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A Free Association of Abilities and Needs[1]

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Dedicated to Alexander Suvorov
who sadly passed away this year.

ABSTRACT: The communist ideal—"from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs"—presupposes the self-evidence of "need" and "ability." Yet the terms' precise meanings are seldom elaborated. Turning to Evald Ilyenkov and Agnes Heller, this article reconstructs concepts of need and ability adequate to Marxism. In so doing, the article distinguishes a distinctly Marxist theory of need, as found in Heller, from more crudely biological and liberal alternatives, demonstrating its compatibility with Ilyenkov's anti-essentialist theory of ability. The upshot, I argue, is both an enriched understanding communist organisation and a reassessment of political subjectivity, reorienting focus to the radical potential of those made "disabled" in capitalism.

KEYWORDS: Karl Marx, Evald Ilyenkov, Agnes Heller, Alexander Suvorov, disability, ability, need, pedagogy, psychology, communism.

Note on terminology: In this text, the terms "capacity" and "ability" are used synonymously. (In English, 'capacity' connotes more of a potential, 'ability' more an actuality; the distinction, however, does not obtain in German, and hence not in Marx.) The term 'talent' denotes an ability that has developed to a 'higher' state. I will distinguish 'disability' from 'physical impairment,' although the two are, of course, related. Following Saad Nagi's definition, "impairment" refers to a functional loss or physical limitation (Romeis 1983). "Disability" refers to role-relevant performance outcomes, which encompass the interactions between impairments and socio-economic forces. In other words, while a physical impairment points towards limits of bodily functions, disability comprises the social context in which it appears. Which physical impairments are understood as disabilities—and when—depends on cultural-historical context: disabilities need not necessarily derive from physical impairments.

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[1] This article is a revised and reviewed version of chapter 1 in Emanuel Almborg's PhD thesis, *Towards a Pedagogy of the Utopian Image*, Kungl. Konsthögskolan, Stockholm, 2021.

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Introduction

"From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs": Marx's famous statement on the organisation of a communist society foregrounds individual needs and abilities. Marx opposed bourgeois conceptions of equality and "vulgar socialism." These, he argued, unjustifiably treated individuals as abstractly equal and separated distribution from production. In their place, he proposed a communist politics that would re-organise society in accordance with the "all-around development of the individual," a free individual rid of capitalist exploitation and alienation, advanced beyond the "realm of necessity." Marx, as such, placed the concepts of "ability" and "need" at the heart of communism. But what to make of their precise meaning?

To explore the two, this article turns Evald Ilyenkov's concept of "ability" and Agnes Heller's of "need." The philosophers, to my knowledge, never met, nor did they address each other's work. Nevertheless, similarities unite the two. Both produced writings from the end of the 1960s to the mid 1970s. Both wrote within Warsaw Pact states: Ilyenkov in the Soviet Union, Heller in Hungary. Both were committed communists critical of the state socialisms under which they lived, with critiques extending to its official ideology (Diamat). And both voiced their critiques, in part, with reference to Marx's notion of the human and his early writings. Additionally, Sergei Mareev has argued, an intellectual continuity runs between psychologist Lev Vygotsky, Ilyenkov and György Lukács (Levant and Oittinen 2013), with the latter supervising Heller's doctoral thesis and informing her work. Amending the missed encounter between Ilyenkov and Heller, this article contends, can reconstruct an understanding of abilities and needs adequate to communist politics, reorienting attention to "disability" within capitalist society. To make its case, the article considers practices and ideas rooted in the Zagorsk School, a Soviet boarding school for deaf-blind children. Situating the so-called "Zagorsk experiment" within an understanding of communism (as distinct from official Soviet ideology), I argue, illuminates the centrality of "disability" for Marxian visions of a different society.

Background

In the early 1960s, the director of the Institute of Psychology in Moscow, V. Davydov, called for a complete reassessment of the history of Soviet psychology, advocating for:

> a restoration of historical justice, since regrettably, historians of our science have lost sight of the dialectical tradition of the theoretical reproduction of the psyche, the 'I,' the 'soul,' 'self,' by the method that was used by Descartes, Spinoza, and later Fichte. Without taking this into account it is impossible

> to understand the modern method of penetrating the mysteries of the 'soul.' (Welsh 1977)

The statement implicitly critiqued dogmas of Pavlovian behaviourism, then known as "reflexology." What's more, it reaffirmed the virtues of a repressed tradition in Soviet psychology, "cultural-historical theory," a method developed by Lev Vygotsky in the 1920s yet marginalised by Stalin's establishment of official Soviet ideology, "Diamat" (Dialectical Materialism), in the 1930s. For a time, Vygotsky's ideas faced censorship; his supporters and adherents were frequently compelled to adjust their theories and practises in conformity with official ideology. But their work possessed insights the emerging orthodoxy lacked. Central to Vygotsky's theory was his pioneering research in disability[2] and a theory of child development stressing the importance of the social as a precondition for developing "higher" cognitive powers and language. Vygotsky showed that cultural-historical context shapes consciousness and cognition, operating through a process of internalisation, whereby lived experience renders shared and social things individual and private. Vygotskian psychologist Alexander Meshcheryakov,[3] specialising in disability, and philosopher Evald Ilyenkov, at the time best known for his reading of the abstract and concrete in *Capital*, became important figures in this attempt to rethink psychology and philosophy, participating in what Maria Chehonadskih has described as the "the Soviet 68."[4] Ilyenkov provoked uproar among Pavlovian psychologists, writing in the official philosophy journal that no amount of inquiry into physiology and "reflexes" could reveal a single thing about the human mind. Pavlovians, in turn, denounced Ilyenkov, decrying his work as "revisionist," engendering a debate and power struggle that would continue throughout the decade to come. That same year, in 1968, Ilyenkov visited the Zagorsk School for deaf-blind children where Meshcheryakov was developing pedagogical methods based in Vygotsky's theory. Ilyenkov quickly became ever more involved in the school, applying and experimenting with a combination of philosophy, psychology and pedagogy for the education of deaf-blind children. Ilyenkov writes:

> The more closely I got to know Meshcheryakov's work, the stronger grew my conviction that blind-deafness as such literally does not create a single problem—apart, of course, from purely technical problems of secondary importance—that is not also a problem for general psychology. The only circumstance specific to blind-deafness is that here all of these problems are a hundred times more acute and therefore literally force the researcher to

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[2] Known as "defectology."

[3] Meshcheryakov was a student of Ivan Sokolyanski, a pioneer in deaf-blind education and close colleague to Lev Vygotsky.

[4] Comments made during a talk at e-flux New York in 2018 and in private conversations.

> pose them in as sharp, clear, and theoretically thought-out—that is, competent—a fashion as possible. And to pose a problem sharply and clearly is to be halfway to solving it. (Ilyenkov 2007c, 87)

During this period, Ilyenkov met a deaf-blind child by the name of Alexander Suvorov; the two developed a close relationship. Suvorov was eager to engage in philosophy, while Ilyenkov, convinced by the importance of dialectical thinking in education, was translating Hegel, Spinoza and Marx into braille. Ilyenkov saw in Suvorov and the other children at Zagorsk proof of his Marxist, anti-essentialist theory of consciousness, itself based on the irreducible sociality of the individual, their "ability" and "talent." Suvorov, for his part, saw in Ilyenkov a chance at being recognised as a universal human being. Suvorov later attended university and Ilyenkov became his mentor. Inspired by Spinoza, Ilyenkov conceptualised the "thinking body," elaborating a body's capacity to "mould its own action actively to the shape of any other body, to coordinate the shape of its movement in space with the shape and distribution of all other bodies"; this, he argued, constituted a fundamental feature of consciousness and human life activity. Communism from this perspective was foremost a pedagogical project to develop such a subject's full potential. In 1977, Ilyenkov gave a talk at Moscow State University, the same year Suvorov graduated from university. In his address, Ilyenkov conveyed the philosophy behind the success of the Zagorsk School. An "anxious dialectical materialist" in the audience, however, objected, "Doesn't your experiment refute the materialist truth 'Nothing in the mind that is not in the senses'? So how come they see nothing and hear nothing, and yet they understand things better than we do?" Ilyenkov relayed the question to Suvorov, who replied, "Who told you we see nothing and hear nothing? We see and hear through the eyes and ears of our friends, all people, the entire human race" (Levitin 1982, 89).[5] Suvorov's response implied that seeing or hearing is to be understood as a social process rather than a bio-mechcanical action of the eye or ear, an answer confirming Ilyenkov's relational understanding of subjectivity. Suvorov would later become a professor in psychology and develop his own theories based on both the lived experience of the Zagorsk School and his reading of Ilyenkov, Marx and Spinoza, alongside a wide range of psychological and pedagogical sources.

Ability

In capitalism, "ability" tends to be measured according to one's capacity to work, what Karl Marx defined as "labour-power" or "labour-ability"

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[5] Levitin attributes the quote to a booklet by Dyenkov, 'Learn to Think from Youth.'

(*Arbeitskraft* or *Arbeitsvermögen*), terms used interchangeably in *Capital* and translated as "labour-power" in English. According to Marx, labour-ability/power is the capacity of a person to labour. The worker is forced to sell this capacity as a commodity on the market. In other words, when the capitalist buys labour-power they are buying something that is a potential. Labour-power is only realised when the worker produces a commodity; this is its use-value. Its exchange-value, on the other hand, is equivalent to the socially necessary labour-time required to reproduce the worker at a given standard of living. As a commodity, labour-power/ability is not only a source of value but produces commodities of more value than it possesses, "surplus value." If, for example, the working day is eight hours, the worker could theoretically stop working after, say, four hours because by that time they would have worked the necessary time for their reproduction. The capitalist, however, makes the worker labour for the full eight hours to generate surplus value, which takes the form of profit. Therefore, the capitalist will try to extend the working day or intensify labour as much as possible to generate more surplus value beyond any physical or natural limit. When there is an abundance of unemployed workers competing on the labour market, what Marx calls "surplus populations," the process of exploitation intensifies. Labour-power, simply put, can be bought for less. Marx describes how agricultural populations forced off the land, having nothing to sell but their labour-power, become wage labourers to survive. The brutal conditions surrounding capital's absorption of new wage labourers from the countryside is exemplified by a government report on working conditions in pottery factories in England cited by Marx:

> The potters as a class, both men and women, represent a degenerated population, both physically and morally. They are, as a rule, stunted in growth, ill-shaped, and frequently ill-formed in the chest; they become prematurely old, and are certainly short-lived; they are phlegmatic and bloodless, and exhibit their debility of constitution by obstinate attacks of dyspepsia, and disorders of the liver and kidneys, and by rheumatism. But of all diseases they are especially prone to chest-disease, to pneumonia, phthisis, bronchitis, and asthma. One form would appear peculiar to them, and is known as potter's asthma, or potter's consumption. Scrofula attacking the glands, or bones, or other parts of the body, is a disease of two-thirds or more of the potters (...) That the "degenerescence" of the population of this district is not even greater than it is, is due to the constant recruiting from the adjacent country, and intermarriages with more healthy races. (Marx 1990, 355)

To remain competitive, the capitalist is compelled to extend both the working day and the productivity of work as much as possible. Marx writes,

> Capital therefore takes no account of the health and the length of life of the worker, unless society forces it to do so. Its answer to the outcry about the physical and mental degradation, the premature death, the torture of overwork, is this: Should that pain trouble us, since it increases our pleasure (profit)? But looking at these things as a whole, it is evident that this does not depend on the will, either good or bad, of the individual capitalist. Under free competition, the immanent laws of capitalist production confront the individual capitalist as a coercive force external to him. (Ibid. 381)

Industrial capitalism thus creates not only a class of proletarians by absorbing "surplus populations" from the countryside and turning them into wage labourers; it also produces a new class of "disabled" subjects, "generations of stunted, short-lived and rapidly replaced human beings...," who deviate from the standard worker's "abled" body, whose labour-power/ability is effectively erased and disposed. It is only through collective labour struggle, Marx argues, that such violence would be lessened and regulated.

If the measure of ability in capitalism is "labour-power," in one's capacity to work, and this work—as Marx shows—is historically specific to capitalism, *dis*ability can be understood as its negation: the inability to work. In this regard, the very the categories of "abled" and "disabled" arise from the exclusion of those with physical or mental impairments from the workforce. As disability activist Marta Russell writes, "the primary oppression of disabled persons is their exclusion from exploitation as wage labourers" (Russell 2001, 88). As permanently unemployed "surplus populations," this exclusion from work is biologised and pathologised through an essentialising notion of the body, against which non-confirming bodies are deemed "disabled." Such an essentialised notion, according to Russell and Malhotra, relies,

> primarily on medical definitions and uses a bio-physiological definition of normality. Further, "the environment" within which this "disadvantage" is located, is represented as "neutral," and any negative consequences of this approach for the person with an impairment are regarded as inevitable or acceptable rather than as disabling barriers. (Russell and Malhotra 2002, 211)

Capitalism, in this manner, produces "disability" in two principal ways. Firstly, due to coercive laws of competition, the pressure to enhance surplus value forces the capitalist to lengthen the working day and intensify exploitation of the mind and body of the worker, exhausting and disabling both. Secondly, those who do not have a body that conforms to historically specific forms of capitalist labour are rendered disabled; their "labour-power" is erased, and they are discarded as "surplus populations." Their potential as labour-power is destroyed. In both cases, the rate of exploitation and the capitalist labour process determines who is "disabled."

Understanding disability as a capitalist relation suggest the relevance of another Marxist concept: alienation. Marx described various forms of alienation in capitalism. Firstly, the worker is alienated from the product of their labour; although the worker makes the commodity, the capitalist owns and sells it. Secondly, the worker is alienated from the labour process because they are forced to sell their labour power as a commodity; it is a form of compulsion and experienced as such. The worker only feels free in basic functions:

> As a result, therefore, man (the worker) only feels himself freely active in his animal functions—eating, drinking, procreating (…) and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal. What is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal. Certainly eating, drinking, procreating, etc., are also genuinely human functions. But taken abstractly, separated from the sphere of all other human activity and turned into sole and ultimate ends, they are animal functions. (Marx and Engels 2009, 71)

Thirdly, the worker experiences alienation from species-being (*Gattungswesen*), a term taken from Ludwig Feuerbach to denote the qualities that comprise the human. Marx, accordingly, describes the dehumanisation of the workers, implying that they are denied human qualities. He often uses the metaphor of a worker being reduced to a machine. In *Capital*, Marx writes:

> Within the capitalist system all methods for raising the social productiveness of labour are brought about at the cost of the individual labourer; all means for the development of production transform themselves into means of domination over, and exploitation of, the producers; they mutilate the labourer into a fragment of a man, degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, destroy every remnant of charm in his work and turn it into a hated toil; they estrange from him the intellectual potentialities of the labour process in the same proportion as science is incorporated in it as an independent power. (Marx 1990, 799)

Finally, human beings are alienated from their peers. In capitalist society, Marx argues, individuals are estranged from each other; the alienated condition of workers—and the division of labour—is generalised throughout society at large. The role of private property—as commodity, as capital—underpins this alienation: "Private property," as Marx writes, "is therefore the product, the necessary result, of alienated labour, of the external relation of the worker to nature and to himself. Private property is thus derived from the analysis of the concept of alienated labour; that is, alienated man, alienated labour, alienated life, and estranged man." (Marx and Engels 2009, 81)

Alienation is the result of historically specific—capitalist—relations. Within such relations, labour reduces the worker to a machine, stunting their potential to develop into a full human, a social being. Bodies that fail to conform to capitalist requirements are rendered useless. The function of 'disability' within capitalism, in this sense, produces alienation, both through exclusion from work and in the curtailment of capacities and potentials. The social structure of disability has many alienating dimensions, which relate to a more general process of alienation in capitalism. Thus, "ability" acquires a dual nature in capitalism: "labour-power," at root the very measure of ability, begets its own negation, "dis-ability," engendering physical and mental impairment. Such impairments impede humanity's actualisation. But what in this instance constitutes humanity? As we will see, for Ilyenkov, the answer is not to be found in some innate essence but rather an external world of objects and relations.

Need

"Man produces even when he is free from physical need and truly produces only in freedom from such need" (Marx and Engels 2009, 77). For the young Marx, following Hegel, the ability to make objects, "objectification," is a basic feature of human activity. This ability, however, is inhibited by the labour process. That is, the separation of labour's product from the labourer prevents the subjective transformation of the world into its object and the object's reciprocal production of the subject. Objectification, as such, is a social process of shaping the world for human needs. Needs are the starting point for subject-object relations, in the specifically human conscious activity of transforming oneself by transforming one's environment (nature). But, as Agnes Heller argues, "needs" in Marx are inherently social. To fail to grasp this, risks a problematically naturalising ahistoricism. Writing in communist Hungary, Heller claimed that need satisfaction is not an isolated process. Needs are necessarily shaped by social context, rendering any neat distinction between "natural" and "social" impossible. Marx, for example, writes that "…natural needs, such as food, clothing, fuel, and housing, vary according to the climatic and other physical conditions of his country", adding that "the number and extent of his so-called necessary needs, as also the modes of satisfying them, are themselves the product of historical development" (Marx 1990, 275). In other words, there are "natural" needs, geared towards survival, and "social" needs. But the satisfaction of "natural" needs is always socially mediated. Humans, unlike animals, transform and socialise "nature" through objectifications that, in turn, shape human needs.

Heller explains that "Marx considered the object of need and the need itself to be always interrelated. Types of need are formed in accordance with the objects towards which they are directed and the activities involving those objects" (Heller 2018, 28). The socially produced quality of "natural" needs means that, for her, only social needs exist. Nevertheless, a biological limit remains, "the existential limit" of the reproduction of human life itself. But one would be mistaken to understand Marx's social notion of needs as opposed to an individual conception. On the contrary, Heller stresses, social needs comprise the totality of individual needs. Moreover, such needs are felt as needs by real individuals. The political implication, here, is that revolutionary transformation might start from the individual's experience of need, rather than the directions of a vanguard acting on their behalf. In the early 1970s, Heller's claim was read by the Hungarian authorities as an attack on the communist regime and her writing was banned.

For Heller, there are "alienated" and "non-alienated" needs. Both are felt and "true." But the former are opposed to the "full and many-sided" development of the individual while the latter enable it. Alienated needs are "the need to valorise capital, the system of need imposed by the division of labour, the continuous appearance of needs on the market, the limitation of the workers' needs to 'the necessary means of existence,' the manipulation of needs" (Heller 2018, 27). Non-alienated needs, by contrast, can only be fully developed with social change, when the economy itself is subordinated to a new "human" system of control. In such a system, need is transformed, relating less to material goods and corresponding more to "higher activities." Crucially, needs, here, are directed towards others who are seen not as means but as ends.

Capitalism continually produces new needs it cannot satisfy. Such needs are shaped by the division of labour and private property. As Heller observes,

> The development of the division of labour and thus of productivity creates not only material wealth but a wealth and diversity of needs. It is because of the division of labour that needs too are 'divided': the position of need within the division of labour determines the structure of need, or at least its limits. This contradiction reaches its peak in capitalism. (Heller 2018, 25)

For Marx, capitalism generates ever more objects of desire yet simultaneously provides an impoverished existence. It creates new needs but attenuates need for the sake of surplus value. Capital alienates the ability to objectify (by separating the object of labour from the labourer) and alienates individuals from one another (through the division of labour, competition and property). But this condition can lead to what Heller calls "radical needs," needs whose fulfilment necessitates the system's transcendence. Such needs are for community and genuine sociality, the need for a social being based on the "full and many-sided" development of the individual, realised in a new form of life, communism. To illustrate the point, Heller turns to Marx's example of workers who choose free time over increased wages. Free time creates opportunities for ordinary people to develop their abilities and interests into talents. Over the long term, it stands to reason, the demand for more and more free time could put pressure on capital's reproduction, ultimately leading to its abolition. In this manner, Heller insists, "radical needs" hold the key to capitalism's supersession, engendering the kind of society where the individual is not reduced to the satisfaction of purely material needs but to the expansion and "enrichment" of new and diverse talents. Communism, here, is not a homeostatic state of pure satisfaction but rather an expansion and development of needs precluded by society's current condition, especially non-material needs. Writing of development, Heller notes,

> The increase in productivity can also be related to needs; by this law, the socially necessary labour time is diminished, with the consequent possibility for the worker of satisfying a 'higher level' of needs. But according to Marx, this can never come about in capitalism, partly because the valorisation of capital sets a limit to the reduction of labour time, and partly because (and we shall see that this is the decisive factor) no structure of need can be built that will enable ordinary people to use their free time to satisfy 'higher needs.' This possibility can be realised only in the society of 'associated producers.' (Heller 2018, 26)

The satisfaction of 'higher needs,' therefore, requires a society in which needs do not appear on the market, surmounting the logic of capitalist accumulation.

To Heller, radical needs are born in capitalism. It is not the needs in themselves that are revolutionary; it is the process of their satisfaction—a process that necessitates systemic change—that implies revolution. In this regard, the proletariat need not necessarily occupy a privileged position within theories of revolutionary change. Instead, it is those individuals who experience such radical needs most acutely—those whose needs develop within the system but cannot be fulfilled by it—who might hold the greatest revolutionary potential. Such individuals are the bearers of what Heller calls the "collective Ought": they are revolutionary subjects who, by the struggle to satisfy not only material needs but "higher needs," struggle for a new society where true freedom—in the free development of new and diverse needs—can prosper.

Property and Alienation

Capitalism, I have argued, determines the pervasive conception of disability. It also, moreover, produces a class of the "disabled." Those who do not have a body that conforms to capital's demand for "labour-power" suffer a form of alienation that ultimately begets their de-humanisation. Capital, in this regard, not only alienates the "disabled" from the labour market; it denies something that is specifically "human" in the Marxist sense. In its dynamic expansion, capitalism continually produces new needs. Yet, in their unsatisfiability, the production of such needs constrains need as such, engendering a condition of "impoverishment." On the above account, the solution to unemployment's alienation resides not in employment, nor does that of 'disability' reside in the ability to labour. Rather, such alienation can only be overcome with society's transformation, creating the conditions for free-self activity and community to prevail. But how does such a transformation relate to the context from which Heller's writing on "need" and Ilyenkov's understanding of "ability" emerged? What of "actually existing socialism"?

For Ilyenkov and for Heller, alienation pertained to private property. Private property mediates social relations, needs and abilities, and does so in alienating ways. Moreover, the all-round development of the individual presupposes its abolition. If private property exists, so will alienation._Ilyenkov writes, "for Marx the 'abolition of private property' is (…) not achieved by a single blow, in one single act of overturn in the legal and political sphere, on the day following a political revolution. The abolition of private property (or, what is the same thing, the real socialisation of property) was always understood by Marx as a process of organic, revolutionary transformation of the whole 'ensemble of social relations'."[6] The revolution, in this sense, creates only the necessary preconditions and starting point for the private property's abolition. If alienation still existed in the Soviet Union, it followed, this was because private property had never been fully transformed into socialised property. Ilyenkov proceeds, "apart from the political revolution, a cultural revolution is required (and) a revolution in the sphere of the division of labour."[7] Only such a revolution, he argues, can overcome the social 'stratification' between "manual" and "mental" labour, between city and village. For Ilyenkov, alienation is nothing other than the process of turning property into private property. "Property," in this instance, denotes the human activity of "appropriation" and "objectification," "private property" the appropriation of "nature's objects' in *private fashion*," with the latter unfolding in such a way as to crystallise the individual's atomised existence. Ilyenkov writes,

> By the word 'property' Marx always—in his youth as well as in his old age—understood not a 'thing' or a 'collection of things' in somebody's possession

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6. Quote taken from *Ilyenkov on Shaff: On the 'Essence of Man' and 'Humanism' as Understood by Adam Shaff.* Shaff's book *Marxism and the Human Individual*, translated independently by Peter Jones, unpublished and sent to author.
7. Ibid.

> and at their disposal, but a process. The process of appropriation by the individual of the objects of nature within and by means of a definite social form.[8]

Private property, in Ilyenkov's account, results from the fetishised illusion of independence between people in the process of appropriation. Here, private individuals no longer see their dependence on each other, but instead become alienated individuals, subject to the abstract forces of competition and market relations. "While capitalism—as the highest and ultimate phase of evolution of private property in general—is the highest and ultimate phase of 'alienation' in general"[9], this does not mean that alienation disappears in a post-capitalist world. Alienation is not abolished overnight. Rather, for Ilyenkov, alienation exists on a spectrum, varying according to private property's development. While alienation peaks in capitalism, levels of alienation might exist in any type society, depending on property's relative socialisation.

Alienation, in Heller's reading of Marx, suppresses the development of human essence. But, significantly, this essence can only be realised *through* alienation. This is because historically developed private property produces alienation in general, a condition that provokes "radical needs." Such needs, in turn, beget the possibility of systemic change and the realisation of fully social beings. Put another way, capitalism provides a specific route to communism via alienation. Yet it is not the only route. Heller observes that there are other possibilities, drawing on the letters Marx wrote to Vera Zasulich, in which he outlines the possibility of building communism directly from already existing forms of community in the peasant commune without first developing industrial capitalism.[10] Irrespective of the route to its actualisation, the "human essence" Heller refers to is not an eternal human nature but a specific historical possibility in capitalist development to transcend its systemic oppression. Here, Heller and Ilyenkov diverge. In Ilyenkov's reading of Marx, "man" is not alienated from some innate human "essence"; it is simply that the Hegelian formula of "alienation of man from himself" was transformed by Marx as alienation of one person *from another person*, as two private owners, resulting in an appearance of independence that obscures the true relation of dependency between people. What makes one human is not a "universal essence"—such as reason—but the part one plays in the ensemble of social relations that comprises humanity (from which reason, or thinking, can develop). To Heller, on the other hand, there is human essence, but only in the sense of a potential sociality, the social process of objectification, and a historical, not eternal, possibility to overcome “alienation (of private property, subsumed under the division of labour) that makes every individual able to participate in social wealth as a whole” (Heller 2018, 46). Communism will therefore realise "a new and higher form.” As she elaborates, “Only then will man become a being that accords with the nature of the species for itself, only then will ‘internal’ and ‘external’ nature adequately match the human essence” (Heller 2018, 46).

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[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] For a discussion on these letters, see Tomba 2017.

Different in character yet overlapping in concern, both positions share the conviction that communist transformation, and the abolition of private property, cannot be measured by legal, political or institutional changes alone, such as those implemented in socialist countries. Rather, degrees of alienation are decisive. In other words, it is the degree to which the whole ‘ensemble of social relations’ is transformed, the degree to which property is socialised and the degree to which material conditions are created that will enable each person to develop their full potential as social beings. Furthermore, this implies that the so-called “socialist countries” of the Eastern Bloc had yet to become communist in Marx’s sense. The socio-cultural revolution Ilyenkov called for[11]—one that would abolish everything inherited from the world of private property and overcome the social ‘stratification’ between ‘material’ and ‘mental’ labour, between city and village, etc., transforming social relations and subjectivity—is in this sense a communist pedagogical project.

Universal Talent

The Zagorsk School provides a sense of what such a pedagogical project could look like. In Ilyenkov’s writing on pedagogy and psychology, abilities are not inherent but developed through social interaction. He is mostly concerned with “mental abilities,” such as the ability to think dialectically, as a necessary part of communist education. Physical abilities are not unimportant here, but they are considered in relation to the way they condition the development of “higher” mental abilities. This conditioning, of course, is socially determined rather than biological. How physical impairments condition mental development and abilities, too, depends on social context. “Ability as such,” Ilyenkov writes, “is foremost a social category, ability is not biologically innate but given to the individual from without and formed during one’s lifetime” (Ilyenkov 2007a, 57). This is an idea of development rooted in the Vygotskian claim that all “higher mental functions,” such as thinking, attention, language and memory are social, not “natural.” Accordingly, higher mental functions develop from relations between people in a specific context. Ilyenkov writes that "the entirety of an 'ability' is given to the individual 'from without'—by the world of objects and people, and the ability is developed (shaped) through the individual's 'assimilation' of the experience of other people, of (…) modes of changing the surrounding world" (Ilyenkov 2007a, 57). This claim echoes Marx's notion of objectification and conscious self-activity. Ilyenkov does not deny biological conditions but argues that claims departing from them tend to lead to the conclusion that abilities are natural and innate, entrenching reactionary positions. Such naturalistic explanations, Ilyenkov, argues, risk essentialising "the historically shaped and inherited mode of the division of human labour" (Ilyenkov 2007a, 57).

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[11] This revolutionary understanding can be understood as an attempt to reconnect with cultural, art and educational post-revolutionary discourse of the 1920s (Fitzpatrick 2002).

But if ability is the universal possibility of developing our full potential or talents as social beings, such an understanding of ability, one could say, implies that its opposite, disability, results from an inherited division of labour. In other words, disability arises from capitalist social relations. Ilynekov writes, "The 'norm' for man is precisely *talent* and that by declaring talent a rarity, a deviation from the norm we simply dump onto Mother Nature our own guilt, our own inability to create for each (…) individual all the external conditions for his development to the highest level of talent" (Ilyenkov 2007a, 67). Providing these external conditions, according to Ilyenkov, is the main task of communist transformation. Ilyenkov does not deny physical impairment; but, according with the previously mentioned disability activist Marta Russell and definitions by Saad Nagi, he separates them from disability and ability. Impairments, here, are specific to social context. The potential, to develop higher abilities and talents is universal, in so far as it is social in origin. Following psychologist Lev Vygotsky's theories, Ilyenkov holds that cognitive powers always develop intersubjectively first and are subsequently internalised. In the education of deaf-blind children, access to the social world is essential: it is the very material experience required for development of abilities. But whereas Vygotsky emphasised the place of language in this social process, for Ilyenkov it has no privilege. He often seems to emphasise other forms of social mediation and practical activities, such as gesture and the use of tools. Meshcheryakov, for his part, devised alternative pedagogical methods, tactile sign language and technologies for group learning, attempting to foster material and social experiences that establish a sense of self in relation to others as well as an ability to participate in the social. But to Meshcheryakov and Ilyenkov, the work with deaf-blind children proved something beyond its specific context, something that was universal in human beings, and that Vygotsky had begun to outline in the 1920s: the social mind. The "human," here, is simply the context in which one is socialised *as* a human individual.

> The human mind begins (...) with the ability to live like a human being in a world of things created by a human being for a human being. And the more this world opens up to the child, the more things are involved into the sphere of his activity, the more and more rational being he becomes. When this—practical—reason is formed, teaching language and speech ceases to be a difficult problem and becomes primarily a matter of technique.[12]

Ilyenkov read Marx through both Hegel *and* Spinoza, producing an understanding of what he calls the *thinking body*, not the physical body of the human but an inorganic body. As Andrey Maidansky (2005, 290) puts it, "Ilyenkov insisted that Marx had in mind not the bodily organ of an individual homo sapiens, growing out of his neck at the mercy of Mother Nature, but precisely the human head—a tool of culture, not of nature (...) Its body does not consist only of the brain, but also of any thing that is created by people for people. Products of culture are nothing but 'the organs of the human brain created by the human hand, the reified power of knowledge'." Perhaps, then, Ilyenkov's concept of the *thinking body* can be understood, as the opposite of disability and its alienating dimensions, that is, ability.

From Ability to the Thinking Body

The notion of the "thinking body" derives from Ilyenkov's unconventional reading of a "deeper meaning" in Spinoza's thought, mobilised as a critique of positivism and dualistic essentialism both in the Soviet context (Pavlov's reflexology, etc.) and in the Western context (English neopositivism, Russell, Wittgenstein, Popper,[13] etc.). Spinoza resolves the dualist problem posed by Descartes, of how soul and body are united, by reframing the question. Spinoza's system overcomes mind-body dualism by arguing that there is only one infinite "substance," "god or nature," with thought and extension merely two of its attributes. This prompts Ilyenkov to claim that there is not body and thought, but only the *thinking body*: an active body, relating in space to other bodies. Substance links thought to a spatial dimension, extension. Thought, as such, can only be understood as an action, an activity within nature as a whole. It is not that humans think in nature; rather nature itself thinks in humans. "In humans, nature thinks of itself" (Ilyenkov 2008, 33): nature acquires self-consciousness. Instead of looking for thinking in the brain, as in positivist science, the concept of the thinking body insists one looks outside the head. Thought occurs in actions and practices. When a body is inactive, on this account, it does not think. It is just a body, not a *thinking* body. Whatever the body is, thinking or not, the thinking body can shape its movement around it. While the body that does not think is determined by its inner logic (nature), the body that thinks moves freely in exterior space. The thinking body performs actions that it was not physically or biologically predisposed to carry out, actions which are not instinctively innate but shaped in relation to whatever the body encounters. Ilyenkov elaborates,

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[12] Quoted in Igor Hanzel (2018, 5).

[13] Ilyenkov, allegedly, would call him "pooper."

> Thus, the human hand can perform movements in the form of a circle, or a square, or any other intricate geometrical figure you fancy, so revealing that it was not designed *structurally* and *anatomically* in advance for any one of these 'actions,' and *for that very reason* is capable of performing *any action*. In this it differs, say, from a pair of compasses, which describe circles much more accurately than the hand but cannot draw the outlines of triangles or squares. In other words, the action of a body that 'does not think' (if only in the form of spatial movement, in the form of the simplest and most obvious case) is determined by its *own inner construction* by its 'nature,' and is quite uncoordinated with the shape of the other bodies among which it moves. It therefore either disturbs the shapes of the other bodies or is itself broken in colliding with insuperable obstacles. *Man*, however, *the thinking body, builds his movement on the shape of any other body*. He does not wait until the insurmountable resistance of other bodies forces him to turn off from his path; the thinking body goes freely round any obstacle of the most complicated form. *The capacity of a thinking body to mould its own action actively to the shape of any other body*, to coordinate the shape of its movement in space with the shape and distribution of all other bodies, Spinoza considered to be its distinguishing sign and the specific feature of that activity that we call 'thinking' or 'reason.' (Ilyenkov 2008, 47)

But the 'thinking body' is not exclusively human; the concept does not demarcate clear boundaries between humans and non-humans, matter and creature. Ilyenkov insists that there are levels of "thinking" in non-human bodies too, in gradations, because thinking is an attribute of substance (nature). Since some animals also "think," Pavlov's mechanistic understanding of a reflex evoked and shaped by stimulation not only tells you very little about the human mind; it also says little of the animal (such as his famous dogs). Nonetheless, for Ilyenkov, in the thinking body something powerfully interferes in the chain of events between an external effect on the body that causes it to react, and this something—a feature of the thinking body—is particularly clear in humans. This is an interference that forces a body to break down the given chain of events and recombine it in entirely new ways. The intervention comprises reflection, contemplation and consideration, leading to reconstruction. Thinking, therefore, is a body's ability to adapt and mediate, a means of recombining movement in relation to external circumstances. In other words, the thinking body possesses plasticity: the ability to respond in an infinite number of ways to whatever it encounters. As such, Ilyenkov conceives "the organ of thought *bodily*, as structurally organised in space" (Ilyenkov 2008, 50). This spatial corporality implies that thinking or consciousness is not an innate essence, but relies on the ability to actively build ever new schemes according to external objects.

In Ilyenkov's non-essentialist conception of the human, thinking or consciousness can be opposed to intrinsic determinations, such as those of instincts, reflexes or anatomy. The human, for Ilyenkov, resides in social practice and the activity between bodies and objects. He defines the human, moreover, not as one who possesses an essential quality common to all, but as a part of a larger whole. Following Vygotsky, Ilyenkov argues that what makes one human is not a specific feature but their role in the "ensemble of social relations" that constitutes humanity. One cannot, therefore, find the answer to thinking in the brain; it is found in action itself, realised in space. To understand thinking in general, one must grasp the relation between the thinking body and its object. This refers not to a particular object or body, but *any object* in general. Thinking can only be understood biologically or anatomically at a specific moment, not in general. Thinking, therefore, is a process, an attribute of substance, constantly *extending* and embracing new things, plastically adapting to them, such that they are experienced by the thinking body not as internal and anatomical but as external, as the shape of things outside the body. But if thinking—that is, actions—are situated in an external space of relations between bodies and objects, how does one account for "error" or "evil"? Spinoza's reply, according to Ilyenkov, was that error or evil were not internal to an idea or an action itself. Rather, they resulted from acts according to the shapes of imperfect objects. When replicating such actions, errors increase. If the particular—imperfect, half-true, relative—is granted universal significance, errors expand. Additionally, the more passive the thinking body is, the more power does the accidentally nearest object, or its immediate circumstances, wield over it, determining its mode of action. For Spinoza, complacency is thus the greatest sin. The more actively a thinking body expands its activity to embrace further objects, the more adequate become its ideas. Human thinking can only be perfected—can only become identical to thought as an attribute of substance—when its actions conform to infinite interacting things, themselves being forms and combinations of a natural whole.

Human beings, in reality, deviate from perfect thinking. Humans think in a finite manner. For Ilyenkov, that means that humans are imperfect; they are always in some sense lacking, constantly striving towards an ideal that eludes completion. This imperfection means that the finite and partial should not be taken for the universal—an error—but should be understood as a movement thereto. It was clear, for Ilyenkov, that thought as an attribute of substance was not identical to human thought. Instead, the universal property of substance provides the basis for "finite thought," itself encompassing human thought. To consider human thought as identical to thought in general is mistaken. It is merely one instance of thought. That is what Ilyenkov claims Spinoza meant by construing thought as an attribute of infinite substance. Ilyenkov, though, develops the idea further, forging a link to Marxist materialism. Since substance is nature, he reasons, it is another word for matter. Thinking thus evolves from matter when conditions are right. It is the same matter that thinks in humans and in other possible creatures or bodies, and thought, accordingly, cannot be separated from this matter. He writes,

> Spinoza's definition means the following: in man, as in any other possible thinking creature, the same matter thinks as in other cases (other modi) only 'extends' in the form of stones or any other 'unthinking body'; that thought in fact cannot be separated from world matter and counterposed to it itself as a special, incorporeal 'soul,' and it (thought) is matter's own perfection. That is how Herder and Goethe, La Mettrie and Diderot, Marx and Plekhanov (all great 'Spinozists') and even the young Schelling, understood Spinoza. (Ilyenkov 2008, 56)

Since thinking is an attribute of substance, Ilyenkov contends, it cannot be found in the brain or the biological body; it exists in the relation between bodies in infinite variations. The argument derives from an unorthodox reading of Spinoza. There is no "thinking body." Accordingly, Ilyenkov's reading is best understood as a departure point for his own theory. To understand Ilyenkov's concept of consciousness, one ought not to investigate the brain, physiologically conceived, but turn to what Marx, in the 1844 manuscripts, called the "inorganic body," that is, a nature that humans both depend on and are part of: the world of "things" that humans produce and reproduce by their "life activity" (labour), which shapes them in turn. This corresponds to what Judith Butler has described as the unity of the human body and nature, the organic and inorganic (Butler 2019), [14] or what Jason Moore refers to affirmatively as "an open conception of life-making, one that views the boundaries of the organic and inorganic as ever-shifting" (Moore 2015, 7).

To Ilyenkov, mind and body are inseparable in the practice of thinking. When such an understanding is applied to developmental psychology, consciousness and self-consciousness are seen to emerge through relations with an exteriority, with an already existing "humanity," not from an intrinsic essence, but from activity with the world of objects, tools and social relations that a child encounters and appropriates, the material context in which they "awaken to consciousness." From this perspective, the problem of accessing this “humanity” is paramount, becoming particularly acute in deaf-blind pedagogy. The anti-essentialist understanding of the human here articulated raises various questions. When does an object become a subject, and what are its limits? What are the organising principles of this “humanity” of which it becomes a part, and who gets to shape it? What bodies does it include and exclude? What are its qualities within a given society and the properties that consciousness and self-consciousness emerge from and are attached to? The anti-essentialist concept of ‘humanity’ would appear to make any nature/culture divide or mind/body distinction impossible. Culturally mediated yet dependent on nature, biological bodies and organic needs are inseparable from the social activity that satisfies those needs. Humanity is attached to nature not because of some inner essence, but due to the social-historical and cultural activities that shape bodies, “life-activity” or labour. The human universal, far from characterising a pure freedom or disembodied form of reason, is precisely this dependency on nature: humans and non-humans, bodies and objects. Butler writes, “So when Marx then claims that ‘Nature is the inorganic body of the human,’ he is claiming that only as inorganic can nature keep the human alive” (Butler 2019, 11). Thus, situating human reason bodily, within space, renders it immanent to subsistence and social reproduction. From this conclusion, a variety of pressing ecological questions, unaddressed here, follow.

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[14] We have to "make sure we do not accept these as two separate kinds of substances" (Butler 2019).

In his writing on Spinoza and the thinking body, Ilyenkov never mentions his work with deaf-blind children. Yet he wrote these reflections whilst increasingly absorbed in daily practice at the Zagorsk School, work that occupied twelve years of his life. As Andrey Maidansky has pointed out:

> He tried to discern the moment of birth of the ideal in the ‘natural,’ not yet human psyche. He wanted to see with his own eyes the most mysterious event in the universe—the origin and emergence of the human self, and further, to discover the laws, according to which the world of ideas and ideals is formed and shaped in the soul of a young child. (Maidansky 2005, 295)

At Zagorsk, Ilyenkov encountered everyday practical obstacles to teaching deaf-blind children and youth. In an essay about the school, ideas resonating with the “thinking body” are reiterated without reference to the concept as such. Ilyenkov outlines how the deaf-blind child learns to satisfy an organic need through their “inorganic body” and so how a body becomes a thinking body. This time the question is formulated as a pedagogical problem, a problem of mediation:

> What kind of obstacle would (…) pose the issue point-blank: either accomplish the transition to the human mode of satisfying organic needs or else perish? An obstacle that would be at the same time a bridge or, so to speak, a level crossing (…) between the biological and the specifically human

> form of mind. Such a bridge-obstacle is any object created by man for man, any artificial tool that man places between himself and an object of his organic needs (Ilyenkov 2007c, 89).

In other words, for consciousness to develop, an artificial link, such as a tool or sign, between biology and the inorganic, that is, between a body and the thinking body, is necessary. “For example—a spoon. A spoon is a pass into the realm of human—social—culture, into the sphere of human life activity and of the human mind” (Ilyenkov 2007c, 89). It is only when the body, or the brain, is transformed from “biological life activity of an organism of the species Homo sapiens into an organ for control of the highly complex system of external objects that constitutes, to use Marx’s expression, the inorganic body of man” that consciousness truly arises (Ilyenkov 2007c, 89). A spoon can be understood as an elementary step in such a process. As such, the first step towards the human mind is in the movement of the hand. The hand moves not according to a biological innate schema or instinct but by the form and function of artificial things made by and for other human beings. The process, however, is not specific to deaf-blind children; it is merely clearer in this case. The deaf-blind child encounters the same humanity located outside of the body as any other child. The difference is one of technique and patience, of mediating tools that can enable a leap from body to thinking body. In his writing on psychology from about the same time, Ilyenkov states:

> The first element of the psyche can arise only where there is the beginning of his organism’s own “self-motion” toward food—toward the mother’s breast. The embryonic form—the baby—“is drawn” in the direction toward the mother’s breast, toward milk. In the animal this psyche is innate. In man it is not, it must still take form—the baby does not display any attempts, even the clumsiest, to move in a particular direction. Fichte described this well, as a fact: vegetative “instinct” in the absence of animal instinct—that is, of the morphologically innate schema of motion in space that is necessary for the elimination of the spatial “obstacle.” Of the ability by means of organized actions to overcome the gap between his own body and the external condition of its existence. The emergence of psychic functions (= the image) is inextricably connected precisely with the presence of this—animal—“instinct,” although it is not an “instinct” at all (…) but a formation that arises after birth. If this is not an “instinct” but a highly complex formation that arises after birth and requires ontogenetic development of a corresponding “functional organ,” then the problem of the emergence of the psyche coincides with—and does not stand in opposition to—the problem of ontogenesis of the corresponding zones of the brain. But the organ here is created by the function, and not the other way round, not the function by the organ, by a “structure” that exists prior to it. (Ilyenkov 2010, 16)

The helplessness and absence of instinctual, biological determination opens a space for plasticity and the inorganic body of man. Such an understanding aligns with Freudian theory (Freud 2017), whereby infantile dependence appears as a starting point for developing a sense of self and others. But in contrast to psychoanalytic theories of innate drive and inborn phylogenetic knowledge of the object of organic need—such as "the good breast" (Klein et al. 1953, J. Bowlby 1958)—Ilyenkov argues that an image emerges in the mind when the newborn encounters an exterior object of any shape or form and adapts their actions to it, whether a breast, a spoon or a bottle. As such, Ilyenkov's non-essentialist position repudiates psychoanalytic and biological determinism. What causes the newborn to move is not a primary mental process, a genetically coded instinct or a biological "drive." It is a social mediation. Thinking and other "higher mental functions"—"human" functions—are irreducibly socio-cultural and are internalised from a specific position in development. The theory offers a rejection of Pavlovian reflexology. For while Pavlov contended that innate reflexes develop slowly, gradually transforming into higher functions, such as language, given social conditioning and stimulation, there is no such grounding in innate reflexes for Ilyenkov. Human functions are one hundred percent social, as Ilyenkov emphasised in his provocations of Pavlovians, articulating a social constructivism based in activity, mediated by objects within an ensemble of social relations. Ilyenkov's orientation to the thinking body is in some respects compatible with Vygotsky's views. To Ilyenkov, language does not play the privileged developmental role it did for Vygotsky. Tool use and activity are just as, if not more, important to the social development of consciousness (as in A. N. Leontiev's "activity theory").[15] Additionally, for Vygotsky, the real issue is not how hereditary an impulse is but how rigidly formed it is at birth. Sex, for example, is an instinct but it is not well formed at birth; by contrast, bottle feeding is not an instinct but can begin immediately after birth. We are readied precisely by our unreadiness. Because individuals are born so helpless, they are ready to be helped, and this is what makes the formation of historical and cultural functions of the mind possible. "Lower mental functions," such as reflexes and instincts, are not rigidly formed in humans, as they are in primates; but for Vygotsky, in contrast to Ilyenkov, they still play a part. They remain and are transformed within "higher mental functions," such as language, and can re-gain dominance if these deteriorate. As such, one could describe Ilyenkov's position as an extension of Vygotsky's work towards a more thoroughly social constructivism, discarding the biological almost entirely. But as Suvorov notes:

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[15] A. N. Leontiev was a Soviet psychologist who worked together with Lev Vygotsky and developed a critique of Pavlov's reflexology.

> Ilyenkov focuses on the social nature of individuality not because he underestimates the significance of "biological factors," but rather because he opposes, in principle, all attempts to shift responsibility for what makes a child part of the "ensemble of all social relationships," for the nature of this ensemble, and for what individuals obtain when they join it. The important thing is not the ratio between the biological and the social, but the extent of human responsibility for themselves and each other. (…) Ilyenkov categorically insisted on the maximum level, on "one hundred percent" responsibility of humanity for itself, for every "possessor and authorized member of common human culture. (Suvorov 2003, 68)

Irrespective of differences, both Ilyenkov and Vygotsky considered thinking possible because of innate determination's absence. This absence enables contemplation, adaptation and the inorganic body of man, in a space where culture and the political manifest. Thinking, however, remains imperfect on this model. It is always lacking, always changing and continually adapting to new conditions. Individuals are born non-thinking bodies, and becoming a thinking body is not a given; if this process of activity and mediation is disrupted or destroyed, precarity befalls the body. As such, the ongoing interchange between the body and nature—"the inorganic body" of the human—requires both renewal and the material conditions for renewal.

Ability and Needs

In the picture presented, the communist subject—often imagined able-bodied, white, male and industrially employed—is better conceived as a deaf-blind child, as both the universal subject and object of communist transformation. Such a transformation can be measured by the conditions for the development of each of us to the highest-level of talent and ability. Here, issues of mediation and pedagogy become decisive. Overcoming capitalist notions of disability implies overcoming property's private appropriation. As we have seen, the pedagogy and philosophy emerging from the Zagorsk School emphasised a *socialised* appropriation of objects, tools and nature. But the problem of mediating such appropriations extends beyond issues particular to the deaf-blind. The problem merely appears more clearly here and, according to Ilyenkov, reveals its universality. Following Agnes Heller, one might add, those who feel "radical needs"—needs for community and social being, the "full and many-sided" development of the individual, which cannot be achieved in their society—bear a universal revolutionary potential. It is not only the struggle to satisfy material organic needs, which engenders political contestation. Demands based on "higher," radical needs pose enormous potential for the emancipatory transformation of society. Such radical needs can perhaps be best understood as what Kathi

Weeks (2011) has called "utopian demands": [16] demands whose importance lies in the impossibility of their satisfaction without structural change .

The communist motto "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs" ought to be re-articulated with a vivid sense of ability's determination by social need. So reframed, the statement critiques the bourgeois equality of transactional exchange, highlighting the conditioning of needs. One could equally say that it implicitly critiques its Soviet revision—"from each according to his ability, to each according to his work"—too, where need replaces labour investment and fails to address the conditioning of needs and the division of labour. Indeed, distribution according to labour was already criticised by Raya Dunayevskaya in 1944 as reproducing capital's law of value (Duyanevskaya 1944). "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs," by contrast, requires the abolition of the law of value and private property. In other words, the slogan implies the transformation of production and distribution, that is, the total system of needs and abilities, which would lead to an expansion of new ones. As Marx and Engels famously wrote in *The German Ideology*:

> For as soon as the distribution of labour comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a herdsman, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; while in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic. (Marx and Engels 1947, 22)

Ilyenkov adds, "[m]an is not split between biological and social being, not on the one hand social and on the other biological, but a dialectical being" (Ilyenkov 2007b, 64). With time, Ilyenkov became increasingly tormented by the increasing distance between "real socialism" on the one hand and the society adumbrated by Marx and the "withering away of the state" promised by Lenin on the other. And yet, according to Sergei Mareev, a student of Ilyenkov, he never lost faith in the "socialist ideal." To Ilyenkov, such an ideal retained one fundamental advantage over capitalism:

> It corresponds to the collective essence of human beings. It is the opposite of the individualism and egoism of the members of the 'civil society' that inflicts

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17. Quoted in Maidansky and Pavlov (2018, 224).

> objective suffering even on those who 'consciously' share the ideology and psychology of this society.[17]

The thinking body Ilyenkov articulated in response is not an isolated individual. It is a social being, situated within a world of tools and artefacts of culture that become its organs within an ensemble of social relations: it is a collective body that idealises the material and materialises the ideal.

The theory and practice of the Zagorsk school today appears marginal. Meshcheryakov died in 1974, Ilyenkov committed suicide in 1979 and Davydov was forced to resign as the director of the Institute of Psychology four years later. In the 1980s, the ideas and methods they championed were attacked in the name of perestroika, in favour of "Western" theories that emphasised the innate determinations of individual development. Alexander Suvorov was one of the last people alive with direct experience of this history, both as student at the Zagorsk School and as a theorist who has continued to develop Ilyenkov's philosophy. The concepts and techniques of the school, I have argued, ought to be reconsidered.

Today, artists, activists and researchers are re-discovering repressed histories and traditions in Soviet theory. Keti Chukhrov (2020) has mobilised Ilyenkov as a critique of cybernetic theory and artificial intelligence; Alexei Penzin (2018) of Chto Delat rethinks Ilyenkov's communism as a cosmology that redefines teleological readings of Marx. In Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, a group of queer activists study Ilyenkov and Suvorov in order to go beyond what they call "liberal queer-theory," replacing it with a "queer-communist" alternative derived from Ilyenkov and Suvorov, a theory founded on a non-essentialist and social understanding of the human, opposed to right-wing and fascist "bio deterministic" theories. They argue that Ilyenkov's radicalism lies not in his rejection of the biological perspective but in

> the fact that relying on the biological factor in personal development relieves society of its responsibility for this development. In other words, the anti-essentialism of Ilyenkov is attributable to an ethical position. As Suvorov remarks, "Ilyenkov focuses on the social nature of personality not because he underestimates the significance of the 'biological factors,' but because he is fundamentally against any attempt whatsoever to relieve the responsibility for how a child is included in this 'ensemble of all social relations,' that which represents this 'ensemble' and how this personality emerges while included within this ensemble (...) Ilyenkov categorically insists on this to the fullest degree, on the 'hundred percent' measure of humanity's responsibility for itself, for each 'bearer and authorized representative of a culture common to all.' (Mamedov and Shatlova 2017)

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[17] Quoted in Maidansky and Pavlov (2018, 224).

Such readings point not only to the strength of Ilyenkov's ideas but to unexplored potentials and applications of them. What's more, they push one to think beyond critical theory's Western canon. Today, it is incumbent upon Ilyenkov's readers to imagine radically different contexts and practices in which his ideas can be realised. Such a project is, of course, processual, entailing experimentation, a dialectics of theory and practice, embodied forms of research, testing, rehearsal, staging. It is "thinking as action."

Ilyenkov's notion of ability acquires a new exigency in light of Heller's 'radical needs.' The statement, "from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs" is turned on its head: it is only from the realisation of radical needs that universal ability can appear. In the essay "Experimental Philosophy," Suvorov reflects on his experiences growing up in the Zagorsk School and his friendship with Ilyenkov. He points out that for Marx the shortening of the working day was essential for free time devoted to "creative activity." He writes, "Marx and Engels provided a theoretical rationale for the need for universal—comprehensive and harmonious—development of the individual, but focused on more, so to speak, macrosocial conditions of such development, one of which they acknowledged to be the presence of leisure time" (Suvorov 2003, 68). Becoming human, he elaborates, depends on just such macrosocial conditions,

> Thus, one is born a person but has to become a human being, and becomes one to precisely the extent that one participates in the process of human, that is, productive, activity. In Marx, the term "production" is a synonym for human activity in general. "Production" is not so much work at a plant or factory as it is activity to transform nature as a whole, universally, and including the transformer himself. Production is universal, creative, and in no way "fragmentary," monotonous, machine-like factory work. Production is all of the "vital activity" of the human "organism," of humanity as a whole. It is understood that such universal vital activity includes not only material production of the means of survival, that is, everything necessary for the physical survival of humanity, but also the spiritual and mental production of ideas (philosophical, scientific, artistic, and religious) and psychological and educational production of the producers themselves—human beings, individuals. (Suvorov 2003, 68)

Such an understanding aligns with but goes beyond a "social model of disability" (Hunt 2019, 73) that grasps disability as a social oppression placed on top of impairments. Thoroughgoing emancipation from such oppression obliges the creation of the material preconditions for free life activity, preconditions antagonistic to the value form and dependent on free time. This would oblige the replacement of labour input—or labour power in capitalism—with the sort of "production" Suvorov alludes to, involving imagination, play, creativity and the "self-production" of the thinking body. If the “human” body comprises an ensemble of social relations, following Suvorov, it is not only up to us to define it and shape its organs. We must create the material conditions for its sustainability, reproduction and access to humanity. Humanity, in this sense, ought not be viewed as an ahistorical “essence”; it is an ethics that communism can be measured against based on the free association of abilities and needs.

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Biography

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