-class sport” as Nonini and Teraoka do (162). Pro-wrestling’s long noted popularity amongst working-class audiences (e.g. Freedman 71) affords it no particular value as a source of proletarian culture as leading Proletkultists envisaged; as Sheila Fitzpatrick notes, “[a]ll Marxist intellectuals agreed, without even thinking about it, that proletarian culture had little or nothing to do with observable popular lower-class habits and cultural tastes” (54). This held true for a heterodox Marxist like Bogdanov also. Pro-wrestling achieves a double flex here, however, by embodying both an example of “lower-class” cultural output dismissed by Marxist intellectuals *and* a form of proletarian work of the kind esteemed by those same intellectuals.

But what *is* pro-wrestling? De Garis describes it as “a hybrid form of sport, street fight, ballet, spectacle, and soap opera” that “defies easy categorization” (“The ‘Logic’ of Professional Wrestling” 195). MacFarlane dubs it a “global art.” It is both. At its simplest, however, it is a live physical performance enacting inter-personal combat, at the core of which is a connection between the performers and their in-person audience (Chow, Laine and Warden 2). This performance is held together by this connection, which involves a willing suspension of disbelief, wherein both performers and audience all “keep kayfabe” (Chow, “Paterre” 75). Kayfabe is the most important concept within pro-wrestling and its academic study. Once upon a time, it referred to the noble lie that excluded outsiders from the predetermined reality of the “sport.” Today, keeping kayfabe involves an audience choice to invest and participate in key performance conventions, thereby co-producing the performance (Hill 176). This is an active, collaborative relationship, wherein fans both create and sustain kayfabe, whilst simultaneously dissecting it with a discerning eye on how well performers “follow the rules of the performance practice and play their role” (Chow, “Paterre” 74).

The nature of pro-wrestling is further developed below; however, with this basic description an important if obvious point can be established: pro-wrestling is a cultural production, but it is *also* labor. As Oglesby notes, pro-wrestling “produces stories told primarily through *laboring*, porous bodies in close contact” (93; emphasis added); it is, as he put it, “a form of *body work* that focuses on the handling, assessing, monitoring, and/or manipulating of bodies” (89). Critics might,

nevertheless, argue that while pro-wrestling may be work, it is not *productive* work fit to label proletarian. Laine has dealt with this point head on. It is true, he notes, that “professional wrestling performs labor, but nothing tangible is produced”; however, following Marx, the labor of pro-wrestling does produce something—surplus value for the capitalist who employs the wrestlers: “Professional wrestlers, like other performers, need not produce any material goods in order to be productive for the promoters—certainly something understood by theatre producers and wrestling promoters throughout history” (*Professional Wrestling* 21–22). That this is understood by wrestlers also is seen in their industry specific argot, in which “wrestlers are called ‘workers’, a ‘work’ (noun) is a con, to ‘work’ (verb) is to perform, and convincing the audience is called ‘selling”” (Chow and Laine 46).

That pro-wrestling is labor and pro-wrestlers are workers is thus established, but is this *proletarian* labor? Ultimately, pro-wrestling is a form of physical labor in which individuals sell the labor power of their bodies for money. This is, as Nonini and Teraoka rightly state, “in principle no different from work in factories, mines, and steel mills; it is even, in some ways, a purer form, since a wrestler has no tools or machinery, but only his [or her] body to work with” (162). However, the proletarian identity of pro-wrestling is not simply down to its physicality but the famously poor working conditions, in many ways at the cutting edge of contemporary capitalist exploitation.

Pro-wrestling has a “history of union-busting dating back decades” (Oglesby 91). It generally escapes scrutiny in health and safety terms despite workers in the industry, from the indies to the WWE, experiencing “a range of work-related harms” and grueling schedules (Corteen 142–44). In a feat of definitional stretching, the WWE misclassifies its performers as “independent contractors” meaning they “do not receive health insurance, retirement pensions, paid leave or other benefits a full-time worker is potentially entitled to” (Schiavone 486). The result is an industry with an “astronomical” (492) early death-rate in which exhausted workers are forced to work when in pain (Corteen 142), a situation so bad Corteen labels the WWE specifically “a harmful business” that “entails activities that are not typically considered as criminal – but perhaps they ought to be” (148). As I note in conclusion, more positive examples of pro-wrestling promotions do exist. Nevertheless, this is the antithesis of socialist relations of production—and why pro-wrestling in its currently dominant forms is not analogous to the Proletkult. Regardless, all but the highest paid pro-wrestlers are proletarianized laborers “who must sell themselves piecemeal, [who] are a commodity, like every other article of commerce” (Marx and Engels 59); with nothing to sell but their labor power, they approach the ring “like

one who is bringing his own hide to market and has nothing to expect but—a hiding” (Marx, *Capital* 114).

So, belaboring the point, are pro-wrestlers proletarians, capable of producing a proletarian culture? If we simply cite Bogdanov, for whom the proletariat was specifically linked to machine production, despite all of the above the answer is probably not (202). The lesson of the original Proletkult, however, is to not be too prescriptive. As Mally notes:

The Proletkult was “proletarian” only in the broadest sense of the word; it drew its major support from the laboring population at large, from industrial workers and their children, from white-collar employees and artisans, and even from the peasantry.... Proletkultists passionately asserted the proletariat’s central position in the new social order, but they did not agree on just what the proletariat was. (100-01)

Pro-wrestlers may not be the industrial proletariat Bogdanov envisaged, but they are the living, breathing proletarians we have. Understanding their potential in developing a proletarian culture now requires understanding Bogdanov’s theory of “the labor point of view” (Wark 17)

### **The Labor Point of View**

Bogdanov identified humans as a “laboring being” (White 390), centering the *experience* of said labor as the labor point of view. But what is labor? Some basics were just thrashed out; however, Bogdanov provides an answer whose wording is important to grasp:

All aspects of labor boil down to this: that human beings *change the correlation of certain elements of nature*, moving them, establishing new interactions among them, etc. If we investigate each concrete act of work, we find this and nothing else. Objects and methods may be different, but the essence of the matter remains the same.

One can go further. Human beings change the correlation of the elements of nature so that they conform to their needs and desires, so that they serve their interests. In other words, they *organize* these correlations to conform to their will to live and to progress. Thus, *all in all, labor organizes the world for humanity*. (42)

Conceptualized thus, nature is “the arena of labor” (Wark 15), or as Bogdanov puts it, “[n]ature is what people call the endless unfolding field of their labor-experience” (42). In other words, it is that which is encountered by/through labor, or more specifically that which is experienced as *resistance* to labor. Resultantly, as Wark

explains, for Bogdanov “the physical world *as we know it* cannot be thought as preceding our labors upon it” (26). Rather, its limits/boundaries are discovered *in practice*, which is to say through active labor upon it. Resultantly, in Bogdanov’s words:

the practical organization of labor effort precedes the intellectual organization of elements of experience and produces it [and as such] the methods of the organization of experience derive ... from the methods of organizing activity that are already to hand.... Accordingly, methods of social practice provide the foundation for cognitive methods.... *In the final analysis, thought takes its form from social practice.* Or, to put it another way: *The interconnectedness of the elements of experience in cognition has as its basis the correlation of the elements of social activity in the labor process.* (219–20)

Culture thus develops from the experience of labor, which is to say from labor within a specific mode of production with attendant technologies (i.e., the tools and organizing schematics) through which we work to (re)organize the elements of nature.

Stemming from this, Bogdanov argues cultures have a class correspondence, as “[d]ifferent practice produces a different logic” (201). For Bogdanov, such divergent labor practices as a team of miners collectively hauling out coal and an intellectual typing up thoughts for publication will interconnect their relevant elements of experience in differing manners. The ramification is that ascendent classes needed to develop their own culture—their own “particular understanding of the world” (Bogdanov 201)—as without this, they will remain ruled by norms and values not truly their own. This cultural revolution, Bogdanov argued, was necessary *before* any political revolution. While socialism will only be possible with the abolition of private property and elimination of classes, before this elements of socialism must develop within the existing capitalist society, in particular “socialism’s most essential element—comradely cooperation” (White 274). Proletkult’s goal was to create a supportive environment that empowered workers’ creatively to facilitate the production of cultural outputs born of their experiences within the field of labor. In practice, as described above, this involved amongst other things abandoning hierarchies and specialization, and adopting collective productions of work. The distinguishing feature of the resultant cultural outputs, Bogdanov believed, would be comradely cooperation, thereby building socialist elements within a non-socialist society.

What then of our contemporary proletarians, pro-wrestlers? From the labor point of view, what organization of experience would develop from the practical organization of *their* labor efforts? Answering this illuminates pro-wrestling’s

potential in producing the key elements of proletarian culture. As a segue into the solution, Nonini and Teraoka offer a valuable point:

Wrestling as a spectacle of physical labor, offers an exuberant display of labor power. Once the rock music stops, sequined robes are shed, and valets and managers leave the ring, we are left with the bodies of the wrestlers – and it is here that wrestling really begins. Standing in the ring, fully illuminated in a semi-darkened arena, the wrestler presents the image of labor power itself; his body, in full view of the audience, displays its scars and its muscle, the visible, tangible result of work in the gym and in the wrestling ring. Not only does the wrestler work with his body, but his body is his work, and it is displayed always with pride. (163)

As labor, pro-wrestling is physical embodied work in which the body is work, and work takes the form of body-to-body interaction. It is here that we return to Oglesby's description of "body work." Understanding the nature of this body work is key to identifying "the elements of social activity in the labor process" that form the basis of the "elements of experience in cognition" (Bogdanov 219–20) and thus the class correspondence of pro-wrestling as both labor form *and* cultural production. This task is aided by comradely engagement with Warden et al.'s previously cited argument regarding pro-wrestling's progressive potential.

### **Collaboration, Care, and Trust**

A stronger political opposition to reactionary politics such as Trump's would exist, Warden et al. claim, "if we approached work as wrestlers do" (202). I hope to support and build upon this claim by establishing a link between said work and the potential development of proletarian culture. To do so, however, it is necessary to understand what is meant by *work*. As noted, the concept of "work" has a specific meaning within pro-wrestling argot, "to work" expressing coterminous meanings as both a con and performance, or as combined by Warden et al., "work" acts as "a shorthand term for the performative labor of representing a fiction" (206), the embodied labor being thus bound with(in) kayfabe. Ultimately the one cannot be separated and/or understood without the other; nevertheless, the first stage of this argument tentatively isolates the physical *technē* of the performance for discussion.

Warden et al. identify two central elements to pro-wrestling work that provide its progressive potential. The first is its collaborative nature, it being "quite obvious that because wrestling is not a real fight, wrestlers are actually cooperating." The second is its specifically embodied nature; as they explain, "it is impossible to fully understand wrestling unless you understand it as an embodied practice," pro-wrestling is "an embodied skill or technique." Both points are correct, as is the

related argument that “this collaborative labor might model a powerful and valuable embodied form of politics” (206–07). They can, however, be extended further.

Chow’s experiences learning pro-wrestling, written-up in an earlier article (“Work and Shoot”), are key to Warden et al., who write:

What is striking is the degree of care, trust, and friendship expressed in the physical practice of wrestling: the “lock-up” or “tie-up,” an almost embodiment of physical conflict, serves instead as a way of establishing a communication between bodies. Suplexes and body-slams are taught with the same care as adagio acrobalance, and while strikes “hurt,” temporarily, they necessarily require the trust of the partner. (207)

Previous descriptions of pro-wrestling’s collaborative nature have been laid out by Levi’s depiction of *lucha libre* training, where “every throw, every lock is a technique of mutuality” (36), or Nevitt’s detailed explication of the execution of a piledriver (“Popular Entertainments” 84). As Chow explains, such collaboration compels empathy:

[l]earning to chain [wrestle] is about more than executing the move “correctly,” it is about developing kinaesthetic empathy. The majority of moves employed in chain wrestling are “legitimate” moves from Greco-Roman or Freestyle wrestling, adapted to ensure they can be performed safely and repeatedly. (“Work and Shoot” 77)

Pro-wrestler Heather Bandenburg describes this empathy as practically embodied in:

the years of back-breaking pain that wrestlers endure (sometimes literally) in order to learn how not to hurt their opponent. We hurt ourselves, but not each other. We are stunt doubles that double for no one.... We look after each other. And learning how to beat someone in a match while leaving them without even a bruise, let alone as a bloody pulp, takes years to perfect. (15)

Pro-wrestling is, thus, a fundamentally cooperative practice that goes beyond simply paternalistic collaboration based upon protecting each other, to embrace an ethics founded upon openness and trust. A “process of *mutually* becoming vulnerable” is a necessary element of the craft as pro-wrestlers “put their bodies at great risk and trust that their partners will have the embodied knowledge to protect them” (Chow, “Work and Shoot” 79). It therefore requires the development of a tacit embodied knowledge—“more a matter of touch than cognition” (de Garis, “Experiments in Pro Wrestling” 72). As Oglesby reports based on his own training, pro-wrestling is “a sensuous, viscerally collaborative endeavor that privileges muscle memory cultivated only between the ropes ... defined by an ethos of care” (91–92).

Within this training (and subsequent practice) is an emphasis upon “kinaesthetic and proprioceptive awareness – the perception of the body’s positioning in relation to itself and other bodies” (Chow, “Work and Shoot” 76) with the purpose of protecting the Other and opening oneself up to their care. As Bandenburg describes, pro-wrestling “involves psychological conditioning—shaping your mind to overcome bodily reactions, such as panicking, lashing out, or freezing. Muscles have memories that learn how to defend the body instinctively from being destroyed, and wrestling involves overriding these” (16). This need to *unlearn* the instinctual reactions of the body to physical danger is central to a pro-wrestler’s safety since, as Chow explains, “attempting to protect oneself makes the move more dangerous. To lay oneself open to danger makes the move more safe—but this also requires a great deal of trust, as one is placing one’s safety in the hands of another” (“Work and Shoot” 80). Tyson Smith describes both the importance and difficulty in developing this state:

For a new student learning pro wrestling, a main challenge is developing a deep bodily trust of his fellow wrestlers. Acting out violence requires each performer to intimately coordinate his body with the body of his “opponent.” A successful performance only happens once the wrestlers learn to rely on each other, creating a synergistic flow of movements. Such trust is difficult to learn in a culture that rewards young men for their toughness, stoicism, and independence. (“Wrestling with ‘Kayfabe’” 54)

For the above reason, pro-wrestling requires the active development of a “corporeal level of intimacy, safety, and care for the other’s body” (Chow, “Work and Shoot” 83), in which “[t]he powerful, hypertrophic body of the wrestler is put to the service of pliability and softness; wrestlers embody friendship while communicating antagonism and aggression” (80).

Pointing to this as evidence of pro-wrestling’s progressive potential, Warden et al. describe “the physical practice of wrestling work” as “model[ling] a politics of friendship” (207). Some potential political implications have subsequently been developed by Laine; as he writes, “even as workers are exploited in the classic Marxist sense that promoters are extracting their labor and the wrestling form clearly stages such alienation, the mechanics and indeed the logic of wrestling may actually rely on in moments of care and camaraderie” (*Professional Wrestling* 25). With this in mind, Laine quotes Smith’s (*Fighting for Recognition*) argument that “because of its inherent empathy built upon mutual trust and protection, [pro-wrestling] has the capacity to be connective, intimate, and a means of solidarity” (87). Yet, while the message that pro-wrestling has an ethos we might ape is important, the point goes deeper—it is the very nature of this embodied work that

generates this ethos, and it is here Bogdanov helps theoretically. Grappling with the regressive reality of much pro-wrestling content, Laine concludes that “the wrestling form, the actual physical practice of wrestling, is less the problem than its theatrical overlay” (*Professional Wrestling* 47). Far from a problem, this physical practice—the *technē* of the craft —is what affords pro-wrestling its potentially radical capacity. This becomes clearer when viewed through the prism of proletarian culture and its development, as advanced by Bogdanov.

### **Embodiment and Culture**

To reiterate, Bogdanov holds that the intellectual organization of elements of experience is preceded by labor efforts, these methods of organization deriving from the nature of said social practice. One’s embodied labor experience is thus central to “how thought takes its form” (Bogdanov 219–20). To further elucidate the radical potential implicit within pro-wrestling work, Karl Marx’s early theoretical writings around the organic/inorganic body are a valuable supplement to Bogdanov here.

For Marx, to be human is to have one’s “nature outside [one]self” (“Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy in General”), being, as Fox summarizes, “profoundly open to and dependent upon objects that are ordinarily considered to be separate and external” (132). So expansive is this openness, in a general sense, that the “external” objects of nature are the “inorganic body” of man, physically separated from the “organic” body but functionally in unity (Marx, “Estranged Labor”). As an aggregation of organic and inorganic bodies in constant tension, the unity of subjective being is a state of perpetual striving. Marx views this striving as so significant that constancy and solidity are only possible by adopting social structures that provide the shared and consistent means for the coordinated and cooperative appropriation of our needed objects—that is to say, a mode of production. This mode of production acts as “the levee bank against the uncertainty and threat of our corporeality”; it is the “mode of unification” of our organic and inorganic bodies, producing a rhythm by which we stabilize and “draw ourselves together” (Fox 162–63).

Like Bogdanov, Marx’s schema sees the mental organization of the elements of our experience preceded and produced by the practical organization of the mode of production. Here we segue back into Bogdanov’s (227) argument that humans “tend to take techniques of thinking that have already been worked out and apply them everywhere” (227)—techniques that are given to us “first and foremost by their social interconnectedness, which become the basis for understanding the interconnectedness of all phenomena” (37). Pro-wrestling’s distinct labor form arguably has both organizing *and* potentially disruptive capacities. Warden et al. describe how it “*opens* the individual to the other” (208) by promoting a “radically

open hospitality” founded on instinctual trust, which “exists primarily in and through the body” (Chow, “Work and Shoot” 8). The essential character of pro-wrestling as labor is interdependence. As a worker, the pro-wrestler is, more clearly than most, the aggregate of a series of relationships with other beings, intimately involved in and dependent upon these “external” elements such that the borders between “internal” and “external” are inescapably, constitutively blurred. It is within this blurring of boundaries that pro-wrestling praxis has potential to alter the existing patterns of social relations, enabling the emergence of a new (albeit contingent) mode of ensemblment, and thus new forms of experience and expression of life. In doing so, however, it must work itself through (and ultimately beyond) the capitalist mode of production. A fundamentally collective and inter-subjective form of labor, the rotten employment practices previously described leave professional wrestlers individualized and atomized via their status as “independent contractors” (Oglesby 91), part of an industry that is “very individualistic” and “[w]ithout any type of solidarity” amongst workers (Schiavone 493). Thankfully, power to disrupt these is again found in pro-wrestling’s embodied labor form.

Marx holds that the mode of production “predominates” over other social relations, acting as “a general illumination which bathes all the other colors and modifies their particularity” (“Grundrisse”). Under this influence, however, “the coexistence of other modes of being, other forms of engagement between our organic and inorganic bodies” is still a reality (Fox 226). Amongst these, central to this argument, are those demands made upon us by the corporeal body. Such demands are encountered on a daily, ongoing basis in such forms as urination, defecation, hunger, sleep, etc. and are regularly experienced as resistance to our will (Fox 213). These “embodied, material realities often stubbornly resist symbolic transformation” (Olson 269), forcing themselves upon us, breaking our sense of the autonomous independence of our self, reminding us of our dependence on our organic body. The human body thereby “influences and constrains the symbolic structures we erect” (Olson 268). In this manner, the body become a potential source of disruption of the hegemonic culture. Our bodies are “re/active and not inert,” containing “stored bodily experience” (LeMesurier 364) that is/can be reactivated/resurrected on both an instinctual and strategic manner. Contained within us as the product of our accrued history, these habit-based, embodied memories—born predominantly, following Bogdanov and Marx, within the arena of labor—can lock us into path dependencies, disposing the body towards particular lines of thought and action. Acting as “embodied meaning cores,” they “influence not only how we meet and respond to exigencies but also what new knowledge is produced as a result of that interaction” (LeMesurier 368). In the words of Hawhee,

“bodies and language ... are often, if not always, moving together” (*Moving Bodies* 166). Returning to Bogdanov, we thus find that the influence our labor experience plays in shaping cultures is even deeper than previously detailed, extending into our flexing of muscles, the tightening of tendons, and the curve of the spine. What does this mean for pro-wrestling and proletarian cultural development?

The weight of such embodied knowledge can trap us in negative patterns of thought, attuning us to “previously learned situations” in manners that constrain our capacity to receive and compute new information. Yet, it is also possible to train and condition our bodies to embed different information and attitudes, and it is here that pro-wrestling, as a performative practice, has particular potential to influence a deeper cultural shift. LeMesurier cites “dance (or martial arts, method acting, burlesque, and so forth)” as extreme types of “[s]ystems of bodily training” that hold the explicit goal of crafting new “specialized habits of movement” and “new ways for bodily existence” (365). Pro-wrestling acts in just this manner, with a kairotic theory of regime development and training practices wherein the repetition of “micro-motions, over and over” is the means via which “a bodily rhythm [is forged] that enables a forgetting of directives” (Hawhee, *Bodily Arts* 142) to act through “immanent awareness” (69).

As indicated, “a form of tacit physical knowledge” (Chow, “Work and Shoot” 76) is an important aspect of pro-wrestling as practice, offering a deep, rich, taxonomy of moves and counter-moves, which can be drawn upon through endless invention and combination through on-the-spot improvisation in response to shifting conditions. In this manner, pro-wrestling initiates a particular series of demands upon the corporeal body, which in so doing embeds interdependence and openness to the Other. Alongside this is an emphasis “on the body in relation to other bodies and actors in space,” attuning the subject:

to potential places of action and response that arise not just from the isolated body but the body in context.... There is a larger awareness of the reciprocal influence of bodies and environments that surpasses dance interests and intersects with issues of how rhetorical actors function within overlapping ecologies and systems. (LeMesurier 377)

Within such kairotic training, the acquisition of pro-wrestling skill is not simply a process to be learnt but with a certain level of mastery can be transformational, offering “the pleasure of immersion and losing the sense of separation of mind from body and body from floor (or partner)” (Fox 224).

Training the body to instinctively cooperate with and trust the Other to protect it and to protect the Other in turn embeds such intersubjectivity into the embodied rhetoric of the pro-wrestler, creating, in the moment of performance, a

specific unification of organic and inorganic bodies in which their interrelation is brought to the surface and encoded into instinctual movements. In its subsequent organization of experience such labor offers a basis, in principle, for proletarian cultural development, pro-wrestling performances becoming cultural outputs akin to those produced in the Proletkult, aimed at building socialism within capitalism, as Bogdanov portrayed.

### **Kayfabe as Labor's Appreciation**

So far, the focus has been upon pro-wrestlers and their embodied labor within the ring; however, with kayfabe the intersubjectivity of pro-wrestling work extends to encompass the audience also. Much like Proletkult theatre, pro-wrestling audiences participate in the performance. Is this audience proletarian? Not entirely, but they *are* working, performing labor and (co-)producing culture. As Hill explains, “the passion work in professional wrestling involves different types of labor, the physical and emotional work of wrestlers and event organizers, and the work of audiences, fans and anti-fans interacting with professional performers” (175). This labor is “keeping kayfabe,” as already introduced. As Brunette and Young elucidate, by suspending their disbelief and playing along with performance conventions—cheering, booing, reacting to in-ring events—live audiences perform labor; their work plays into the paid performers’ labor, supporting it by producing “a virtual all-encompassing backdrop character for wrestlers to play off” and “producing value by contributing to the spectacle of the show” (223), thus indicating it is worth watching.

However, kayfabe today has a second side also; simultaneous to their co-production of kayfabe, audiences “read through the fiction” (Jeffries 10), parsing performances’ constitutive elements with an eye to developing immediate and long-term hypotheses about the intensions underpinning performance choices. This is “a game of prediction and interpretation to which they apply their understanding of wrestling techniques, character histories, performers and WWE as a company” (Nevitt, “The Spirit of America Lives Here” 323), part of which involves judging the verisimilitude of the actions, meaning performers’ success in “follow[ing] the rules of the performance practice and play[ing] their role” (Chow, “Paterre” 74). At the heart of kayfabe today is thus an ongoing practice focused on interpreting the performance *as a work*, which is to say, consciously recognizing it as *labor aimed at the production of kayfabe*—or as Chow and Laine label it, “the labor of illusion” (45). Kayfabe recognizes kayfabe.

Grasping this, Laine has already identified the “ability [of audiences] to see and gauge labor in the match itself” (“Kayfabe” 201–02). My thesis is that in the right context this second side of kayfabe can be shifted from recognizing pro-wrestlers’ work *is* labor to consciously appreciating it *as* labor. Moreover, this appreciation of

the performance's *labor* can take two forms. The first recognizes its exploitative (capitalist) form. Chow and Laine have noted how such recognition can be forced upon audiences when shocking moments, e.g., an injury to a wrestler:

subverts the narrative frame and reveals the labor of the wrestling body. In these moments, the substance and meaning of affirmation quickly changes, from appreciation of narrative labor (that is, the ability to tell or represent a story) and the ability to simulate violence theatrically, to a celebration of labor as such. (45)

This celebration of labor need not romanticize it. As Jansen emphasizes, “[a]ny account of professional wrestling ... is incomplete without considering the real violent labor involved in performing staged violence” (305). As talk of injury and wrestlers forced to work in pain indicates, pro-wrestling labor—even when performed well and correctly—puts tremendous strain on the human body. Moreover, Jansen warns how the specific nature of such labor, in which performers fake pains “while disguising other—real—pains”, can veil “the conditions of [the latter’s] production” (320).

Yet as Laine describes, even at its simplest level, in keeping kayfabe, thus acknowledging the work behind the work, audiences “see that workers are working, we work in the stands to cheer them on or boo them, and we know that the bosses are skimming excess value off all of us” (“Kayfabe” 201). Audience applause is thus, literally, “the acknowledgement of a *job* well done” (Chow and Laine 45; emphasis added). In recognizing pro-wrestling work as a job, moreover, said conditions of production swim into focus, available as a subject for critique. These conditions—pressure towards needless risk taking, lack of “down time” to rest and recuperate the body, etc.—are driven by capitalist maximalization of profit, creating unsafe working conditions, turning strains on the body into shortened careers.

The second form of appreciation for the performance's labor appreciates the specific nature of its embodied form. The curious nature of “keeping kayfabe” means all involved recognize and are fully cognizant of the interdependence and collaboration underpinning the performed violence—indeed its markers are visible to the trained-eye. As Bordelon describes, “the body communicates in a different language through such means as motion, gesture, and stance” (26), and in the pro-wrestling ring singular movements of this bodily rhetoric communicate two seemingly incompatible but vital messages, as concurrent with the “aggressive” snap of a suplex is the collaboration of the move “taker” in propelling the lift and “selling” the blow, and the protection supplied by the move “giver” as they bring them to the canvas. Appreciating such body work, audiences thus appreciate its grounding in

comradely cooperation and creativity, intuiting in their own co-productive labor the same features. Thus, might proletarian culture be developed and promulgated.

### **For Worker Control**

Ultimately, such development will require revolutionary changes. As Laine notes, presently, “while the labored performance of professional wrestling may allow some moments or sense of solidarity between workers, it is at the same time leveraged for the needs of the promoter” (*Professional Wrestling* 26). The “general illumination” shed by the capitalist mode of production is a powerful force constraining the creativity of labor and increasing its endangerment—it is within these conditions that pro-wrestlers, as proletarians, must grapple towards a world beyond waged labor where workers are freed from conditions deleterious to their health and creative wellbeing, and in-ring actions are undertaken for the pleasure of performing, not shaped by calculations regarding pay packets.

As a Marxist, Bogdanov believed socialism will only be possible with the abolition of private property and elimination of classes. He also believed, however, that cultural revolution must proceed political revolution, the development of proletarian culture being necessary to arm the ascendant working class with cognitive tools for socialist rule. Elements of socialism could and must, therefore, develop within the existing capitalist system. My thesis presented here is that, in a manner analogous to the Proletkult, pro-wrestling could potentially facilitate that development. This is not to say pro-wrestling is innately progressive; its legacy of sexism, hypermasculinity, and racism is well known. These, however, are issues with “its theatrical overlay,” not “the wrestling form, the actual physical practice of wrestling” (Laine, *Professional Wrestling* 47).

Either way, Bogdanov did not support a cultural *tabula rasa* in which proletarians broke with such bourgeoisie art entirely; rather, “[he] urged the workers to study their cultural heritage in order to discover what was important to them and what was not” (Murray 197). The Proletkult’s anti-hierarchical, egalitarian organizational form provided a platform facilitating such critical study and proletarian creativity. For pro-wrestling to live up to its potential as such a platform new relations of production will also be required. Existing studies already illustrate alternative models of organization, from the “Burning Hearts” training sessions Bandenburg (189-99) describes, to the potential of feminist promotions like EVE (Litherland, Phillips, and Warden) or queer indie promotions like A Matter of Pride (Westerling), such examples crying out for future close-readings to help connect theory with on-the-ground practice. If then, study can influence praxis, a vision of *workers’* control and proletarian cultural promotion should be pro-wrestling’s future.

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