



## Ilyenkov and Lenin's Dialectic

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**I**N THE PAPER, I DISCUSS EVALD ILYENKOV'S interpretation of Lenin as a dialectician thinker. It turns out that Ilyenkov has used Lenin to criticise the positivistic and technocratic traits in Soviet reality of the Brezhnev era. Thus, Ilyenkov sees Lenin to be more "Hegelian" than he actually was. Lenin did not attempt to develop a system of dialectical categories in Hegelian manner, nor was his idea of "the concreteness of truth" identical with Hegel. For Lenin, dialectics meant above all a concrete analysis of a concrete situation.

Evald Ilyenkov, the maybe most prominent Soviet philosopher, never liked to be viewed as a "dissident." On the contrary, he always stressed that his understanding of philosophy and especially of Marxist dialectics were in line with the ideas of Marx and Lenin. They were the "Diamatchiks" and Party bureaucrats who were wrong as regards to the true interpretation of Marxism-Leninism, not he. Already in his seminal work *Dialectics of the Abstract and the Concrete in the 'Capital' of Marx*, published in 1960, Ilyenkov declares "the ascent from abstract to the concrete" as the quintessence of both Hegel's and Marx's method and lets the reader know, that Lenin, too, was an adherent of this method:

A 'logical argument' of the 'on-the-one-hand, on-the-other-hand' type, an argument more or less accidentally isolating various aspects of the objects and placing them in more or less accidental connection, was rightly ridiculed by Lenin as argument in the spirit of scholastic formal logic [...]. If the Party reasoned about trade unions according to this principle, there could be no hope for any principled, scientifically worked-out political line. It would have been tantamount to a complete rejection of a theoretical attitude to things in general. (Ilyenkov 1982) (translated by VO)

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### Ilyenkov's View of Lenin as a Dialectician

This was already a reading of Lenin which must have made the “Diamatchiks” insecure. Ilyenkov pursued the same line of thought during his entire productive life. His last book was a thin volume of 180 pages with the title *Leninist Dialectics and Metaphysics of Positivism*, published posthumously in 1980, one year after his suicide (Ilyenkov 1980).

It was noteworthy that the book, which had a short introduction by Ilyenkov's friend Lev Naumenko, was published by the prestigious Party publishing house Politizdat, but most astonishing of all was the huge amount of copies in which the booklet was printed: 100 000 copies. Such an amount for a philosophical pamphlet would be unheard-of in present-day conditions, and even in the Soviet Union it was exceedingly high. Wladislaw Hedeler, the German scholar who participated at the first Ilyenkov conference in the West in 1999, suspected that there was a political tactic move behind this all: the authorities wanted to “re-direct the ‘critical Marxist’ as soon as possible back to the conventional mainstream of the official Marxism-Leninism” (Hedeler 2000, 282). This may be true or it may be not; I for my part could well imagine—indeed, I think that this is a more plausible explanation—that the publication was an attempt of a reciprocal influence: Ilyenkov's friends in the Party tried to influence the minds of the authorities by popularising his ideas.

Be it as it may, Ilyenkov's posthumous book on Lenin's dialectics has left even many of his admirers cold or uneasy. The book is written in a harsh polemical tone—indeed, in this it reminds of Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (1909), which actually may have been one of its paragons—and its attacks against “Positivism” have an overtone of obsessiveness. The arch-villain in the book is Aleksandr Bogdanov, just as in Lenin's book of 1909. A further problematic point is the history of the edition of the book. After having compared the book with an article of Ilyenkov published a year earlier, in 1979, in the official theory journal of the Party, *Kommunist* (where Naumenko was one of the editors), Wladislaw Hederler is of the opinion that Ilyenkov's original text is heavily edited.<sup>1</sup>

We hope that the original manuscript (or manuscripts) of the book on Lenin's dialectics one day will turn up from the archive of Ilyenkov,

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1. See Hedeler (2000, 287). The article in question was Ilyenkov's “Materializm voinstvujushchii—znachit dialekticheskii. K 70-letiju vykhoda v svet knigi Lenina ‘Materializm i empiriokrititsizm’ ” c, in: *Kommunist* 1979 № 6. The original version of Ilyenkov's book manuscript is to come in the 10-volume Collected Works edited by Andrei Maidanski (the “Kanon +” Publishing House, Moscow).

which Professor Andrey Maidansky at present is going through and editing. Nevertheless, I believe that the book reflects mostly Ilyenkov's authentic views on the subject, albeit in a polemical form. Ilyenkov is known for his distaste towards "positivism," which he, however, never defined very accurately. Clearly, "positivism" represented him not only a certain philosophical current with an empirist epistemology. He saw in it a worldview which he found repellent—a narrowly "technocratic" attitude towards society and the tasks of building socialism. It seems to me that Ilyenkov felt that the Soviet society was going astray in the 1970s, forgetting the humanistic and cultural ideals of socialism. This explains the often profusely aggressive tone of *Leninist Dialectics and Metaphysics of Positivism*. The intention was to demonstrate what Lenin "really said" and turn this against the actual Soviet society as it existed in Brezhnev's times.

But if this indeed was Ilyenkov's strategy—that is, to play Lenin against the "real socialism,"—so it had its precarious sides. If Lenin is to deliver the yardstick for the assessment of Soviet realities, the risk of taking a hagiographic stance towards Lenin becomes great. Ilyenkov's Lenin in the book *Leninist Dialectics...* does not, in fact, differ much from the picture of the infallible theoretical genius established already in the late 1920s and canonised in such texts as V. Adoratski's article of 1930, where it was claimed that Lenin already since his youth was a master of Marxist dialectics.<sup>2</sup> Actually, Ilyenkov goes even further than Adoratski, when he alleges that Lenin had absorbed the philosophy of Hegel already during his Siberian exile in Shushenskoe in 1897–1900, where he studied i.a. Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. The fact that no excerpts or notes on Hegel have been preserved from this period, Ilyenkov (1980, 29) quits with nonchalance.

Despite of this dogmatic starting point, Ilyenkov does in *Leninist Dialectics...* some interesting observations concerning Lenin as a philosopher and questions a couple of received Soviet interpretations. For example, according to him, it is a "legend," that in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, Lenin "has delivered only general axioms of any materialism, allegedly not noting specially the dialectics," whilst he "in the *Philosophical Notebooks* in particular took up the dialectics" (Ilyenkov 1980, 161). For Ilyenkov (1980, 162), it is not justifiable to speak of

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2. The article of V. V. Adoratski on Lenin's biography was published for the first time in the journal *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia* №№ 1 и 2–3, 1930 and set the paragon for further Soviet discussion on Lenin as a theoretician.

Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* as a work focusing on gnosological questions only.

Ilyenkov is undoubtedly right in stressing the unity—at least a relative unity—of Lenin's work. In the West, there has emerged an interpretatory tradition of “two Lenins,” the earlier one of a vulgar materialist and representant of a primitive theory of reflexion, the later one in turn a cunning dialectician and admirer of Hegel.<sup>3</sup> This dualistic picture finds little support in Lenin's own work and Ilyenkov's interpretation is here of course closer to the historical truth. However, Ilyenkov is at the same time reading Lenin in the light of his own favourite philosophical idea, that of the absolute coincidence of dialectics, logic and theory of cognition. This is a Hegelian idea, which Lenin quotes approvingly in his *Philosophical Notebooks*, although (and this is symptomatic) he does not seem to make further use of it.

### What did Lenin Actually Understand with Dialectics ?

For Ilyenkov, Lenin thus gives the paragon of materialist dialectics. According to him, “Lenin knew extraordinary well the higher form of dialectics, which constituted ‘the soul of Marxism’—the dialectics of *Capital*, the dialectics as the logic of thought of Marx and Engels, the materialist dialectics” (Ilyenkov 1980, 28).

However, what did Lenin actually understand with “dialectics?” If we read attentively his texts, a strange feature soon stands out. Lenin's talk about “dialectics” is often haphazard, but one trait is recurrent: the idea of a concrete analysis of a concrete situation. Examples abound, so it suffices to quote from an important work of 1904, *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*:

[G]enuine dialectics does not justify errors of the individuals, but studies the inevitable turns, proving that they were inevitable by a detailed study of the process of development in all its concreteness. One of the basic principles of dialectics is that there is no such thing as abstract truth, truth is always concrete. (Lenin 1964, 409)

The idea of a concrete, all-sided analysis of the phenomena is a hallmark of Lenin's special genius. It was just this trait which allowed him to see hidden possibilities in political processes; possibilities which other politicians did not see, as they looked at the world through the eyeglasses

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3. This thesis has been put forth especially by Anderson (1995). I analyse Anderson's arguments more detailed in my paper ‘What Kind of Dialectician was Lenin?’ (Oittinen 2018).

of a dogmatic theory. We see this creative trait in Lenin, when he seizes the revolutionary opportunity in October 1917, against the warnings of such “orthodox” Marxists as Kautsky or Plekhanov. Lenin was never a prisoner of the theory: the concrete situation and the possibilities it offered was always more important for him than abstract theoretical schemes. In *Leninist Dialectics...* Ilyenkov is, of course, right when he stresses Lenin's innovativeness in his philosophical and political analyses.

However, before going any further, I would maintain two points which concern Lenin's idea of the “concreteness of the truth.” Both his concept of truth and his thoughts about the concreteness were quite different from those of Hegel.

#### a) Lenin's concept of truth different from that of Hegel

On the basis of the above-mentioned, nothing seems more natural than to equate Lenin's and Hegel's concepts of truth. The famous German playwright Bertolt Brecht did so. He loved to repeat the expression “Truth is always concrete” which, according to him, was the *idée-mâîtresse* of Hegel's dialectics; he even painted these words on the rafter of the house he lived during his exile in Denmark in the 1930s, in order to keep them constantly in his mind. The expression indeed sounds Hegelian. But one seeks it in vain in Hegel. Brecht seems to have taken it from Lenin and interpreted it as a Hegelian trait in Lenin's thought. This is not so simple, for several reasons.

First, Lenin and Hegel had quite opposite concepts of truth. For Lenin, truth was essentially, in accordance with the “theory of reflection” he supported, the good old Aristotelian correspondence relation:  $x$  is true, if  $x$  “corresponds” to the fact  $y$  outside the mind. The question of what a “correspondence” means is of course problematic and it has caused much discussion among philosophers. But the main idea which concerns us here is that in the Aristotelian theory of truth, facts have the priority and the subjective thoughts are secondary, i. e. dependent of the facts, if they are assumed to be true. For Hegel, on the contrary, the Aristotelian interpretation of truth as *adaequatio rei et intellectus* is insufficient. For him, a deeper definition of truth is to say that it is a “correspondence of a content with itself” (*Übereinstimmung eines Inhalts mit sich selbst*) (Hegel 1930, § 24 Zusatz 2), which is “a quite different meaning of the truth as the first-mentioned” [i.e. the Aristotelian—V.O.].

When Hegel says that “truth is the whole” (*das Wahre ist das Ganze*) (ibid.), he means with the whole a totality where the distinction between the subjective and the objective, or the subject and the substance, has in the last resort become sublated. This sublating is a process in which the substance becomes more and more mediated with the subject, until they finally obtain a synthesis in the Absolute Idea. For Hegel, the whole reality of the universe consists of this process, and so he can claim that the “execution” (implementation, *Ausführung*) of the process is at least as important as its final result. Thus, although Lenin’s and Hegel’s views on the necessity of a concrete approach to the reality seem at first glance to be similar, there is actually a deep difference between them. Lenin’s “concrete analysis of a concrete situation” is factual; it consists of an empirical inquiry—Hegel, for his part, discarded the empirist approach, which according to him, “instead of seeking the truth in the thought itself,” falsely tries to obtain it “from the experience” (Hegel 1930, § 37).

Hence, when Lenin (1964, 482) says that “the ABC of dialectics [...] tells us that there is no such thing as abstract truth, the truth is always concrete,” he is saying something quite different from Hegel’s intentions. He is not construing a totality in which all the details would form moments submitted to the teleological movement of the Whole. For Lenin, the principle of the concreteness of the truth is the way which makes it possible to escape the grip of abstract and dogmatic determinism. To my mind, it is important to see that although both Hegel and Lenin criticised abstract theories, their incentives were different: for Hegel, the goal was to construct an organic, richly detailed totality, while for Lenin there was no such “totalist” ambitions; what he aimed at, was to find by a detailed analysis the fissures in the seemingly monolithic façade of, for example, such a determinist theory of history, as Marxism was interpreted by the protagonists of the Second International.

### **b) Lenin follows Chernyshevsky, not Hegel**

But from where has Lenin his idea of “concrete analysis” and the “concreteness of the truth” if not from Hegel? In the foreword to the second German edition of *Capital*, Marx distinguished two steps in his method, the inquiry (*Forschung*), which consisted of the analysis of the object of research. It was followed by “presentation” (*Darstellung*), and only at this latter stage the dialectical figures were used. But Lenin never refers explicitly to this two-step structure of Marx’s method when

discussing dialectics. Somewhat surprisingly, Lenin's idea of dialectics does not come from Marx, but from the Narodniks. These pre-Marxian Russian revolutionaries rebelled against the dogmatic interpretation of a pre-defined succession of socio-economic formations presented by the Second International Marxists. This "Marxist" (actually, of Positivist origin) scheme seemed to deny all alternative perspectives for Russia. The country had to pass from feudalism to capitalism following the iron-cast necessity of the laws of historical development. It was especially Nikolai Mikhailovsky, an eminent representant of the moderate wing of Narodniks, who polemised against this deterministic scheme.<sup>4</sup> But the "concreteness principle" was formulated earlier, already in 1855–56 by Nikolai Chernyshevsky, in an essay, which dealt with Russian literature:

The essence of this method [the dialectical method—V.O. ] lies in that the thinker must not rest content with any positive deduction, but must find out whether the object he is thinking about contains qualities and forces the opposite of those which the object had presented to him at first sight. Thus the thinker was obliged to examine the object from all sides [...] Gradually [...] the former one-sided conceptions of an object were supplanted by a full and all-sided investigation [...] In reality [...], everything depends upon circumstances [...] Every object, every phenomenon [...] must be judged according to the circumstances, the environment, in which it exists. This rule was expressed by the formula: 'There is no abstract truth; truth is concrete', i.e., a definite judgement can be pronounced only [...] after examining all the circumstances on which it depends. (Chernyshevsky, 1855-56 as cited in Plekhanov 1974, 547)

For Chernyshevsky, Hegel's dialectics consists above all of a concrete analysis of all the sides of the phenomenon in case. Chernyshevsky does not give in his essay a more specified presentation of Hegel's method. He does not speak about the mediation of subject and substance, nor of subjectivity as an absolute, self-referential negativity, nor of the triadic movement of categories—all of which are, in fact, essential traits of Hegel's dialectical method. It is only the "concreteness" of analytical approach which counts.

In a seminal article on Lenin's dialectics, Robert Mayer constates, that

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4. I discuss the Marx-Mikhailovsky dispute more in detail in my recent book *Marx's Russian Moment* (Oittinen 2023, 41–64).

Lenin [...] was not saying anything original about the dialectic in 1904 when he identified it with concreteness and tactical relativism. This sounds a plausible comment, but it should be borne in mind, that by using this seemingly so simple principle Lenin was able to challenge successfully the positivistic *Zeitgeist* of the Second International Marxism. He borrowed it from Plekhanov, who in turn had taken it from Chernyshevsky. But Lenin turned it against Plekhanov's own fraction in the Russian Social Democratic Workers's Party, by showing that a "principal weakness of Menshevism and other revolutionary trends was an undialectical tendency to rely on abstract and universal rules for solutions to concrete tactical problems. (Mayer 1999, 46)

### c) Lenin never formulated any "dialectical logic"

But maybe Lenin had later, in the *Philosophical Notebooks* of 1914–1915, formulated an idea of dialectics which would be somewhat more specific than the stress on the importance of a concrete analysis, accompanied with hints to the role of the "contradictions" in the process of cognition and in the objective reality? Most of the *Notebooks* consists of excerpts and direct quotations from Hegel's *Science of Logics*, and it is not always easy to distinguish passages and formulations only resuming up Hegel's views from those expressing Lenin's own thoughts. There are, however, some important passages in the Hegel conspectus, where Lenin steps aside from rewriting Hegel and reflects about what he just has read. One such passage is at the end of the notes on *Science of Logics*, with the title *Summary of Dialectics*; another is a longer fragment, written in 1915, *On the Question of Dialectics*, which, according to the editors of Lenin's works, is contained in the notebook following the conspectus of Lassalle's book on Heraclitus (Lenin 1974, 582). It seems that these fragments give the most "authentic" picture of Lenin's ideas concerning dialectics and Hegel's importance for Marxism.

In the first fragment, *Summary of Dialectics*, Lenin departs from Hegel's definition of the "dialectical moment" in the judgement, which runs as follows: "This equally synthetic and analytic moment of the *Judgment*, by which [the moment] the original universality [general concept] determines itself out of itself as other in relation to itself, must be called dialectical" (Lenin 1974, 220).<sup>5</sup> One almost sees Lenin shaking his head, when he comments: "A determination which is not a clear one!!." But Lenin tries, nonetheless, to capture the essential features of Hegel's dialectics. He lists as many as sixteen "elements of dialectics," among

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5. In the original: "Dieses so sehr synthetische als analytische Moment des *Urteils*, wodurch das anfängliche Allgemeine aus ihm selbst als das *Andere Seiner* sich bestimmt, ist das *dialektische zu nennen*" (Lenin's (1974, 220) quotation from Hegel).



them “the entire totality of the manifold *relations* of this thing to others”; the idea of development; the thing or phenomenon as the sum and unity of opposites; “not only the unity of opposites, but the *transitions* of every determination, quality, feature, side, property into every other;” “the endless process of the discovery of *new sides*, relations, etc.”; “the repetition at a higher stage of certain features, properties, etc., of the lower,” and “the apparent return to the old (negation of the negation)” (Lenin 1974, 220 sqq.).

If one considers more closely all these definitions of the “elements” of dialectics, it becomes soon obvious, that they are mostly nothing else but further specifications of the view on dialectics which Lenin had already long before the assumed “turn” of 1914. Even in the *Philosophical Notebooks*, dialectics is for Lenin above all a theory of concreteness, a method of taking into account all the details and sides of the phenomenon to be analysed.

This impression gets confirmed when we read the second fragment, *On the Question of Dialectics*, which is apparently written a bit later than the previous one. Here Lenin first mentions “unity of opposites” as a characteristic of dialectics, but continues then:

Dialectics as *living*, many-sided knowledge (with the number of sides eternally increasing), with an infinite number of shades of every approach and approximation to reality (with a philosophical system growing into a whole out of each shade)—here we have an immeasurably rich content as compared with ‘metaphysical’ materialism. (Lenin 1974, 361)

Again, he underlines the richness, many-sidedness, concreteness of the dialectical research.

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Lenin may well be right when he says that a “living, many-sided knowledge” is one of the hallmarks of the dialectical approach. But this said, we do not find in Lenin any explicit formulation of a dialectical logic—if we understand with “logic” some coherent order of categories. This runs counter to the suggestions of Ilyenkov and many other Soviet philosophers with the reputation of being “Hegelians,” who have claimed that Lenin gives us a materialist interpretation of Hegel’s dialectics. Indeed, we find in Lenin many interesting and acute comments on Hegel’s philosophy, made from a materialist point of view. But they remain scattered, fragmentary and do not form a coherent whole. If

Lenin, as a Marxist, would have turned Hegel upside down (as the saying goes), one would have presupposed that he develops—or at least sketches—a materialist system of categories. But we find nothing like that in Lenin’s published works or in his *Nachlass*.

One might maybe object, that Lenin, like Marx and other genuine Marxist philosophers, intends to take from Hegel only the method, not the system of categories. This argument reflects the old system vs. method dispute among the Marxists, which was initiated by Engels’s comments on the discrepancy between the revolutionary method and conservative system in Hegel. But actually, it seems to me, that with the “system” Engels meant above all Hegel’s so-called “real philosophy” (*Realphilosophie*), that is, philosophies of nature, history, art and religion. The method, on the other side, consisted of the logic of philosophical categories.

Hegel’s ambition in his *Science of Logic* was to fulfil and overcome Kant’s intentions in this respect. As well known, Kant lamented that Aristotle had left us 12 categories, but did not offer any justification why just these categories should be the fundamental ones. Kant attempted to give a justification of the categories by deducing them from the synthetic activity of the Transcendental Ego. According to Hegel, Kant had not succeeded in this. For Hegel, a justification of the categories of dialectical logic is possible only if one intrerprets the categories as self-moving. In Marxist philosophy, such a view on categories cannot be accepted—it is nothing but “Ideenmystik,” as Lenin rightly notes.<sup>6</sup>

But the problem of a system of categories remains even in Marxist dialectical logic. Many Soviet philosophers have tried to construct such systems and thus renew Kant’s and Hegel’s projects of a justification of categories, and a description of the “system of the categories of dialectics” was included even in the basic courses of Dialectical Materialism taught at the schools (one typical work in this respect was Aleksandr Sheptulin’s *Kategorii dialektiki*, 1971). It is, to my mind, symptomatic that Ilyenkov never participated in these projects of Soviet Diamat. For him, other aspects of dialectical thought were more important, for example the idea of the ascent from the abstract into the concrete, or the thesis that dialectics, logics, and theory of cognition form an inseparable

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6. As he himself says in the *Philosophical Notebooks*: “Hegel’s logic cannot be applied in its given form, it cannot be taken as given. One must separate out from it the logical (epistemological) nuances, after purifying them from *Ideenmystik*: that is still a big job” (Lenin 1974, 264).

unity. It is true that Lenin, contrary to the aspirations of Diamat tradition, never had the ambition to build a deductive system of the categories of dialectical logic. But a critical scrutiny of Lenin's texts shows that Lenin did not highlight the just mentioned, for Ilyenkov so important aspects of dialectics, either.

Ilyenkov's Lenin is to an important degree a construction: a connoisseur of Hegelian dialectics who in a genial manner was able to "apply" Hegel's ideas in a materialist way. The truth is, to my mind, simpler. Lenin had an outstanding analytic mind, who was able to go in the most concrete details of the problems he studied, and in this manner, he could see possibilities and alternatives in political and social processes, which other Marxists of his days usually did not notice. But to call this rare ability a "dialectical thinking"—in the sense of a conscious application of a method—is another matter.

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