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**Digitalization and the Anthropodicy Problem
in Andrei Platonov's Works***

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Abstract

The article identifies the main features of the Russian writer Andrei Platonov's (1899–1951) comprehension of the anthropological consequences of the radical social transformation during the years of the “Great Turn,” or “Great Break” (i.e., the years of Stalin's reforms that started in 1929). Platonov's evaluation is unique in its scale and depth. He was among the first authors to draw attention to the typological commonness of Soviet and German totalitarianisms. Their similarities are not only rooted in the design of the respective regimes. Vice versa, the design itself is generated by the possibilities of inhuman rationalistic activism in mass society. Platonov's texts written in 1929–1934 were devoted, rather than to mass collectivism or political and socio-cultural reorganization, to anthropology and the possibility of reorganizing man, together with his cosmos. The main idea of these literary works is search for a universal way of human existence in general, including the living and the dead. In these texts, Platonov deeply conceived and felt the complete emptiness and inhumanity of doctrinaire rationalistic activism, when it is accepted as a practical maxim for the universal human will. This body of texts does not represent a dystopian view of a possible future, yet it relates the shock of an encounter with an unexpectedly ambiguous future and the author's longing and suffering in his attempts to

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understand it. Such attempts lead to the need for a new anthropodicy as a justification for a human existence, notwithstanding man's limitations and finiteness. In this respect, the results of Platonov's reflections are extremely relevant in relation to the analysis of humanitarian factors and the consequences of currently ongoing digitalization of practically all spheres of life, as well as in terms of searching for new foundations of human life under these conditions. Platonov's works turn out to be more relevant than the alarmism of the philosophers of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory and than the contemporary demonization by the conceptions of digital posthumanity and transhumanism. Platonov's relevance is due to the depth of the topics and problems he raised, and their meaning is just beginning to be revealed today.

Keywords: anthropology, corporeity, digitalization, utopia, self-awareness.

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Цифровизация и проблема антроподицеи: читая Андрея Платонова*

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Аннотация

Статья представляет попытку выявить главное содержание осмысления А. Платоновым антропологических следствий радикальной

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трансформации социального бытия в годы «Великого перелома». Это осмысление важно своим масштабом и глубиной. А. Платонов одним из первых обратил внимание на типологическую общность советского и германского тоталитаризма. Такая общность коренится не только и не столько в дизайне политических режимов. Наоборот – сам этот дизайн порожден возможностями бес- и вне-человеческого рационалистического активизма в массовом обществе. Тексты Платонова 1929–1934 гг. посвящены не столько массовому коллективизму, политике и социально-культурному переустройству, сколько антропологии, возможности переустройства человека как такового в его единстве с космосом. Главная идея этих текстов – единый универсальный способ бытия человека вообще, включая живых и мертвых. Платонов глубоко продумал и прочувствовал в этих текстах ясность полной пустоты бесчеловечности доктринерского рационалистического активизма, который принят в качестве практической максимы общечеловеческой воли. Этот корпус текстов представляет не антиутопию как некое представление о возможном будущем, а шок от столкновения с неожиданно наставшим неоднозначным будущим, тоску и страдания от попытки понять его. Попытки такого осмысления приводят к необходимости новой антроподике как оправдания бытия человека перед лицом его ненужности и исчерпанности. В этом плане результаты платоновского осмысления чрезвычайно актуальны применительно к анализу гуманитарных факторов и следствий современной цифровизации практически всех сфер жизни, а также в плане поиска новых оснований человеческого бытия в этих условиях. Творчество Платонова оказывается более актуальным, чем алармизм философов франкфуртской школы критической социальной философии и чем современные хорроризации цифровой постчеловечностью и трансгуманизмом. Актуальность эта обусловлена глубиной поднятых им тем и вопросов, содержание которых только начинает открываться в наши дни.

Ключевые слова: антропология, самосознание, телесность, утопия, цифровизация.

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Introduction

The image of modern civilization is largely determined by ongoing digitalization, that is, by the development and use of technologies based on discreteness, algorithmicity, computability, and programmability. Developing Alvin Toffler's idea [Toffler 1984], we can now discuss the present-day civilization as the "Fourth Wave society." Computing technologies and new means of communication, expansion of digital media, combined with the development of artificial intelligence and the Internet of Things permeate all spheres of modern society, from business and politics to art and personal matters.

Like all achievements of civilization, digitalization quickly brought about mixed consequences. The initial public enthusiasm about an "open society," "e-government and civic participation," and the possibility of personal self-fulfillment were quickly replaced by alarmism with some elements of horror. Such doubtful consequences of digitalization as mistaking information in education for knowledge proper, reduction of scientific research to formalized regulations, radical changes in employment markets, replacement of skills requiring reflection and argumentation with gaming skills, etc., are now obvious consequences of this transformation, widely discussed at various levels.

However, the required response appears to be neither complaint nor derision, but objective understanding. Digitalization is a powerful factor in the transformation of our civilization, it is indeed a structural change and it poses a significant challenge to philosophical anthropology, understanding of the role and place of man in this new set of relations with the world and society. History, even in recent times, provides examples of radical transformations of these relations, as well as attempts to understand their causes and consequences. In this respect, the Russian writer Andrei Platonov's works written in the late 1920s – mid 1930s provide interesting and important insights, as the author witnessed such radical transformations and gave them an original interpretation. This was the period called the "Great Turn" or "Great Break" when the Bolsheviks, who had actually come to power as leaders of a peasant revolution then solidified their authority in the so-called "New Economic Policy" period during 1921–1928. (NEP made it possible to overcome the destructive consequences of "War Communism" and the Civil War, to assist peasantry and urban middle class.) But since 1929, the Bolsheviks moved on to the implementation of a simplified variant of Marxist "scientific socialism," which resulted in many acts of state-imposed mass violence and the formation of a totalitarian society.

This paper attempts to find answers to three main questions:

- (1) What is the difference between Platonov's understanding of the "Great Turn" from its interpretation in the mainstream Soviet literature of that period?
- (2) What was original in Platonov contribution to the philosophical comprehension of the anthropological consequences of the radical transformation of social life and the role of the individual in society?
- (3) What makes Platonov's experience relevant to us, and how is it related to the transformation of social reality caused by the current wave of digitalization?

Reflections over life's turning point

The history of the Soviet socialist experiment has been described by many historians. Over the course of time, we discover new aspects of the period, which are important for our understanding not only of its goals, their implementation, political and economic consequences, but also, which is probably even more important, for understanding its humanitarian impact. Belles-lettres hold important evidence that contributes to this understanding, expressing feelings, experiences, thinking and behavior in the society of this specific epoch. In this respect, the works of Platonov (his early collections of stories and novellas *Chevengur* (1929) [Platonov 1978], *The Foundation Pit* (1930) [Platonov 2009], *The Juvenile Sea* (1934) and *Soul, or Dzhan* (1934) [Platonov 2008]) stand out sharply among Russian fiction of mid-20th century (its second and third quarters). First of all, Platonov's works differ in the very style, the system of images and the manner of writing, the unique estrangement from reality, such as appears when a person finds his environment breaking down, and the justification for these radical changes is just a set of abstract ideas.

In the 1930s, and more recently, Platonov was qualified as a satirist continuing the tradition of the Russian writer Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin (1826–1889) [Shubin 1987; Borisova 1989] in the course of interaction and comprehending the course of construction and the results of "real communism." However, in 1934 Platonov himself sharply denied such an assessment of his work [Platonov 1991, 331]. Indeed, it is much more serious and deeper than mere criticism, satire, or stinging grotesque.

Platonov's attitude to the building of socialism is quite extraordinary. At the beginning of the last century, almost every Russian intellectual went through the temptation of "scientific socialism." The reasons for

this lie outside the current research (see: [Tulchinskii 2018, 75–121]). In short, the process of economic and political modernization turned out to be the decisive factor and, in this respect, it triggered an active search for practical answers to issues of social life, for guidance how to reconstruct society and take an “immediate leap” into the kingdom of justice. And the answers were found in Marxism – an extremely rationalistic doctrine claiming to be based on scientific lines, which forecast an inevitable collapse of capitalism and its replacement by a social order that would eliminate private property and function in keeping with collectivist morality. Moreover, all these arguments were pronounced to be based on allegedly newly-discovered laws of social development. According to these laws, it is necessary to use violence against society because this is justified by the theory of rationalistic activism. They readily embraced Marxism because they really wanted to believe in it. Platonov, with his deep belief in scientific and technological progress [Poltavtseva 2011], was no exception. However, the years of the “Great Turn” seriously tested Platonov’s views, when he observed the dramatic transformation and its consequences in the provinces of the Soviet Union.

As it solidified, the Soviet regime proceeded to the “final solution” of remaking the present reality in the name of great universal justice. Joseph Stalin appropriated the course proposed by Leon Trotsky’s for accelerated dismantling of the semi-market economy of the New Economic Policy period (1921–1928), for agricultural collectivization and urban industrialization, which resulted in massive violence against peasantry. As a result, the idea of the end of private property turned into the destruction of the property owners, the deterioration of the peasantry’s conditions – expropriation of farmers’ food produce, resettlement (“liquidation into far away”), famine, mass repressions. Platonov found himself in the epicenter of this radical reorganization and destruction, initiated in order to build an unprecedented new world, society, and man. In 1935–1937, this violence reached and encompassed the urban population, that is, the initiators of the revolution, the victors in the Civil War, and the activists of the “Great Turn” themselves. But Platonov was banned from publishing his work at that time, so others wrote about the Great Terror (political repressions of 1937–1938). And he returned to literature only during the Second World War.

Platonov was not quite alien to the Russian avant-gardist writers, and we know that he briefly cooperated with one of them, Boris Pilnyak (1894–1938). What is common between them is the personal experience

of revision and annihilation of old meanings and of the old worldview, when existence was reduced to the timeless universality of being. But if the avant-garde reflected the surface urban culture, Platonov's involvement with the change lay much deeper.

Sometimes Platonov's work is regarded as a large-scale dystopia, but this assessment does not seem to be well-grounded. Thus, contemporary Russian philosopher Svetlana Neretina contrasts Platonov's work to Yevgeny Zamyatin's dystopia *We* (1924) [Neretina, Nickolsky, & Porus 2019, 6] and notes that the Western countries turned into reality Aldous Huxley's dystopia, whereas Russia implemented the model described by George Orwell and China followed Yevgeny Zamyatin. But Platonov does not fit into this witty typology for a good reason.

Many authors have noted that Platonov's prose is not suitable for quick reading. It is no coincidence that almost immediately upon the return of Platonov's works to the readers in the 1960s, his fiction was labeled "philosophical," alongside with the works of Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky. However, Platonov breaks away from this tradition. Platonov does not just comprehend the ordinary way of life, the attitude of the individual to life, and possibilities of improvement. He looks into the very essence of the radical breakdown as a liminal transition. Under the circumstances, familiar way of life is replaced with violence against human nature, in the name of implementing abstract ideas that look rational.

Platonov did not write so much about mass collectivism political and socio-cultural reorganization, as about anthropology, about the possibility of restructuring man as such, in his unity with the cosmos, about a universal way of human existence, including both the living and the dead. This is an absolutely different scale and depth. It is hardly possible to refer Platonov to any of the well-known philosophical constructions. This is due to the depth of his insight into the feeling inhuman nature of doctrinaire rationalistic activism, when it is accepted as a practical maxim for the universal human will.

The experience of "reduction (nullification)" of personality, or The Soviet *Book of the Dead*

Andrei Platonov's interest in the possibilities of science and technology has been noted by many critics and may serve as a key to understanding his intuitions. At the same time, Epishka in the short story "The Inventor of Light – the Destroyer of Society, the Terminator of Hell" invented a machine that generates food, and peasant Makar,

who cannot understand how he himself managed to extract iron from clay at the bottom of his water-well. Here, technology is perceived as “self-seeding,” as cosmic and dividend providing in the universal plane of being, both in relation to nature and to people. In this light, “self-running” improvements of nature (such as engineered “improvement” of cows, utilization of living people and corpses) do not sound unnatural. Vehicles and machines – both realistic steam locomotives and products of the bizarre fantasy of Platonov’s “visionary heroes” – are a manifestation of a kind of rational existence. In other words, Platonov portrays communism as a society of “self-seeding” and “self-running” machines, as an experience of rent from natural forces and elements like “the Sun that is the eternal proletarian,” functioning without human resources. Such a semantic picture of the world is close to the “metaphysics” of native Amazonians in South America described by the Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro [Castro 2009]; according to their “metaphysics,” the world is not united in its nature, and the very diverse elements in nature serve as different incarnations of a single meaning.

At this festival of self-creating mind, man may become superfluous. Moreover, Platonov’s heroes are united by their inability to bear the bonds of reality. In the novel *Chevengur*, Chepurny speeds up time to shorten the long-suffering in life and in history. Dvanov could not bear life, yearning to know the beauty of the other world. This impatience with the present foregrounds death as the main idea, the entrance and the exit, an alternative to the unbearable world that is doomed to destruction. Interest in the supernatural, in the dead, and empathy for them are obvious in all of Platonov’s work. In this he is surprisingly adequate to the Russian and Soviet experience, trying to build the ultimate kingdom of justice. And what could be greater justice than a pilgrimage of equals to the “foundation pit” from where no traveler returns?

The Russian culture researcher Sergey Nickolsky’s inventory of Platonov’s heroes, considers “clusters of meanings”, and includes: “restructurists” (theorists-practitioners), proposing and trying to realize their hardly feasible fantasies, “seekers and fellow-travelers,” “guides to communism” – unthinking performers, “naturally organic heroes,” “friends of machines,” “nobody and nothing,” and others [Neretina, Nickolsky, & Porus 2019]. Their common features are total insanity and irresponsibility. These people, for all their activity, are not masters of their lives. All of them are characterized by an unreasonable passion for

destruction, by poor adaptation to social life; they also fail to recognize the right of another person to their own truth and life. Among them, even a child, as “a living person for the future,” is superfluous.

All Platonov's prose is a narrative about dying, with multiple images of death; and life in this inhuman world gives rise to a non-human language. There is a reason why Platonov's prose is so unusual and difficult to read. It can be said to be written in the language of the dying and the dead. In addition to the Egyptian and Tibetan *Books of the Dead*, it appears as the Soviet *Book of the Dead*. All the three bodies of writing talk about afterlife, about overcoming this present existence and obtaining peace in non-existence. In other words, Platonov works describe a fatally sick social organism, where the disease manifests itself in pathetically overcoming human imperfection, with the help of “self-creating” rationality.

Platonov's texts do not pose a dystopia as an idea of a possible future. These works present the shock of a collision with a future that is unexpected and ambiguous, and also the author's longing and suffering from attempts to understand it. These attempts lead to the need for a new anthropodicy intended to justify for a human existence, notwithstanding man's limitations and finiteness.

The absurdity of total rationality

For the purposes of our research, it is important to understand that we are talking about a civilizational phenomenon associated with the realization of the ambiguous political potential of mass industrial society. Very similar processes simultaneously took place in post-Weimar Germany, as well as in Italy, Spain, Poland, and the Baltic countries. Usually, these processes are associated with the formation of a mass society with its characteristic tendency, with populists coming to power, and subsequent the formation of authoritarian regimes. People did not immediately realize the features that German (Hitler-Nazi) and Soviet (Stalinist) totalitarianisms shared) (and partly Italian *ducismo*). Hannah Arendt convincingly wrote about the socio-psychological commonality of those models of totalitarianism, and later Eric Hoffer [Hoffer 1951] developed her ideas. James Burnham [Burnham 1941], and after him Milovan Đilas [Đilas 1957], Michael Voslensky [Voslensky 1984] and John Kenneth Galbraith [Galbraith 1967] saw the roots of this community in the “managerial revolution,” the formation of a new class (the nomenclature), that is, entry of hired managers who dispose of assets that they do not own, i.e., the property of large monopolies or of the

state (nationalized property). Politically, this meant the initial ideological symbiosis of imperialism with Fabian socialism (a no less statist doctrine), aiming at convergence of “real socialism” and capitalistic mass consumption society.

The philosophers of the Frankfurt School [Horkheimer & Adorno 1947] came closest to the essence of the phenomenon. They saw this commonality in the nature of industrial production, which turns man into an appendage of machinery, and also in the role of mass culture and mass communications. These philosophers saw the main cause of this in the inhumanity of rationalistic activism.

The civilizational breakthrough that defines the modern world and all of its achievements, prospects and problems, was due to the synthesis of two great ideas (“the meeting of Athens and Jerusalem”): Judaist monotheism and Greek logic. What made technical progress possible in the realm of the Judeo-Christian tradition was an awareness that the world was created by a single will, was based on a single rational design and that a person is given intellectual means and abilities to comprehend this design, the Logos as a rational idea, the law of the world order. Its prerequisite was the transition from scholarly analysis and interpretation of sacred scriptures to the realization of the possibility of questioning and testing nature itself (experimental knowledge). It is not for nothing that the emergence of science, *scientia* as experimental knowledge, and the outburst of the Holy Inquisition’s activity, the witch-hunt, happened simultaneously. The next step – through deism – discarding the “hypothesis of God” and going to activities that are not merely cognitive, but also transformative, with all the ensuing consequences: from great scientific and technological achievements to environmental disasters and moral imposture. In this respect, mass society, armed with efficient rational ad technologies, is inherently predisposed to the temptation of totalitarian authority to experiment with nature, society, and man. It is important to note that total rationality is extra-human and, just like the “metaphysics of native Amazonians,” does not need a “human hypothesis.”

The stylistic unity of totalitarian imagery found expression in the cinema of Dziga Vertov, Leni Riefenstahl, and Sergei Eisenstein. But Platonov may have been the first artist to reveal the anthropological nature of this experiment on society and man. His short story “Garbage Wind” was originally called “In 1933 (Tale of the Fate of a Western Man).” Its content obviously overlaps with Platonov’s short story “Doubting Makar,” which was sharply criticized by Joseph Stalin and

deprived Platonov of publishing his stories for a long time. In 1934, Maxim Gorky read “Garbage Wind” and was so stunned by the vivid description of “gloomy delirium” that he doubted the possibility of publishing the story “anywhere at all” [Zilbershteyn & Tager 1963, 315]. Both the “father of nations” Stalin and the founder of socialist realism Gorky shared the same political intuition, which did not fail them. And Platonov himself, subtly feeling the deep anthropological kinship between the modifications of totalitarianism, again turned to this topic in his story “Across the Midnight Sky.”

In this respect, Platonov “touched the nerve” of metaphysics and anthropology that permeate human activity, and he expressed the deep essence of this metaphysics quite in the “native Amazonian” way, when the meaning that permeates all things and is embodied in people and things becomes a creative force, and manufacture of goods turns out to be a by-product of this meaning. Then, the “creation of benefit” happens “by itself.”

Thus, the work of Platonov appears as a warning against “social and cultural engineering,” in which a person plays the passive role of a user of a “self-expanding” system. Mankind is plunging into a similar situation with the prospect of total digitalization: the Internet of Things, artificial intelligence and other digital technologies.

On the one hand, the post-industrial information society of mass consumption literally implemented the great project of humanism of the Enlightenment with its slogans “Everything in the name of man!” “Everything for the good of man!” “Man is the measure of all things!” Based on the market economy, using Big Data technologies in marketing, society is able not only to satisfy, but also to stimulate any need. On the other hand, digital technologies and, first of all, artificial intelligence, the Internet of Things, automation, and robotization oust humans from the labor market. Before our eyes, a new anthropology is being formed, when employers no longer require reasoning or reflection as “gaming” skills of operating with options that follow a previously developed algorithm. All historic achievements of the trade unions have been nullified – labor itself is becoming more and more precarious, when responsibility for the object of labor, its organization, including finding clients, technological support, safety, etc., is assigned to the employee himself. Even free time becomes indistinguishable from work. We are faced with a logical stage in the transformation of capitalism [Boltanski & Chiapello 1999] – a system focused on self-growth of capital, followed by a stage of its further dehumanization:

for digital platforms there is no difference between a thing in the IoT system and a person; and human life activity is reduced to operations with options.

The great humanistic project of the Enlightenment was fulfilled and, as a result, gave rise to a new animality and displacement of man. There are the growing trend of new social inequality, stratification, and dependence on new masters, multiple means of control over thinking (through artificial intelligence), emotions and behavior (through nudge marketing based on Big Data), socialization as such. The problematic nature of free will, self-awareness, and responsibility as well as the deterioration of natural intelligence, the trends of “cyberpunk,” uselessness of a subject who comprehends the world “in the first person,” while all problems can be solved for him and without him by the incarnations of meaning “in the third person,” – all these circumstances encourage us to re-read Platonov in a new light.

Conclusion

Historical experience bears witness to the costs and hazards of absolutizing simplified rationalism. In modern times, rationalist activism has come under sharp criticism. The most famous critique belongs to the authors of the Frankfurt School, Albert Schweitzer [Schweitzer 1923]. Fyodor Dostoevsky analyzed and criticized rationalism. Another Russian philosopher and literary critic, Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975), in the course of criticizing abstract rationalism developed the concept of “participatory thinking” as an expression of a person’s conscious involvement with the world [Bakhtin 2003]. In this respect, one can and should distinguish at least two types of rationalism: “technological,” which goes back to the ancient idea of *tékhnē* (skillful artificial transformation of reality), and “cosmic,” which goes back to the ancient idea of *cosmos* as a harmonious wholeness of the world, and the search for a way to preserve this harmony. These two do not oppose each other, as the former provides an instrument for implementation of the latter. And the area of their interaction is individual self-awareness “from the first-person perspective.”

It is no accident that modern employers are increasingly expressing demand for more personnel who possess soft skills – skills of critical thinking, independent argumentation, and search for solutions in team discussion. The digital economy needs to be understood from the first-person perspective (which is a source of change and development). And the essence of self-awareness is its going beyond the limits

of the given, beyond the programmed framework – into the context, to new horizons, visions, and experiences. A striking example of this is the work of A. Platonov, which turns out to be more relevant to our time than the alarmism of the philosophers of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory and than the demonization by the conceptions of digital posthumanity and transhumanism. This relevance is due to the depth of the topics and issues that he raised. The content of them is just beginning to be revealed in our days.

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