



Interviews:

Rejuvenating the Revolutionary Essence of Marxist Theory at the Centennial of Evald Ilyenkov

Arto Artinian, David Bakhurst, Pham Minh Duc, Sascha Freyberg, Isabel Jacobs, Martin Küpper, Kyrill Potapov and Monika Woźniak

Interviewed by Siyaveş Azeri

SIYAVEŞ AZERI (SA): The year 2024 marks the centennial of independent Soviet philosopher, Evald Ilyenkov. The following questions below were sent via email to the authors.

- 1) The first question will be a very general one. It seems as if we are experiencing a “revival” of Ilyenkov’s ideas; there appears to be a growing interest in his philosophical conceptualizations and methodology. What is so significant about Ilyenkov’s ideas that may be responsible for such a revival?
- 2) The next question will be in a sense the continuation of the previous; in what sense and how relevant/actual is Ilyenkov’s take on philosophical questions? Does he have anything to offer in the face of contemporary philosophical and/or social and political issues and crises?
- 3) In his philosophical work, Ilyenkov addresses several problems that traditionally belong to different fields of philosophical study, from machine-thinking and the AI to the questions concerning the relation between philosophy and sciences, the “universal,” the “ideal,” problems of epistemology, methodology, the relation between ethics and science, Marxism, humanism, general education and the education of people with disabilities, to the criticism of positivism, so on and so forth. What in Ilyenkov’s philosophical approach keeps together these apparently different fields and questions? Does he suggest that there is an essential bond between these diverse problems? If so, what that would be in his formulation?

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Interview with Arto Artinian

SA: *The first question will be a very general one. It seems as if we are experiencing a “revival” of Ilyenkov’s ideas; there appears to be a growing interest in his philosophical conceptualizations and methodology. What is so significant about Ilyenkov’s ideas that may be responsible for such a revival?*

ARTO ARTINIAN: In Evald Ilyenkov’s thought we have a Soviet philosophy that is uncompromisingly communist at heart, openly and directly positing the communist transformation of society as eudaimonia, as a practical vision for achieving “the Good Life” (at least within the confines of our own current imagination, culture and systems of knowledge, as Ilyenkov might have qualified it). In other words, this is not a Marxism of the Trotskyist vs. Stalinist factional fight, nor is it a liberal “dissident” (i.e. anti-communist) critique of the Soviet epoch (despite some current efforts at presenting Ilyenkov as a “critic” of the Soviet system in ways that sound Trotskyist or anti-communist—albeit in disguise). Nor is it a Marxist critique of capitalism from within capitalist society (which remains the most widely read “flavor” of Marxism—a fact, which given the total lack of political success of revolutionary Marxism in the West, is a contradiction in itself).

Ilyenkov’s efforts were directed towards an explicitly political goal: the formation of Soviet subjectivity, and thus, directly waging struggle for the movement towards egalitarian society. It is not surprising that he always thought through the category of “Soviet society” and the “Soviet people.”

In other words, Ilyenkov’s revival today is to an extent formed by the “shock,” the realization that a major Marxist philosopher from within the Soviet Union (who was also a committed communist, it is crucial to this keep in mind) was busy thinking about the fundamental political questions, from within a society that had eliminated the capitalist class, along with capitalist economic and juridical structures. This contrasts with hegemonic perceptions of Soviet society in the West today, where the common narrative affirmed by constant negative scribbling across ideological space, is that Soviet Marxist thought was incapable of significant contributions, since it functioned as “ideology.” There is a persistent narrative—especially in the West—that to be a “creative thinker,” one would have to be not a communist thinker (or at best, a “Marxist” who is fundamentally critical of the USSR). This distorted

view holds (in innumerable variations) that virtually everything in Soviet philosophy since Lenin was directly or indirectly in the service of the party nomenklatura—with few exceptions such as Merab Mamardashvili, who was indeed recognized as a major creative thinker in philosophy. Mamardashvili, however, did not consider himself a Marxist, or a communist, though his thought was certainly infused with ideas from the Marxist tradition, among others.

What is the ground of Ilyenkov's communism? His entire body of work was centered on asking the fundamental political question inherited from Aristotle and Marx: "What does it mean to be human?" Ilyenkov's various answers to this question took the form of praxis: the communist political goal is to reach a condition of everyday life, of a society consisting of fully-developed human beings. This presupposed the ability for everyone (including people born with severe disabilities) to think. Thinking itself was conditioned through culture, through the infinitely complex, and historically layered web of social relations, and the relations, ideas and concepts that formed those social relations (obviously, through processes of constant political struggle, and the working through various contradictions).

It is indeed this fundamental question that is ever-present throughout Ilyenkov's public and intellectual life. Thus, in polemical works addressed to a general audience, such as "The school must teach how to think," Ilyenkov passionately called for socialization focused on fostering thinking, rather than the trend towards "tracking" students who already excel in some field of formal logical reasoning (as in the education system emphasizing the role of elite schools, consisting of overachieving "hard sciences" students). The centering of human beings in human society was also the central theme of his constant polemics against the positivist-cyberneticists' dream of reducing human thought to a series of complex input-output functions acting on a human-created computing machine, a most pathetic act of reductionism, for it placed total acceptance upon formal logic, which was but a limited subset of the innate human ability to make sense of everyday life through thinking. Dialectical logic, in contrast—the ability to persist through the tensions of contradictions (as Hegel beautifully affirmed) that defined most aspects of everyday life—was the form most organically, for Ilyenkov, embedded in the human mind, as a capacity, a potentiality, that could be unlocked in everyone (again, through deliberate processes of socialization that aim to accomplish this goal).

It is precisely on this point that Ilyenkov's direct relevance for our times is found. He participated in the Zagorsk studies for the full socialization of severely disabled children. This extraordinary program objectively proved the fact at the core of a communist like Ilyenkov's politics: social relations, the complex processes of socialization, the internalization of a particular culture (the collectively formed "already-is" of a society, a totality of already-happened, of actually-existing social relations) is what "makes up" a human being, not the particular aspects of one's "biological"/genetic inheritance. This was a final deathblow to all racist arguments, which are firmly implanted in all capitalist ideological space (whether labeled liberal, "progressive" or fascist and Nazi). Expressed most succinctly, Ilyenkov's political position is "I am, who We are," vs. the liberal-racist "I am, because I (through my own genetic makeup and/or personal/individual efforts) became this way." In other words, communist socialization affirms that who I become is a direct function of the cultural-social structure I become socialized in, whereas capitalist subjectivity is overwhelmingly a function of one's own class inheritance and "genes" (i.e. the main factors which liberal ideology constantly accents as the prime determinants of one's own formed subjectivity). It is thus not surprising at all that the results of the Zagorsk Experiment are not widely known, for its results decisively target and disempower all forms of capitalist subjectivity.

SA: The next question will be in a sense the continuation of the previous; in what sense and how relevant/actual is Ilyenkov's take on philosophical questions? Does he have anything to offer in the face of contemporary philosophical and/or social and political issues and crises?

ARTO ARTINIAN: The central question motivating Ilyenkov: "What does it mean to be human?" certainly remains of prime importance in our political struggles today. We are living under a regime of socialized cybernetics, which is imposing itself as the "common sense" of contemporary capitalism, as its ascending new ideology. This is taking place under conditions of generalized proletarianization: the condition of ever-increasing loss of the fundamental human abilities of to do and to be/think). Marx already foresaw this as a tendency, a trajectory of development, inherent in the internal logic of capitalism. We are living through it now, and the fusion of generalized proletarianization with the ideology of socialized cybernetics, has produced an emerging vision for a new political subjectivity: biological beings with human capacities.

This is the new mediating link, between the previous form of subjectivity under capitalism—the Homo Economicus of mass consumerism and libidinal economy of hyper commodification and consumption—and the emerging hyper-alienated world of Homo Datum, a world in which human beings are just a particular instance of a digital social object (some digital entity which is capable of displaying simulated/approximated or base human capacities).

Ilyenkov sensed this trajectory of political development (including among the increasingly fashionable and politically dominant positivists-cyberneticists in Soviet intellectual life) and it is safe to say, the shift towards Homo Datum subjectivity would be appalling to him. In this context, Ilyenkov's ideas about "thinking," and thus relatedly, of dialectical logic as an organon for thinking—for making sense of the complex contradictions that define everyday living— become centrally important. For what is the ongoing hype about all things "AI," but a thinly veiled political program that has declared humans "obsolete," uninteresting, imprecise, irrational, subject to emotional sways... We are reminded here of the pioneers of cybernetics in the UK and US, who in the post-WW2 years, wrote about the inherent vagueness of human language, and thus of human beings in general. Their inability to understand the practical implications of dialectical logic (for they were liberals of various flavors, to the core) for the human condition, produced radical and dogmatic reductionism, declaring that the human mind (and everything that derives from it politically) is nothing more than a computing machine, and thus its "functionality" can be accurately replicated, and further "improved on," by human-created digital computing machines.

Today, the vast, inexhaustible range of human ways of making sense of living, filled with contradictions above all else—an ability which is best systematized through Ilyenkov's approaches to dialectical logic as an organon—are being declared in need of optimization, simplification, and elimination, primarily through the displacement/externalization of our sense-making capacities. Such is the vulgarity of capitalists, that we are expected to jettison our innate abilities to experience wonderment, our imagination, etc., in other words, the entire movement from abstract to concrete is being replaced by a persistent abstract to abstract loop. Sense-making is now to be externalized to simulated human intelligence in the form of digital social objects, such as the various "AI agents" (themselves, essentially a radical abstraction of plagiarized (already-happened) social relations).

Just to be clear: I don't have a problem with simulated human intelligence or relations. The problem becomes political (and thus all-significant) when such simulations—and thus abstract-to-abstract movements—begin to substitute and normalize actually-existing social relations, and thus interrupting and subverting the abstract-to-concrete movement that is the precondition for thinking (for sense-making) necessary for the existence of the social, that politically most meaningful universal, the constant subject and object of Ilyenkov's thought.

On a different level of the political, Ilyenkov also understood that the movement towards the formation of an egalitarian society, away from the primitive social formation known as capitalism-primitive, because it actively promotes stunted political subjectivity, the negation of the fully developed human being—requires multiple and succeeding revolutions in the political domain. The first stage was the easiest to execute: the nationalization of capitalist private property, the actual elimination of the capitalist property form, as well as its ideological framework of liberalism (in all of its shades, from “left” to “right”). Ilyenkov called this the “formal” socialization of bourgeois property forms, and the primary achievement, thus far, of Soviet socialism.

Other revolutionary transformations had to follow, which Ilyenkov didn't see happening yet in Soviet society, to his great regret. I think he may have overlooked the fact that such follow-on transformations did occur in Soviet society. Probably his lack of close, first-hand experience of living in a capitalist society (a joy that all of us today are experiencing daily), prevented him from fully capturing the revolutionary changes that did occur in the formation of a new political subjectivity: the New Soviet Person was perhaps incompletely actualized by the 1960s (before the party signaled a turn towards consumerist culture, essentially hoping to emulate the hyper-consumerist, libidinal economy of contemporary capitalism), but at least through most of Ilyenkov's life, Soviet “common sense” was indeed distinctly different from that of a citizen living in Western part of Germany, or the United States. The revolutionary transformations in Soviet society between 1917 and 1961 (to use Gagarin's flight into space as a marker) can be denoted through particular markers: the revolutionary and most rapid expansion of education on all levels; the democratization of “high culture” through the provision of maximum social access to the arts; the fostering of the avant-garde in various areas of human creativity and thought (from architecture, literature and music, to the organization of the economy itself), and the

general absence of commodity consumption as the central virtue of everyday life. As an example, access to the arts in post-socialist Bulgaria has once again become the prerogative of the newly reconstituted bourgeoisie, as has privatized (thus capitalist-controlled) book publishing and reading. Classical music has essentially atrophied, along with the visual arts and everything in between, depending once again (as in pre-socialist times) on the benevolence of bourgeois donors. The overall social effect of this retrenchment of the arts, is its renewed functioning strictly along social class lines, to the detriment of the vast majority of people in society.

To summarize: for Ilyenkov the socialist revolutionary transformation of society is a question of utmost necessity, to be achieved via political struggle. In his philosophical system, the corresponding movement would be the practiced ability to complete the flow of abstract-to-concrete. However, we must be keenly aware that unlocking a course of political development through and beyond capitalism—and based on principles of egalitarianism enabling the full actualization of human beings—is a series of multiple and interconnected follow-on revolutionary transformations. This long duration political struggle on the level of strategic-systemic social transformation, centered on the gradual creation of conditions for the maximum, full development of each human being (and thus, simultaneously, of society as a whole) —beyond that of a wage laborer and consumer—offers a practico-political guide, at the very least illuminating the possible steps that need to be anticipated in the ongoing struggle against the capitalist political form.

In the final analysis, Ilyenkov was the preeminent Soviet philosopher of praxis. I mean “Soviet” here, in the sense that Ilyenkov’s own political subjectivity was Soviet, having been born and lived exclusively in the Soviet epoch. Unfortunately, he practiced philosophy actively mostly in what Soviet-Russian historian Andrei Fursov calls the “post-heroic” phase of Soviet society, when communist ideas of revolutionary transformation of society fueled by a program of radical egalitarianism and unbounded optimism about the future, were being actively replaced by the anti-humanism of liberalism, of the vilest capitalist logic, in its most dogmatic positivist form. In the last two decades of his life, he witnessed (as his letters to the party leadership, to a group of economists, and to his friend, the prominent mathematician Georgy Shilov attest) the gradual decay and decomposition of the communist party towards liberalism. This must have been an unbearable burden, a most profound disappointment, especially for a decorated war veteran, having first-

hand witnessed the human cost (and determination) through which his society defended its political trajectory towards socialism.

From our present vantage point of living in capitalist societies, the series of transformations noted as necessary by Ilyenkov may seem utterly beyond comprehension in scale and difficulty of conceptualization, but it is far better to have fundamental insights about the necessary road ahead, rather than remain comfortably inside a false imaginary, or a depressed acceptance of capitalism through its often-hollered TINA (there-is-no-alternative) abstraction.

SA: In his philosophical work, Ilyenkov addresses several problems that traditionally belong to different fields of philosophical study, from machine-thinking and the AI to the questions concerning the relation between philosophy and sciences, the “universal,” the “ideal,” problems of epistemology, methodology, the relation between ethics and science, Marxism, humanism, general education and the education of people with disabilities, to the criticism of positivism, so on and so forth. What in Ilyenkov’s philosophical approach keeps together these apparently different fields and questions? Does he suggest that there is an essential bond between these diverse problems? If so, what that would be in his formulation?

ARTO ARTINIAN: At the risk of sounding very repetitive, the essential bond that joins together the various strands of Ilyenkov’s thought can be summarized as follows: concern and direct engagement with the fundamental question: “What does it mean to be human?” and the political goal of transforming political subjectivity along the lines of socialist-egalitarian politics. I keep returning over and over to this question, but there’s no way around it, as this is precisely the line, the boundary condition that separates Ilyenkov’s position, from that of the typical liberal notions of the political today.

To Ilyenkov, the answer to this question was rooted in the idea that our very existence as human beings is one of the extraordinary random events of the universe itself. He didn’t waste his time in speculations about trans-historical essences that ground our ontology as human beings. Far more important and interesting than the idea that we are simply a totally random event (non-event?), a tick precipitated by the benevolent indifference of the universe, was his point, that now that we are, now that we exist, it is best and necessary to strive to unlock the potential contained within our condition, to deploy the full “resources” that we have and to live according to this potentialities denoting our

condition. It is difficult not to make the immediate parallel with Aristotle's meditations on this same question, and that is totally OK. After all, as we know there's an organic continuation in-thought, from the ancient thinker through Spinoza, Hegel, Marx and the Marx-inspired systems of thought which overdetermined Ilyenkov's philosophical world.

A committed communist, Ilyenkov understood that social relations in their totality (or, culture, in his conceptual world) form the ontological categories of our existence. Underpinning this belief was the understanding that capitalism had politically exhausted itself by the 20th century (in other words, all it could offer was more of the same, with diminishing returns: think of the degenerated political "elites" that are in position of power today...). Communist revolutionary transformations offered a far better way towards achieving the fundamental political task: the formation of a society, consisting of full-developed human beings. Fully-developed in their human totality, meaning, having a maximally-developed ability to think (to make sense of everyday life), to live life filled with meaning, creativity, reflection, understanding. To think, meant to make sense of contradictions, to persist through the tensions of a contradiction (to return to Hegel's wonderful phrase), and to emerge changed on the other side of it. Ilyenkov constantly emphasized this point!

The common bond uniting these lines of thought is the concept of the "universal." The "universal" for Ilyenkov is that which has emerged through culture as being "common-to-all" (всёобщее). That which is common-to-all is what makes us human beings, and thus is the prime political battleground. It is the foundation around which the social fabric can form and reproduce most completely aligned with the human ontological inheritance. But this could actualize only within an appropriate political configuration. This was the core of the Soviet project in its most revolutionary periods, and unsurprisingly and correspondingly, the heart of Ilyenkov's thought.

Soviet society was to be the political actualization of the universal, the common-to-all field of everyday life, forming a culture grounded in egalitarianism and fully-developed human beings. Once this was accomplished, the "sky was the limit," and in this sense, we can read the enormous social optimism that pervaded Soviet society through the sixties (and especially from the end of the civil war through the immediate aftermath of the victory in the Great Patriotic War); but we must note, this was optimism underpinned by a complex dialectical tension

throughout. As an example of how widespread this speculative optimism about the communist future was in Ilyenkov's time, we could point to the early corpus of the Strugatsky brothers in works such as *The Land of Crimson Clouds*, *The Way to Amalthea*, and *Noon: 22nd Century* (1959-1962). Even more fully developed, this line of thought, outlining the vast potential suggested by communist subjectivity, can be encountered in the novels *Andromeda: A Spce-Age Tale* (1959), and *Razor's Edge* (1963) by the great Soviet writer and paleontologist Ivan Efremov. Such works should be read as continuations of Ilyenkov's philosophical thought, expressed through the form of science fiction. They are an indicator of how the focus of Ilyenkov's thought and polemics, was "in the air" of Soviet society during the fifties and early sixties.

By contrast, the capitalist class (and its dominant ideology of liberalism) actively fears this universal in the political domain. Liberals are deathly afraid of the formation of a "society," of that which is common-to-all politically.

The formation of such a generalized commonality is utterly incompatible with capitalism and would spell the political end of the capitalist class. This was understood by early ideologues such as David Hume, who defined individual, personal (and of course, material) interest as the highest possible "virtue," echoing similar ideas from John Locke and other comparable owners of shares in slave plantations in the English colonies of North America. Liberalism replaces the universal in politics with "civil society," the infinite number of private, particular groups, motivated by narrow (not-common-to-all) interests (mostly defined through the equally narrow categories of capitalist commodification). Michel Foucault focused on this very problem of liberalism in relations to the political, in his lectures in the late 1970s, at the College de France. We can find similar engagements in Giorgio Agamben's work, especially in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*.

Evald Ilyenkov's notion of the universal is the total rejection of the liberal notion of particular interest. This is the Soviet political project expressed in philosophical categories. It is not an accident at all that Yegor Gaidar, Anatoli Chubais and other liberal criminals explicitly justified their insistence on shock therapy in post-Soviet Russia, as the need to dismantle as soon as possible—and as thoroughly as possible—the existing Soviet universal political structures (even if they were incomplete in their form and functioning; the potentiality was already part of the Soviet social fabric, whereas it is almost completely absent

in Western capitalist collectivities, dominated by bourgeois civil societies). The restoration of capitalism in Russia would have been impossible without this process of deliberate destruction of the socialist social fabric, which was in-process of formation.

In conclusion, it must be said that Ilyenkov reminds us that Marxism is above all, a framework for waging political struggle on the systemic-strategic level of the class struggle. Repeating Lenin's insight and fundamental contribution on this point, Ilyenkov would perhaps agree, that the common bond joining the critique of fundamentalist positivism (expressed today in the ideology of socialized cybernetics), along with the need for a practical education curriculum dedicated to teaching and practice of dialectical logic—and of the widespread (universal) formation of practical programs in creating socialization spaces for all people (regardless of their initial intellectual abilities, disabilities, inherited culture and ontology of everyday life) that aim to unlock the inherent, organic and innate capacity for creativity and wonderment present in all people—in all of this, the common bond is the fundamental political project of rejecting the inherited and still persistent burdens of capitalism, and its overcoming by a new praxis, a new politics of communism as eudaimonia.

Evald Ilyenkov and all of us who lived during the Soviet epoch, at the very least, sensed these potentialities for living in new, better, more fulfilling ways; the deeply felt and internalized realization that there is more to life than the simple reduction of all living to one exchange of labor power for money, and the acquisition of some desired commodities with that money, a process looped more or less till death. In retrospect, the minimization (and at times, outright absence) of the basic categories of the capitalist libidinal economy seems like an extremely significant political achievement in itself. Of course, such conclusions about communism as the way to the future, and especially building upon the potentialities unlocked by the Soviet epoch, may seem strange. This is especially true given the vast amounts of most vulgar and primitive propaganda unleashed against every aspect of Soviet socialism till this day. After all, however, Soviet society did implode and formally disappeared from the political field.

Yet perhaps this is really a problem of political struggle in the “collective West,” where revolutionary socialism didn't even manage to accomplish the first stage of nationalizing capitalist private property forms. This historical fact must be recognized by Marxists, especially in

the West. In this context, Evald Ilyenkov's corpus of thought can function as both, a corrective to the increased abstractions of Western (now mostly) academic Marxism, while also serving as a generator of how to engage in praxis—using the intellectual weapons of philosophy to wage effective political struggle in theory (to borrow Louis Althusser's elegant phrase here), and by doing so, to directly affect the political field itself.

SA: Thank you for your contribution Arto Artinian.

Arto Artinian is a musician and a student of political philosophy. He grew up in both Bulgaria and the Soviet Union, before pursuing his university studies in the United States. His current interests include the articulation of new communist politics, Soviet Marxism, Eastern European political thought, and history during the socialist period, as well as writing and performing electronic music. He is presently working on two projects: "Homo Datum," centered on the emerging transformations of political subjectivity in contemporary capitalism, and "June 1941: Soviet Ukraine," a historico-philosophical reconstruction of the first months of the Nazi invasion of Soviet Ukraine, in an attempt to counter current historical revisionist narratives of that war, that are increasingly popular across Europe. Arto is currently an associate professor of political science at Borough of Manhattan Community College—City University of New York. He lives in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, while also travelling to New York as his academic position demands. He is also a member of the editorial collective and board of the Institute for the Radical Imagination, in New York City.

Interview with David Bakhurst

SA: *The first question will be a very general one. It seems as if we are experiencing a “revival” of Ilyenkov’s ideas; there appears to be a growing interest in his philosophical conceptualizations and methodology. What is so significant about Ilyenkov’s ideas that may be responsible for such a revival?*

DAVID BAKHURST: Actually, I don’t think it’s right to say that we are experiencing a revival in Ilyenkov’s ideas. I think that interest in his life and work has been steadily growing for a long time, perhaps since his death in 1979, but certainly since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. When I began studying Ilyenkov in the early 1980s there were hardly any resources. In the West, the 1977 English translation of *Dialectical Logic* was available from progressive bookshops and a few libraries had Russian editions of his works (the British Library, for example, had *Dialektika abstrakt’nogo i konkret’nogo v “Kapitale” Marksa* (*Dialectics of the Abstract and the Concrete in Marx’s “Capital”*) and carried *Voprosy filosofii*). The situation in Russia was not much better because his books were out of print and it was not always easy for people to get library access. Moreover, like all Russian publications of the Soviet era, you often needed to know the story behind many of Ilyenkov’s writings in order to read them correctly and there was no secondary literature that could help with that. In 1980 there was no book, Soviet or Western, about Vygotsky, let alone Ilyenkov. However, the situation soon began to improve. Ilyenkov’s final book, *Leninskaya dialektika i metafizika pozitivizma* was published in 1980, and an English translation appeared in the UK in 1982 (*Leninist Dialectics and the Metaphysics of Positivism*), the same year that Progress published an English translation of *Dialektika abstrakt’nogo i konkret’nogo v “Kapitale” Marksa*. A Russian collection of Ilyenkov’s writings on aesthetics, *Isskusstvo i kommunisticheskii ideal* (*Art and the Communist Ideal*) followed in 1984, along with a second edition of *Dialekticheskaya logika* (*Dialectical Logic*). Under glasnost, Ilyenkov’s friends and colleagues began to write reminiscences about him, the first set—by Mikhailov, Korovikov and others—appeared in *Voprosy filosofii* in 1990. A year later, another important anthology of Ilyenkov’s writings came out under the title *Filosofiya i kul’tura* (*Philosophy and Culture*), with an introduction by Novokhatko. 1991 also saw the publication of my *Consciousness and Revolution in Soviet Philosophy: From the Bolsheviks to Evald Ilyenkov*. In 1997 the unexpurgated version of Ilyenkov’s first book was published under its original title, *Dialektika abstrakt’nogo i konkret’nogo v nauchno-teoreticheskom myshlenii* (*Dialectics of the Abstract and the Concrete in Scientific-Theoretical Thinking*). In 2002, a number of Ilyenkov’s writings on philosophy of education were collected under the title,

Shkola dolzhna učit' myslit' (*School Must Teach How to Think*) and the entire book was translated into English in *The Journal of Russian and East European Psychology* in 2007. A second Russian edition of Ilyenkov's 1968 book, *Ob idolakh i idealakh* (*Of Idols and Ideals*) also came out in 2002. In 2009, *The Ideal in Human Activity* appeared, an important English-language anthology of Ilyenkov's texts and in the same year *Logos* published the definitive text of Ilyenkov's masterpiece "Dialektika ideal'nogo" ("The Dialectics of the Ideal"), which later appeared in a fine English translation by Alex Levant. Interest in Ilyenkov then intensified further with the publication of three volumes of archival material collated by Elena Illesh, Ilyenkov's daughter, and the discovery of the long-lost text of Ilyenkov and Korovikov's famous "Theses on Philosophy." At the same time, Andrey Maidansky began the herculean project of editing Ilyenkov's *Collected Works*—7 volumes have so far appeared and several more are planned. Finally, I should mention that my book, *The Heart of the Matter: Ilyenkov, Vygotsky and the Courage of Thought* was published in 2023, collecting together many of the articles I have written about Ilyenkov over the course of my career. A paperback version will be available in April this year.

Forgive this long list! It's incomplete of course. I didn't mention Evgeny Pavlov's *Intelligent Materialism*, an anthology of English translations of Ilyenkov's writings on Hegel. I didn't include translations in languages other than English, or the works of the many scholars who have written about Ilyenkov or drawn on his ideas. I should also draw attention to Andrey Maidansky's website (<http://caute.ru/ilyenkov/index.html>), where you can find many of the writings I did mention. My point is only that interest in Ilyenkov has been remarkably constant over the last 30 years or more and shows no sign of abating. This is of course an intriguing and rather amazing fact. When *Consciousness and Revolution* came out in 1991, just as the Soviet Union collapsed, I assumed that my book would be consigned to the dustbin of history because Ilyenkov was destined to be remembered—if he was remembered—as an obscure contributor to a defunct tradition. But I am delighted to say that assumption was unfounded.

I don't think there is a single answer to the question of why Ilyenkov has inspired such interest and admiration. Ilyenkov was a massively important figure in the history of Soviet Marxism, who did more than anyone to create and sustain a form of creative, critical Marxism in contrast to the doctrinaire version of "diamat" and "histmat" that formed the official ideology of the Soviet state. So his immediate friends and colleagues, and their students after them, sought to preserve his memory and keep his ideas alive, not just for Ilyenkov's sake, but so that the tradition Ilyenkov helped to found should remain alive and continue to develop. I don't think many of these thinkers saw this primarily as a

matter of sustaining *Marxism*, so much as recognizing a distinctive tradition within Soviet thought that was rich in insight and moral depth and which they did not want to see erased. Ilyenkov's appeal in the West is a little different. Many scholars, already aware of Vygotsky's cultural-historical psychology and Leontiev's activity theory, were drawn to Ilyenkov because they saw him as the philosophical mentor of those schools. Ilyenkov was in various ways connected to them, of course. He knew and admired Leontiev. He was very close to Vasili Davydov and Alexander Meshcheryakov. Western interest in Ilyenkov, however, has not typically come from philosophers (despite my efforts!), but from people in psychology, education, communication, applied linguistics and cognate fields, who were attracted to his views on activity and the ideal and then were pleased to discover that Ilyenkov had a developmental theory of culture and mind, that he wrote on education, including the education of blind-deaf children, and so on. Of course, there was interest in Ilyenkov from other quarters too. Some Western Marxists saw him as the archetypal anti-Stalinist, whose example shows that the Soviet Union was not entirely a lost cause. And others were simply drawn to some of his key ideas, such as his work on the abstract and the concrete. And of course, some find Ilyenkov irresistible because he was a romantic figure, a tragic hero. The more you learn about his life, his triumphs and torments, his achievements and his persecution, the more impressive he seems and the more moving his story.

SA: The next question will be in a sense the continuation of the previous; in what sense and how relevant/actual is Ilyenkov's take on philosophical questions? Does he have anything to offer in the face of contemporary philosophical and/or social and political issues and crises?

DAVID BAKHURST: I think Ilyenkov's work continues to be philosophically significant. If I didn't, I would have stopped writing about him long ago. Ilyenkov addresses questions of perennial philosophical importance—about the nature of mind and its embodiment in human life activity, the reality of culture and its significance in human development, the nature of concepts and norms, the character of knowledge and inquiry, the limits of natural-scientific explanation, the emergence of personhood, imagination, insight and understanding... Although he is wedded to a Marxist idiom that can appear dated, his ideas have a freshness and originality that is truly compelling, especially when they are understood in the context in which he was writing. I like to bring Ilyenkov's ideas into dialogue with other thinkers who grapple with the same questions, and who sometimes try to articulate similar insights. When I first started doing this, I would often get pushback, especially in Russia: How can you say that there are parallels between Ilyenkov and Wittgenstein? Ilyenkov was a materialist and Wittgenstein an idealist!

But now we have overcome these wooden dichotomies and are willing to see things in less Manichean terms.

Over the years, I have tried to bring Ilyenkov's philosophy into conversation with thinkers like John McDowell, Jerome Bruner, Jonathan Dancy, Sebastian Rödl, Elizabeth Anscombe, and others. And there are many other avenues that one might pursue—for example, exploring the relation between Ilyenkov's conception of "the thinking body" and contemporary views of embodied cognition. At a less esoteric level, there are obviously important lessons to learn from his preoccupation with education as *learning to think*, a view which does not just align him with Western advocates of critical thinking (though Ilyenkov has a much richer conception of thinking than they have) but addresses an issue of massive political importance today. For what is the antidote to conspiracy theories, echo chambers, scepticism about science, and so on, if it is not education aimed at the cultivation of knowledgeable citizens who can think for themselves and who care about making up their own minds. And, of course, Ilyenkov's humanistic criticism of cybernetics resonates today with the rise of AI. So there is no doubt Ilyenkov remains relevant.

It is important that Ilyenkov's works, often produced under conditions of censorship and self-censorship, require a good deal of interpretation, and so it is not unusual for readers who are drawn to his writings to find in them themes that engage with issues of interest to them. (This is so for all philosophers, but I think it is especially true when it comes to exploring Ilyenkov's works, where readers often have less to guide them than with thinkers who have prompted a wealth of secondary literature defining established points of entry into their work.) This means there is a risk of distortion, of course, but also the prospect of novel and inventive readings that open up exciting new avenues of inquiry.

I think the biggest challenge facing sympathetic interpreters of Ilyenkov today lies in finding an interpretation of his humanism that is not at odds with contemporary progressive views about our relation to non-human animals and the natural world more generally. Ilyenkov thinks that there is a very sharp distinction to be drawn between human minds—responsive to reasons and capable of self-conscious thought, intentional action, and self-determination—and those of non-human animals, whose mental lives are dictated by biological and environmental imperatives. Many thinkers today find such a severe opposition unsatisfying: it fails to do justice to the commonalities between human and animal minds and it places us somehow above and outside "nature." As a result, the natural world is seen merely as an object of human mastery and domination, as a means of humanity's self-development and fulfillment, but of no intrinsic value. Of course, an Ilyenkovian need not hold such a view, and perhaps Ilyenkov himself, had it been put to him,

would have disavowed it, but there is plenty of precedent for such thinking in the Marxist tradition and Ilyenkov's adherence to such views is more than merely a matter of rhetoric. Ilyenkov's solution to the problem of the ideal, for example, makes much of the power of human activity to transform nature. It is important to explore carefully the extent to which we can embrace the core of his position while rejecting the idea that nature is a mere means to human flourishing.

SA: In his philosophical work, Ilyenkov addresses several problems that traditionally belong to different fields of philosophical study, from machine-thinking and the AI to the questions concerning the relation between philosophy and sciences, the "universal," the "ideal," problems of epistemology, methodology, the relation between ethics and science, Marxism, humanism, general education and the education of people with disabilities, to the criticism of positivism, so on and so forth. What in Ilyenkov's philosophical approach keeps together these apparently different fields and questions? Does he suggest that there is an essential bond between these diverse problems? If so, what that would be in his formulation?

DAVID BAKHURST: Ilyenkov thinks of philosophy as a unity, not as a collection of disparate sub-disciplines. For him, philosophy is the "science of thinking" (*nauka o myshlenii*). By "science" here, he means "systematic study" (the Russian "nauka," like the German "Wissenschaft," is far broader in meaning than the English "science", as that term is used today). Philosophy is a non-empirical discipline and does not study thinking as the psychologist or cognitive scientist does. Philosophy studies the forms of our thinking, our fundamental categories and concepts, and the *movement* of thought—the nature of reasoning, the dialectical interplay and development of ideas, the methods of concept formation, scientific inquiry, and the achievement of knowledge and understanding.

With this conception of philosophy, it starts to become clear how Ilyenkov is led to address all these various topics. His most fundamental inquiries, into Marxist epistemology and the nature of the ideal, issue in a conception of the human mind as a set of capacities or powers that emerge in the course of the child's initiation into culture. This leads Ilyenkov to consider the creation of the conditions in which the human mind is nurtured and cultivated, and so it's natural he should address questions of education and equally obvious why he found Meshcheryakov's work with blind-deaf children so enthralling and inspiring. It's also clear why his resistance to positivism, which is first articulated in a purely theoretical context, comes to take on a moral and political dimension. Ilyenkov was appalled at the extent to which positivist and

scientistic thinking had gripped Soviet ideology and led the Party to think that the problems of Soviet society could be addressed by “the scientific-technological revolution.” Ilyenkov was no luddite; he had no problem with computer science and cybernetics as scientific disciplines. But he strongly rejected the idea that social and economic problems could be solved by thinking of human beings as information-processing devices. He felt this technocratic vision lost sight of the true ideals of communist society as a fellowship of equal self-determining persons organizing their lives to ensure the flourishing of all. Ilyenkov’s humanistic Marxism lends all his work a moral dimension, since the ideal that motivates everything he does is the creation of a just society that enables human flourishing.

So from Ilyenkov’s perspective, all these problems, issues and themes are organically connected to one another. They are all aspects of the *same* problem, the problem of finding a satisfying conception of the unity of thinking and being, which for Ilyenkov is not a merely theoretical problem, but a practical one to which communism is the solution—communism in the true sense of the word, that is, not the kind that sent tanks into Czechoslovakia, or that thinks of disabled people as a burden on society, or that rules by fiat and fear, or that discourages people from thinking for themselves.

SA: *Thank you for your contribution David Bakhurst.*

David Bakhurst is George Whalley Distinguished University Professor at Queen’s University, Ontario. His book, *Consciousness and Revolution in Soviet Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1991) was the first critical history of Soviet philosophical culture. The primary research was conducted in Moscow under the mentorship of Felix Mikhailov. Since then, in addition to continuing his work on Russian thought, Bakhurst has written on epistemology, metaphysics, Wittgenstein, ethics and philosophy of education. His publications include *The Heart of the Matter: Ilyenkov, Vygotsky and the Courage of Thought* (Brill, 2023); *The Formation of Reason* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011) and the edited collection, *Teaching and Learning: Epistemic, Metaphysical and Ethical Dimensions* (2020). Bakhurst is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and Executive Editor of *Journal of Philosophy of Education*.

Interview with Pham Minh Duc

SA: *The first question will be a very general one. It seems as if we are experiencing a “revival” of Ilyenkov’s ideas; there appears to be a growing interest in his philosophical conceptualizations and methodology. What is so significant about Ilyenkov’s ideas that may be responsible for such a revival?*

PHAM MINH DUC: I do think at first, I need to delve into the key aspect that, what is revived and what do we revive for? If revival means bringing something back from the death, then it is not the case for Ilyenkov. As, Ilyenkov ideas were not “dead,” his legacy still continues, his thoughts still influence many people and scholars from around the world. Yet, revival here may mean looking at Ilyenkov’s ideas in a fresh way, interpreting and applying his ideas to contemporary issues, make it “lively” and carry “the breath of our current era.”

In that sense, I will then answer the question, “What do we revive for?” But, as you can see from the question, we are the active agents that do the work. Therefore, the things that we need to consider first is ourselves. Recall the ancient adage; Socrates stated that the most important things is “know thyself.” And in that light, the question that Kant proposed: “What is man?” (Kant, 2004, p. 538). Inherited the legacy of Kant, Karl Marx dealt with that same question, but from a dialectical (and historical) materialist point of view. In *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, *German Ideology* and his mature work, *Capital*, Marx seeks for the real conditions that make us human, and from that move on to identify what we truly are. Ilyenkov continues that legacy to unveil the human essence. His significant contribution is his discovery that the real conditions of man consist not only of material aspects that give human the vital sources for existing, but also of the ideal and the human culture.

Although it may seem that Ilyenkov has a Hegelian take, if we look carefully, we can see his dedication to materialism, while going against naive and trivial materialism that only see human as a mechanical being and reduce every spiritual element to material substance. The important thing is that, we cannot reduce human and spiritual aspects to matter, but we see these aspects as material—a materiality irreducible to any substance, the “lively-culturally-socially-thinking matter.” This is what Ilyenkov sets before himself to resolve throughout his works such as *Dialectical Logic: Essays on Its History and Theory*, and *Dialectics of the Abstract & the Concrete in Marx’s Capital, The Concept of the Ideal*.

To put it in a sentence, I contend that Ilyenkov’s conceptualization of human is the most significant aspect in his thought that we need to consider.

SA: *The next question will be in a sense the continuation of the previous; in what sense and how relevant/actual is Ilyenkov's take on philosophical questions? Does he have anything to offer in the face of contemporary philosophical and/or social and political issues and crises?*

PHAM MINH DUC: Continuing the line of thought from my previous description of Ilyenkov's ideas of man as the core of his philosophy, I think that Ilyenkov's thought is indeed forceful. His ideas can be used to answer the currently hot debated questions concerning transhumanism, a school of thought that announces triumphantly the transcendence of human form and its inherent essence: "What is the essence of man? Can it be transcended?" Rethinking the fundamental concerns of what it is to be human and how society and culture interact with and affect the material conditions of existence in light of the current intellectual, social, and political issues is needed. In order to achieve societal and personal transformation, Ilyenkov's dialectical method promotes a comprehensive understanding of human problems and calls for the synthesis of theory and practice. As a result, his philosophical endeavor—which emphasizes the relationship between the ideal and the material, the person and the community—continues to be an essential tool for critically analyzing the urgent problems of our day.

Also, in this light, and in contemporary philosophical discourse, Ilyenkov's insights can offer a potent critique of reductive materialist or overly idealist conceptions of human existence. His analysis of the role of the ideal and thinking in the material world, as the "distinct matter itself," with the particularly his exploration of concepts such as the "ideal" in "The Concept of the Ideal," underlines the significance of cultural and intellectual dimensions in shaping human reality. This approach is immensely valuable in addressing current debates on the nature of consciousness, the construction of social reality, and the dynamics of cultural and ideological formation.

Lastly, Ilyenkov also investigates the human in concreto, in personality. His unique view of personality as synthesis of human psyche with material and social conditions can be the answer for the current issues of the politics of identity. Also, his view can be the quintessence key to deal with the hot problems of "machine personality," "A.I. personality," and more generally, the questions that already Winner proposed: "Do Artifacts Have Politics?" (Winner, 1960).

SA: *In his philosophical work, Ilyenkov addresses several problems that traditionally belong to different fields of philosophical study, from machine-thinking and the AI to the questions concerning the relation between philosophy and sciences, the "universal," the "ideal," problems of epistemology, methodology, the relation between ethics and science,*

Marxism, humanism, general education and the education of people with disabilities, to the criticism of positivism, so on and so forth. What in Ilyenkov's philosophical approach keeps together these apparently different fields and questions? Does he suggest that there is an essential bond between these diverse problems? If so, what that would be in his formulation?

PHAM MINH DUC: Ilyenkov's philosophy functions as a tapestry, deftly combining several philosophical fields of study and investigations under one overarching concept: the dialectical interaction between the ideal and the material in the context of human social practice. This idea, which has its roots in the dialectical materialism tradition passed down from Marx, holds that human consciousness and the material world are not two distinct worlds but rather are linked by the ongoing processes of human action. Also, human consciousness is the "matter in itself," it cannot be reduced to any others forms of matter. This view is indeed put more radical in his "Cosmology of the Spirit," where he said, that consciousness is the highest form of matter (Ilyenkov, 2017).

And as I previously mentioned above, the idea of the "ideal," which Ilyenkov views as being closely related to and developing from material conditions via human work and social interaction, therefore the also the "matter in itself," rather than as a simple abstraction floating above material reality, is also at the center of his methodology. With the help of this comprehension, he is able to integrate seemingly unrelated fields of philosophical study—such as the philosophy of science, ethics, and education—as well as the nature of consciousness and the difficulties presented by artificial intelligence.

Furthermore, Ilyenkov finds that humans actively shape their surroundings and asks how they perceive it, which is the fundamental connection between these disparate issues. According to his theory, we not only engage with the material world but also change it, producing the "ideal" in the process, via our practical and intellectual endeavors. This change is not exclusive; it also affects how we view the world, how society is organized, and how we approach philosophy. Therefore, the core of Ilyenkov's formulation is that: the notion that comprehending the fullness of the human requires an awareness of it as a matter in itself, as the dialectical interaction between the ideal and the material, mediated by human thinking and praxis. This dialectic suggests that any meaningful study or intervention—be it in science, education, or eth-

ics—must understand the interplay between human awareness and material conditions. It is not only a theoretical construct but also a useful manual for interacting with the world.

To summarize, Ilyenkov’s overarching concept is dialectical materialism, which centers philosophical research around human activity and suggests that the self and the universe are undergoing mutual transformation. This viewpoint, which contends that the many fields of philosophy, science, and social practice are all aspects of the same fundamental reality that has been molded by human labor, provides a potent framework for confronting the complexity of modern life.

SA: *Pham Minh Duc, Thank you for your contribution.*

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Pham Minh Duc was born in Ha Noi. He studied Philosophy from 2018 at VNU University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi. His field study is Philosophy of Science and Technology, specifically Ethics of Artificial Intelligence.

Interview with Sascha Freyberg

SA: *The first question will be a very general one. It seems as if we are experiencing a “revival” of Ilyenkov’s ideas; there appears to be a growing interest in his philosophical conceptualizations and methodology. What is so significant about Ilyenkov’s ideas that may be responsible for such a revival?*

SASCHA FREYBERG: I think the interest in Ilyenkov is first of all due to the fact that there is a renewed interest in Marxism, which together with the whole legacy of the socialist countries was (and to some extent still is) in a state of *damnatio memoriae*. Ilyenkov’s life and work represents the critical and humanist heritage of the Soviet experiment and is a clear example for genuine philosophical work and creative as well as critical mental labour done in the socialist realm—or what we could call the “global former East.”

As to Ilyenkov’s work in particular, he would not claim any originality, his radicalness is of a different kind than capital T theory in attention economy. Ilyenkov embodies ‘the courage of thought’ despite complicated conditions and thus follows the attitude demanded by Hegel in his Berlin inauguration lecture: “the courage of truth,” that is, philosophy as critical anti-authoritarian consciousness. It is not only insight of genius, but it is the earnest labour of his working-through the philosophical heritage of Marxism and the way he presented e.g. dialectical logic in rather non-technical language which is of interest. The idea of simplicity is at once a very notion of what we could call “the ideal of science” as well as of simple need to speak to people—not only to academics. In this sense it is a truly communist take on philosophy which is embodied in his works and this is certainly fascinating to many people, given the situation nowadays.

There are of course more specific aspects to his work which are of interest (his idea of a dialectical logic as processual and relational, of interaction, of the embodiment and objectivity of the ideal, of personality as a kind of knot, of the role of thought in the world etc.) and people are often fascinated with his involvement in the ‘Zagorsk experiment,’ but I think for him it was a thinking-through of the philosophical trajectory of which Marx and Engels were a part of. His work can be understood as an unfolding of the implications of Marxism. In this respect, he is one of the advocates of the Praxis- or Activity approach, his notions are all based in the understanding of the self-development and -transformation of humanity through its own actions. I call this his contribution to the ‘metamorphological project’ as the philosophical answer to modernity, where “all that is solid melts into air.”

SA: *The next question will be in a sense the continuation of the previous; in what sense and how relevant/actual is Ilyenkov's take on philosophical questions? Does he have anything to offer in the face of contemporary philosophical and/or social and political issues and crises?*

SASCHA FREYBERG: I think his contribution to the 'metamorphological project' in general and to activity theory in particular are full of potential for contemporary theory. This pertains to diverse "turns" today (practical, embodied, ecological, posthumanist, self-declared new materialist etc.) which more often than not fall short of a systemic analysis and lack – as strange as it may sound – a proper understanding of research, i.e. an understanding of the role and the very notion of science (what Lenin called *nauchnost*). Ilyenkov tried to show how Marx's method is scientific and philosophical at the same time, what kind of research logic is at work and what this means for a dialectical logic. From his understanding of what he called "consistent materialism" a particular critical function of thought is emphasized which is not helpless in face of symbolisms and their reifications. Thus, it is a materialism which can be spelled out in terms which current theory understands but often splits up instead of taking on the hard work of seeing e.g. semiotics and (post-) structuralism not opposed to scientific realism and/or humanism. That's just a very general notion of his actuality, but I think an important one. I found interesting that he has so many points of contact (and agreement) with thinkers who seemingly stand in a different tradition like Neo-Kantianism or Pragmatism in particular when it comes to a philosophy of culture (which in itself is rather marginalized today). The whole idea of culture is thought in its entanglements and interactions with the world, also building on Marx formulation of the metabolism between humans and nature. So, to shortly answer the second question: yes, he does have much to offer, although he would claim that it is not his personal work, but just his expression of a collective work.

SA: *In his philosophical work, Ilyenkov addresses several problems that traditionally belong to different fields of philosophical study, from machine-thinking and the AI to the questions concerning the relation between philosophy and sciences, the "universal," the "ideal," problems of epistemology, methodology, the relation between ethics and science, Marxism, humanism, general education and the education of people with disabilities, to the criticism of positivism, so on and so forth. What in Ilyenkov's philosophical approach keeps together these apparently different fields and questions? Does he suggest that there is an essential bond between these diverse problems? If so, what that would be in his formulation?*

SASCHA FREYBERG: Given what I have said so far, I think it does not come as a surprise, that I answer the first two questions in the affirmative. I mentioned that he can be seen as the proponent of a specific approach inside of Marxism (or Marxism-Leninism), which works out the implication of human activity not only for cognitive phenomena but a whole realm of problems, since in practice or everyday life ideal and material aspects are always in a particular interaction, brought into a concrete *form* or configuration. There are however different ways to tackle the question of how he would put the connections (materialist dialectics, dialectical logic, consistent materialism etc.). I think, as a student he was excited when he read Engels' distinction of old and new materialism: the old materialism is fine as far as it goes, but it cannot explain the *necessity* in the emergence of thought, so it can only be grasped as a contingent combination of elements or absurd coincidence. For Engels (and young Ilyenkov), however, there must be a place for thought in the universe. However, would such an idea be sufficient in providing the formula under which we could subsume all of Ilyenkov's work? Even pointing to the central idea revolving around human activity on Earth would be much too abstract.

Maybe the question cannot be answered when we presuppose that epistemology, methodology, pedagogy, criticism of positivism and technocracy belong to different academic fields and are quite different again from listening to Wagner records, riding a bike or smoking tons of cigarettes. Let's suppose that in all their differences they can be considered *as problems* on different levels and contexts of human activity and thought (which is always connected with the former, albeit often in muted ways). They all involve in some way or another *the activity* called *learning*. As a Marxist philosopher Ilyenkov put the emphasis on *understanding problems*. This means that our way to understand an issue is as important as the connection of the problem with particular actions, actual practices or with other issues. Ilyenkov followed Hegel in his inversion of the abstract and the concrete, with the latter as a tentative result of a process of engagement. There are different levels of coherence and "truth is always concrete" as Marx put it, so several formulations of the consistency of a problematic configuration are possible, depending on which concrete problem you have to deal with at the moment. This dialectical research logic as such was directly opposed to the petrification and dogmatization of historical and dialectical materialism (like in Stalin's infamous Fourth Chapter). So my guess is, that the kind of philosophy Ilyenkov did and worked on does not even want to give such a formulation, it legitimizes itself differently. It is our retrospective view which asks here. Ilyenkov worked at a particular moment at a particular place, and what he worked for was to keep thought alive, but not for thoughts sake. For him this meant to let people partake in the 'riches'

of philosophical heritage in order to understand themselves as persons, as individuals and as collectives in better, i.e. more adequate, liberating and emancipating way. If you ask me for my formulation of his central ideas, I would pick Ilyenkov's idea of dialectical logic as a 'logic of the concrete': we inquire into situations, thoughts, things, issues where ideal and material, cultural and natural forms are entangled. We are faced with forms, work with them to orient ourselves, understand or deal with the world. We use them as tools but we (can) also transform them. In Ilyenkov there's a notion of a basic relation between thought and potentiality. However, thought is not enough, it never is, but without it there's no unfolding of possibilities embodied in the forms of action.

SA: *Thank you for your contribution Sascha Freyberg.*

Sascha Freyberg is a visiting fellow at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin and member of the Max Planck Partner Group "The Water City: The Political Epistemology of Hydrogeological Praxis." He is also an editor of the book series "Verum Factum: Studies and Sources on Political Epistemology" and with *Marxism & Sciences*.

Interview with Isabel Jacobs

SA: *The first question will be a very general one. It seems as if we are experiencing a “revival” of Ilyenkov’s ideas; there appears to be a growing interest in his philosophical conceptualizations and methodology. What is so significant about Ilyenkov’s ideas that may be responsible for such a revival?*

ISABEL JACOBS: Unlike more orthodox Soviet Marxists, which can appear a little stale today, Ilyenkov has a lot of creative potential. That makes him a lively voice in contemporary debates rather than a figure of purely historical interest. In fact, many of his writings feel remarkably relevant today, for instance when it comes to theories of artificial intelligence, automation and machine learning, but also his radical work on education and disability. I think one aspect of Ilyenkov’s thought that resonates with people today is his complex materialism, which fuses materialist dialectics with ideality and theories of embodied cognition.

SA: *The next question will be in a sense the continuation of the previous; in what sense and how relevant/actual is Ilyenkov’s take on philosophical questions? Does he have anything to offer in the face of contemporary philosophical and/or social and political issues and crises?*

ISABEL JACOBS: Ilyenkov was a visionary precursor of current ideas of *transindividuality*, which equally emerged from reading Spinoza through Hegel and Marx. Ilyenkov’s take on Spinoza is unique in its emphasis on what he calls the *thinking body*. Throughout his works, Ilyenkov developed the idea that it is not the individual mind that thinks but the interactivity of a collective thinking body. From that idea arose his notion of *personality*, defined as a node within a communal network.

Today, Ilyenkov’s theory of subjectivity can be brought into dialogue with a more recent shift towards non-human agency, ecology and the Anthropocene. His sci-fi book *On Idols and Ideals* (1968), for example, features extraterrestrial, more-than-human thinking bodies, such as intelligent machines or conscious mold. Cybernetics and systems theory were very much *en vogue* in Soviet debates of the 1950s. Ilyenkov was a critical voice in those debates, invested in defending the superiority of human thinking against artificial, computational intelligence. While some of Ilyenkov’s anthropocentric positions need to be updated from today’s view, his concerns regarding cybernetics and AI still feel fresh.

SA: In his philosophical work, Ilyenkov addresses several problems that traditionally belong to different fields of philosophical study, from machine-thinking and the AI to the questions concerning the relation between philosophy and sciences, the “universal,” the “ideal,” problems of epistemology, methodology, the relation between ethics and science, Marxism, humanism, general education and the education of people with disabilities, to the criticism of positivism, so on and so forth. What in Ilyenkov’s philosophical approach keeps together these apparently different fields and questions? Does he suggest that there is an essential bond between these diverse problems? If so, what that would be in his formulation?

ISABEL JACOBS: I think Ilyenkov’s main contribution, which also unites his diverse interests, is his original conception of *thinking*, rooted in a conscious materialism. In his late work, *Dialectical Logic*, he offers a striking metaphor of the activity of thinking. Similar to the form of a jar growing under the hands of a potter, thinking happens within the interactivity of hands, clay, and tools. Such a conception of a transindividual thinking body transcends any material-social or mind-world dualism. It is not me who thinks but my social-material interaction with others and the environment. In *On Idols and Ideals*, Ilyenkov beautifully summarises his position: “The ability to see the world like a human means to see through the eyes of another person, through the eyes of all other people.”

SA: Thank you for your contribution, Isabel Jacobs.

Isabel Jacobs is a PhD Candidate in Comparative Literature at Queen Mary University of London. She specialises in Soviet and French thought, with a focus on Alexandre Kojève. Her research is situated at the intersections of philosophy, aesthetics and the history of science. She co-founded the research network *Soviet Temporalities* and runs a regular Ilyenkov reading group. Her interests include late socialist temporalities, ecology, migration and political theology.

Interview with Martin Küpper

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MARTIN KÜPPER: I believe that there are several reasons why there is growing interest in Ilyenkov’s philosophy in academic circles. Firstly, there is a certain fascination that stems from his personal life and background. From his participation in World War II to his successes and failures in Soviet philosophy following 1945, including his groundbreaking work on Marx’s methodology which garnered international attention, and his involvement in the Zagorsk experiment.

Secondly, he is politically intriguing because he does not fit into the usual narrow-minded dichotomy between dissidence and dogma. As a Bolshevik, he fully supported historical socialism and its achievements and dedicated himself to working towards a classless society, the so-called second stage of communism.

Finally, his manner of thinking is fascinating. Ilyenkov was a great polemicist who knew how to articulate his position masterfully and was not hesitant to criticize opposing viewpoints. He represents a generation of thinkers whose self-confidence was high as their work was an integral part of the construction of socialism, as demonstrated by the Zagorsk experiment. This experiment also centered around the distribution of social resources in the development of science, with a philosopher at the forefront. Socialism needed philosophy, and philosophers needed socialism. However, the position of the polemicist was always precarious, as political institutions could silence them, or they could succumb to hubris.

His personality, political integrity, and thinking are valuable traits that are hard to come by in today’s world. The resurgence of interest in his work reflects a need for this kind of philosophy and criticism of current conditions that make the development of such personalities almost impossible.

SA: *The next question will be in a sense the continuation of the previous; in what sense and how relevant/actual is Ilyenkov’s take on philosophical questions? Does he have anything to offer in the face of contemporary philosophical and/or social and political issues and crises?*

MARTIN KÜPPER: Ilyenkov’s philosophy offers valuable scientific tools for current debates on at least two fronts. Firstly, materialist philosophy

has reemerged after falling into a defensive position following the collapse of the Soviet Union. New Materialism and Posthumanism, two currents in this field, present far-reaching reductionisms despite their diverse positions. For instance, the redefinition of “matter” is mainly based on the discoveries made by natural sciences, leading to ontologies that level out the difference between human society and natural contexts. This reduces reality to contingency and assumes that rapid changes in productive forces, like science and technology, are unchangeable variables. Individuals are thus limited to acting responsibly with the effects of these changes. Ethics of responsibility are justified in this context, but they are not aimed at social liberation. Instead, they focus on technocratic strategies for overcoming crises such as the climate crisis. These philosophies do not allow for a self-determined transformation of the mode of production by the exploited classes.

Ilyenkov’s philosophy emphasizes the importance of the ideal as a social context, providing an effective antidote to reductionist materialism. His ideas can be used to counter new materialisms, showing that natural sciences and philosophy should not be mutually exclusive. The natural sciences examine the different structures, forms and types of matter within a particular societal framework, while philosophy focuses on the origin, realization, and development of (scientific) thinking within a social context that operates under certain laws. Rejecting the claim to a universal explanation of reality’s structures given by natural sciences, Ilyenkov’s philosophy demonstrates the social dependence of all philosophizing in an ideology-critical way.

Secondly, philosophy, which has historically been a source and component of Marxism-Leninism, has come under attack in contemporary global Marxism. This also leads to an ignorance of the level of knowledge achieved in historical socialism and blocks the reception of elaborated approaches. The discussion on the topic of inheritance, including what to inherit and how to inherit, is still in the early stages of development. Ilyenkov’s way of thinking can be seen here as a successful example that can be inherited and is also valid under current conditions and in current debates. For instance, his thinking, trained in the cultural-historical school of psychology, argues that the world shaped by humanity has opposed the biophysics of humans in a long historical process and continues to do so in the development of an individual. However, it remains dependent on it as well. Ideal phenomena like love can be viewed as social rather than biophysical issues. After all, this dialectic allows the conclusion that the current problems of capitalist-induced human metabolism with nature can only be comprehensively solved by revolutionizing the mode of production.

Currently, there are dominant positions that understand Marxism almost exclusively as social theory or a certain form of sociology. They

want to exclude all philosophy from the corpus of Marxism. This approach deals with original philosophical concepts such as practice, class, or consciousness by specialized sciences without taking their special epistemological status into account or even discussing it. Ilyenkov's philosophy shows that sciences not only have to be partners but also have to work together in a certain harmony, representing different levels of scientific work as a productive force. Philosophy emphasizes this and makes the identity of thinking and being its main problem, revealing how in the respective sciences this problem based on social conflicts arises in the formation of categories and concepts.

SA: In his philosophical work, Ilyenkov addresses several problems that traditionally belong to different fields of philosophical study, from machine-thinking and the AI to the questions concerning the relation between philosophy and sciences, the "universal," the "ideal," problems of epistemology, methodology, the relation between ethics and science, Marxism, humanism, general education and the education of people with disabilities, to the criticism of positivism, so on and so forth. What in Ilyenkov's philosophical approach keeps together these apparently different fields and questions? Does he suggest that there is an essential bond between these diverse problems? If so, what that would be in his formulation?

MARTIN KÜPPER: There are two important points to consider here. Firstly, philosophy, according to him, is the science of scientific thinking. The main object of this science is the problem of the unity of thinking and being. Scientific thinking arises from the historical necessity of securing the socialization of human beings in a general, necessary, and reproductive way. This ensures stable productive forces and relations of production. The questions that bind all of these areas together are why thinking necessarily arises, how it is divided into different forms, and what role these forms play in social practice. He thinks that the sciences and their organization, as well as the material and ideal problems, sedimented in them, require a philosophical approach to the question of the "nature of thought." However, it is important to note that these questions are only inadequately solved or cannot be solved at all in antagonistically structured societies.

For him, Marxism (-Leninism) is not only a political ideology, but also a worldview (*Weltanschauung*). In other words, he sees Marxism as a philosophy that unites politics and philosophy. Marxism offers a unique approach to understanding society and politics. It not only poses important questions for critical thinking but also provides a framework

for political action. One of the main aims of Marxist theory is to establish a communist mode of production that can support the ongoing development of individuals, their abilities and skills, as well as the economy and technology. This means creating a system that is sustainable and avoids catastrophic crises while promoting social progress and development.

SA: *Martin Küpper, thank you for your contribution.*

Martin Küpper is a PhD Student at the University in Kiel about Aesthetics in the GDR and also a Doctorand at the international and interdisciplinary project titled “Philosophy in Late Socialist Europe: Theoretical Practices in the Face of Polycrisis” at Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca. After his studies he worked as a scientific assistant at the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt/Oder in 2019 and as a trainee at Jovis publishing house in 2020. Author of an introduction into materialist philosophy (2nd edition, 2021), among articles and edited issues.

Interview with Kyrill Potapov

SA: *The first question will be a very general one. It seems as if we are experiencing a “revival” of Ilyenkov’s ideas; there appears to be a growing interest in his philosophical conceptualizations and methodology. What is so significant about Ilyenkov’s ideas that may be responsible for such a revival?*

KYRILL POTAPOV: First, I think people recognise the ambition of Ilyenkov’s project and the relentless energy with which he pursues it. How many thinkers since the Enlightenment have attempted to offer a complete philosophical system? Certainly, it became progressively rarer in the twentieth century as philosophy became professionalised. Bakhurst (2023) draws parallels between Ilyenkov and Bukharin and indeed how many Marxists since Bukharin attempted such a feat? The current Ilyenkov renaissance suggests he perhaps got further than Bukharin in this project. Ilyenkov’s work does not limit itself to “value” or “class” or any other topic of Marxology; its topic is human life and thought as we find them. What is particularly appealing here I think is how sober Ilyenkov remains in his ambition. Writing in the clearest language he can find, Ilyenkov avoids the utopianism and dogmatism of other Soviet thinkers as well as the pessimism of the Frankfurt School, to critically engage with their shared tradition.

SA: *The next question will be in a sense the continuation of the previous; in what sense and how relevant/actual is Ilyenkov’s take on philosophical questions? Does he have anything to offer in the face of contemporary philosophical and/or social and political issues and crises?*

KYRILL POTAPOV: In my own work as a human-computer interaction (HCI) researcher, Ilyenkov has helped me to understand how technology and cognition are related. There’s a cognitivist tradition in HCI that sees the mind as another kind of computer, in a dyadic interaction with the tech tool. Ilyenkov helps me to reframe this within wider social practices and the systems in which they are embodied. It’s not a dyad but a complex dynamic system. This of course compliments other embodied approaches to cognition, but also emphasises the role of material culture and sociality. I study data visualisations and other Marxists have commented on how these are products of capitalism, reifications etc. Which is true, but it’s only in Ilyenkov that I’ve been able to find answers to the more basic questions of how do they actually work such that they can do this reification.

SA: *In his philosophical work, Ilyenkov addresses several problems that traditionally belong to different fields of philosophical study, from machine-thinking and the AI to the questions concerning the relation between philosophy and sciences, the “universal,” the “ideal,” problems of epistemology, methodology, the relation between ethics and science, Marxism, humanism, general education and the education of people with disabilities, to the criticism of positivism, so on and so forth. What in Ilyenkov’s philosophical approach keeps together these apparently different fields and questions? Does he suggest that there is an essential bond between these diverse problems? If so, what that would be in his formulation?*

KYRILL POTAPOV: In a word, *activity*. Ilyenkov advances our understanding of a Marxist concept that is not well covered by terms such as *labour* and *praxis*. Habermas (1990) famously criticized Marxists for lacking the resources to characterise what constitutes a practice and makes it good i.e. normativity. Ilyenkov does this: his philosophical project takes us from the level of practices, be they of physicists or school students, to the contribution and orientation of individuals within those practices. Throughout this work, he is often contrasting two views of activity: on the one hand, there is our dynamic metabolism with a (social and natural) world which we form as it forms us, on the other hand, there are cybernetic dynamics which can as much associate with Western Capitalism as with the Soviet society in which Ilyenkov lived. This top-down method of organisation severs activity from dynamic concrete reality and reproduces structures of alienation.

SA: *Kyrill Potapov, thank you for your contribution.*

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Kyrill Potapov is research fellow in Human-Computer Interaction and Anthropology at University College London. His research focuses on social practice and the interpretation of personal data. At present, he is exploring social practices involving current and future home energy systems. His theoretical work draws on Ilyenkov, Vygotsky, and the Pittsburgh School. He spent over a decade teaching English at a secondary school in London.

Interview with Monika Woźniak

SA: *The first question will be a very general one. It seems as if we are experiencing a “revival” of Ilyenkov’s ideas; there appears to be a growing interest in his philosophical conceptualizations and methodology. What is so significant about Ilyenkov’s ideas that may be responsible for such a revival?*

MONIKA WOŹNIAK: There are several reasons for this revival. It can be seen, of course, as part of a broader rise in interest toward Soviet philosophy and state socialist Marxism in general. This growing interest, in turn, resulted from a loosening grip of neoliberal ideology with its militant anti-communism that we have observed more or less since the 2008 crisis, on one hand, and mainstream recognition of the climate crisis, on the other. Of course, there are also several additional factors that play a role here: generational change in academia with the emergence of new, less prejudiced scholars, the stream of new translations and materials appearing since the 1990s, etc.

Nevertheless, the interest in Ilyenkov’s works goes far beyond just that. His legacy is incredibly rich and multifaceted, both because of the themes it discusses and the sources it uses. It is relevant to people interested in education, the theory of knowledge, dialectical logic, AI, etc. It can speak to people following various lines in critical theory—from followers of Engels and Lenin, through humanist Marxists, people interested in the Hegelian legacy, to people interested in Spinoza and new materialism. To all of them, Ilyenkov has something interesting to say. I also think that he offered a version of non-vulgarized dialectical materialism that was very refreshing to those who felt disappointed with the development of Western critical theory. A version that was unapologetically Marxist, materialist, and dialectical but also creative and philosophically nuanced. Finally, his egalitarian approach to education has always attracted people interested in education, self-education, democratization of access to culture, etc., which can partially explain his unique popularity outside the narrow circle of academic Marxists.

SA: *The next question will be in a sense the continuation of the previous; in what sense and how relevant/actual is Ilyenkov’s take on philosophical questions? Does he have anything to offer in the face of contemporary philosophical and/or social and political issues and crises?*

MONIKA WOŹNIAK: There is a whole body of literature that can be seen as proof that he does. Ilyenkov is not only the object of historical studies, but his ideas are actively used. I remember my surprise when I discovered Krystian Szadkowski’s employment of *Dialectical Logic* in his analysis of the subsumption of current academia under capital, for

example. And I could continue: Ilyenkov's ideas can be found in texts discussing cognitive studies, sustainability challenges, aesthetics, the value-form debate, education, philosophy of artificial intelligence, and so on. And in most cases, his ideas really do contribute something there by counteracting the dominant narratives with a more dialectical, nuanced, materialist, egalitarian, and humanist (but not abstractly moral or essentialising) approach.

Personally, I believe that Ilyenkov's most important contribution to Marxism is his methodological and epistemological studies, simply because I believe understanding Marx's method is crucial for developing Marxism and conducting new research. Whether we agree with every detail of Ilyenkov's reconstruction of Marx's method or not, I think his books offer a very good point of departure and a position that is definitely still worth seriously engaging with and discussing. Ilyenkov's writings—not only those specifically devoted to methodology but also those employing it—are a great lesson in thinking dialectically, in trying to understand phenomena concretely, in their relationship with the totality they are part of.

SA: In his philosophical work, Ilyenkov addresses several problems that traditionally belong to different fields of philosophical study, from machine-thinking and the AI to the questions concerning the relation between philosophy and sciences, the “universal,” the “ideal,” problems of epistemology, methodology, the relation between ethics and science, Marxism, humanism, general education and the education of people with disabilities, to the criticism of positivism, so on and so forth. What in Ilyenkov's philosophical approach keeps together these apparently different fields and questions? Does he suggest that there is an essential bond between these diverse problems? If so, what that would be in his formulation?

MONIKA WOŹNIAK: I believe that Ilyenkov not only formulated his understanding of the object of philosophy very early, but also never abandoned it, and it is precisely what unites his different philosophical endeavors: philosophy deals with thinking in all its multifaceted nature. This might sometimes seem obscure because Ilyenkov's understanding of thinking is very distinct from a psychological one or logical (formal) one we are used to. For Ilyenkov, thinking is something both deeply rooted in the world of socially and historically created normativity and revealing the laws governing the objective reality (this is why we can speak of unity of logic and dialectics). His philosophy goes beyond dualism of matter and mind, instead treating thinking as an ability of acting,

of actively creating one's own activity in response to world and transforming it.

Majority of Ilyenkov's writings can be linked to thinking and knowledge understood in that way. There are exceptions, of course, but few—short texts, sometimes written for a specific occasion and audience, like international conferences. Ilyenkov studies Marx's method as something that tells us not only something about the capitalist economy but also reveals something more general about knowledge, about thinking. He is interested in pedagogy as a science dealing with people acquiring the ability to think and in what "thinking" actually means. He writes about cybernetics and AI mostly because of the difference between employing algorithms, already pre-existing rule and thinking as something creative, able to deal with contradictions and deeply rooted in the world of praxis. The majority of his texts on aesthetic deal with questions of cognition; art is, for him, primarily a form of perception. Even "Cosmology of Spirit," while somewhat unique in its approach, is a "poetic phantasmagoria" about nothing other than thinking.

SA: *Monika Woźniak, thank you for your contribution.*

Monika Woźniak is a researcher of the history of state-socialist Marxism, especially in the post-Stalinist period. She works at the Institute of Philosophy of the Czech Academy of Sciences, where she conducts the project "Unorthodox Orthodoxes: Forgotten Quest for 'Real' Marxist Science in Eastern Europe" as well as at Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, where she is a member of the project "Philosophy in Late Socialist Europe: Theoretical Practices in the Face of Polycrisis". She is a member of the editorial board of *Contradictions. A Journal for Critical Thought*.

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