



Through the Looking Glass: Evald Ilyenkov's Images of the Ideal

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ABSTRACT: This brief report looks back at the international conference *Images of the Ideal*, held in Berlin in May 2024 to celebrate the centenary of the Soviet philosopher Evald Ilyenkov (1924–1979). The event highlighted that Ilyenkov is becoming an important voice in contemporary discourses on philosophy of culture, social and critical theory, psychology and education, materialism, AI and automation, ecology and the political economy of capitalism.

KEYWORDS: Evald Ilyenkov, Soviet Marxism, political economy, Ilyenkov Studies, dialectical materialism, socialism, theories of automation, philosophy of technology.

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Commemorating Ilyenkov

The international conference *Images of the Ideal* was the largest gathering to commemorate the centenary of the central Soviet philosopher Evald Ilyenkov (1924–1979). The event highlighted that Ilyenkov is becoming an important voice in contemporary discourses on philosophy of culture, social and critical theory, psychology and education, materialism, AI and automation, ecology and the political economy of capitalism.

With a focus on Ilyenkov's concept of the ideal, the contributions explored the relation between the ideal and imagination; the radical and utopian potentialities of the ideal today; and its crucial place in materialist dialectics. The conference brought together participants from across the globe, including Canada, USA, Denmark, Germany, Poland, UK, Czech Republic, Finland, Sweden, Romania, Ukraine, Ireland, Armenia and Georgia. Several Russian scholars, living and working in exile, including Ilyenkov student Alexander Surmava, took an active part in the debate. Informal chats in the breaks were as important as the rigorous discussions during the panels.

A Global Community

In the words of leading Ilyenkov scholar Vesa Oittinen (Helsinki), “the symposium showed that a global 'Ilyenkov community' has now become established.” *Images of the Ideal* brought together researchers and activists from diverse intellectual traditions, disciplines and fields of inquiry, including philosophy, philology, art history, psychology, computer science, sociology, political economy and cybernetics.

Scholars of Soviet thought, Marxist activists and a more general public contributed to making the conference into a key moment of dialogue in the reception and study of Ilyenkov's philosophy across countries and generations. It also provided an occasion for remembering the work and life of one of Ilyenkov's students from the Zagorsk school of deaf-blind children, Alexander Suvorov, who actively supported the interest in Ilyenkov until his death earlier this year.

Vesa Oittinen and David Bakhurst, two scholars who introduced Ilyenkov's thought to the broader philosophical world in the decades after Ilyenkov's passing in 1979, were present. Oittinen is a leading figure in the study of Soviet and Eastern European Marxist thought in the West while Bakhurst's milestone monograph *Consciousness and Revolution in Soviet Philosophy* (1991) remains a major English-language point of reference. Bakhurst presented his major new book *The Heart of*

the Matter: Ilyenkov, Vygotsky and the Courage of Thought (2023) at the roundtable on Ilyenkov's legacy, joined by Corinna Lotz (International Friends of Ilyenkov, London) and Kyrill Potapov (University College London).

While Bakhurst (Queen's University at Kingston, Canada) shared insights into the various contexts for his important book, taking up the memorial reference to Alexander Suvorov, Potapov critically analysed Bakhurst's readings of Soviet philosophy in the light of the analytic tradition. How can the concerns of both traditions be brought together? While the analytic tradition presupposes the capacities of understanding and reason, Ilyenkov's Marxism, in line with the cultural-historical school of psychology, takes the *social genesis* of thinking, as well as of language, as the starting point for its reflections.

Bakhurst embedded Ilyenkov's thought in the underground philosophical scene of Moscow during the late Soviet period, which he experienced first-hand in the 1980s. Bakhurst also explored the difficulties of 'reconciling' Soviet Marxism with analytic philosophy, hinting at shared Hegelian lines of thought. Lotz rounded up the discussion by pondering on the context which prevented Ilyenkov from publishing ground-breaking works in his lifetime. She argued that his theorising of "the mobile, contradictory relationship within cognition i.e. the living dialectic of the Ideal world itself" challenged the "dogmatic reductionism" prevailing in "the Stalin-Brezhnev era." As both Bakhurst and Lotz emphasised, Ilyenkov's circle of thinkers was struggling for dialectics in opposition to the reduction of Marxism to Stalinist dogma.

Ilyenkov Today

Images of the Ideal showcased that the centenary of Ilyenkov's birth has coincided with a renaissance in interest in the philosopher, at a time when a new, global and more diffused generation of Ilyenkov scholarship has emerged. This new wave of Ilyenkov scholars seeks to expand the scope of scholarship and to illustrate Ilyenkov's significance to a wide, and previously unacknowledged, set of ideas and debates. They draw on earlier and essential research, including by Andrei Maidansky, Vladislav Lektorskii, and Elena Illesh, Ilyenkov's daughter, who are publishing the philosopher's complete works in Russian—the basis of an increased availability of translations of Ilyenkov's works in many languages.

The new wave also includes recent research from established scholars, including a new study by Oittinen on Ilyenkov's social ontology as

a theory of “second nature.” In his activity approach, Oittinen argued, Ilyenkov developed the concept of second nature into a process of materialising ideals, which thereby attain “objective existence in social life.”

Just over 100 people attended the opening lecture by Boris Groys (New York University), titled “The Lord of the Rings: Evald Ilyenkov and the Circularity of Cosmic Time,” moderated by Zaal Andronikashvili. Analysing the modern condition of “post-historical depression,” Groys situated Ilyenkov’s essay “Cosmology of the Spirit” (1950s) within a Soviet imaginary of cosmic annihilation and immortality. The most promising way to overcome the historical impasse, Groys argued, seemed to be the “eternal return” of the historical cycle, as imagined by Ilyenkov in his cosmology. For Groys, Ilyenkov took a unique and truly radical position. Ilyenkov proposed placing cosmic forces under human control to artificially produce a chain of potentially infinite repetitions of the historical circle. In Ilyenkov’s anthropocentric cosmology, humans become initiators of the end of this world.

The panel discussions spread over two days presented new work on Ilyenkov's engagement with philosophies of activity and materialism. His criticism of cybernetic theory, technology and automation was contextualised within broader philosophical debates on materialism, ontology, science and technology, cosmology, subjectivity and culture, as well as new examinations of Ilyenkov's interlocutors, such as Lev Vygotsky and Mikhail Lifshits, and broader Soviet debates on the political economy of so-called late socialism.

Thinking and Automation

Siarhei Biareishyk (University of Pennsylvania) took up similar threads in “Language: Money, Ideal: Ilyenkov’s Spinozist Reading of Marx,” detailing Ilyenkov’s Spinozist reading of *Capital*, and focusing on concepts of commodity and money-form. To understand Ilyenkov’s notion of the ideal, Biareishyk argued, we should consider Spinoza’s peculiar conception of language as a “symbolically mediated practical activity of the *thinking body*” (a term coined by Ilyenkov). For both Spinoza and Ilyenkov’s theories of embodied cognition, it is not only the brain that thinks, but the whole subject interacting with objective forms.

Trevor Wilson (Virginia Tech) and Siyaves Azeri (Babeş-Bolyai University) further explored questions of cognition, artificial intelligence, machine thinking, agency and fetishism. Reading Ilyenkov’s *On Idols*

and *Ideals* (1968) along with Marx's *Grundrisse*, in his analysis of Ilyenkov's criticism of cybernetics and automation, Wilson focused on Ilyenkov's affinity for the hand as the supreme organ of human thinking.

Azeri juxtaposed Ilyenkov's critical views on automation with current debates on "cognitive capitalism." The most important aspect of human thinking, Azeri argued, is its "social constitution: thinking emerges only through bodily activity where the body does not signify a mere individual body but the social body—the totality of social relations between humans." Both Wilson and Azeri emphasised the relevance of Ilyenkov's theories of thinking and machine intelligence for contemporary debates on AI, bringing Ilyenkov in dialogue with recent works, such as Yuk Hui's writings on cosmotechnics or Matteo Pasquinelli's *The Eye of the Master: A Social History of Artificial Intelligence* (2023).

Jamie Phillips (Toronto) focused on ideality and fantasy in philosophy and psychopathology, as represented by Ilyenkov and Vygotsky. Phillips retraced Vygotsky's frequent appeals to Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks*, especially to the zigzag-like figure of thinking which held "within itself the possibility of a flight of fantasy from life." Developing a psychopathology critical of Freudian psychoanalysis, Vygotsky used the concept of fantasy to study the nature of human consciousness and the breakdown of his patients' relation to reality.

Themes of embodied cognition, collectivity and the social constitution of the human personality, crucial to Ilyenkov's entire project, came to vivid life in a screening of Emanuel Almborg's seminal film *Talking Hands* (2016), moderated by Elena Vogman and Olexii Kuchanskyi (both Bauhaus-University Weimar). After the viewing of *Talking Hands*, enriched by archival material from Zagorsk, the discussion touched on questions of language and materiality, the relation between images, sound and touch, and socialist philosophy rooted in concrete educational practice. At Zagorsk, as *Talking Hands* demonstrated, Ilyenkov took an active interest in the work of his friend Alexander Meshcheryakov and met the brilliant student Alexander Suvorov.

Dialectical Materialism(s)

The problems and radical possibilities of Marxist dialectical materialism traversed several papers. Franz Heilgendorff (Dresden University of Technology), closely read Ilyenkov's *Dialectics of the Ideal* alongside *Capital*, exploring the logical and categorical premises. The key to Ilyenkov's notion of the ideal lies, as Heilgendorff demonstrated, in

identifying the contradiction of the commodity form, not in the relation between two commodities, as many *Capital* exegetes do, but in the relationship of the commodity to itself. Isabel Jacobs (Queen Mary University of London), Martin Küpper (Babeş-Bolyai University) and Giorgi Kobakhidze (University of Toulouse) each approached the issue of materialism from different angles.

Küpper attempted to position Ilyenkov's concept of the ideal against contemporary "new materialism." He emphasised how such materialism is both unreflective and ontologically dependent on the results of the natural sciences. This raises the question of whether a philosophical materialism should seek its starting point in a "dialectics of the material," that is the historical relationship between the emergence and further development of the ideal within human beings through their social practice.

Jacobs argued that Ilyenkov's concepts of the soul and personality are embedded in a left-wing Aristotelian tradition. Confronting Ilyenkov's materialist dialectics with a tradition that Ernst Bloch called "the Aristotelian Left," she focused on the active and creative potentiality of matter itself. Exploring a Soviet variant of the Aristotelian Left that emerged in the 1950s, her paper also revealed the neglected influence of the 12th-century Andalusian philosopher Ibn Rushd (Averroes) on Soviet dialectical materialism, including Ilyenkov's understanding of dialectics as an activity of the collective "thinking body." Jacobs finally pointed to a dialogue between Ilyenkov's *On Idols and Ideals* and Günther Anders's analysis of the capitalist soul.

Kobakhidze in his paper demonstrated how Ilyenkov's conception of the ideal functioned as a renewal of Marxism in the Soviet Union, enhancing its scientific quality while criticising outdated and dominant vulgar Marxist ideas of the Stalin era. Critical of the imperial tenets of Soviet "diamat", Kobakhidze also unveiled the roots of Soviet ontologism in Russian national philosophy of the 19th century. Ilyenkov's intervention, Kobakhidze suggested, shifted Soviet philosophy "away from ontology, towards logic." Yet this very logic must be understood materially, because "logic and ontology could not be separated." Ilyenkov's shift, finally, can be read along with similarly anti-dualist attempts in today's new materialism.

Socialist Economies

Keti Chukhrov (Linköping University/Karlsruhe University of Arts and Design) situated Ilyenkov in contemporaneous discourses on political economy, cybernetics and socialist planning. Reading Ilyenkov side-by-side with the economist Yuri Yaremenko, Chukhrov suggested that body and thinking were entangled in dialectics, with meaning emerging as “the sensuousness of concepts that matter.” In a planned socialist economy, objects are not commodities; they are common goods.

Monika Woźniak (Babeş-Bolyai University/Czech Academy of Sciences) further explored Ilyenkov’s views on “state socialism,” presenting some unpublished and neglected texts by Ilyenkov. As Woźniak convincingly argues, Ilyenkov’s views on socialism were intricately tied to his interpretation of Marx’s dialectics. This perspective, according to Woźniak, enabled him to detect “Soviet shortcomings as originating from the systemic logic, rather than isolated political faults or inherent features of any formation.” Rather than remnants of the previous order, those faults originated in a lack of “real socialisation.”

Cosmos and Culture

Besides Groys’s lecture, Ilyenkov’s text on cosmology reappeared in various talks, including in an intervention on speculative ontologies by Alexei Penzin (University of Wolverhampton). Penzin argued that “really existing socialism” in its late stages was “a fertile ground for speculative ontologies.” His talk illustrated this hypothesis with two co-existing paradigms: Ilyenkov’s early “Cosmology of the Spirit” and Mikhail Lifshitz’s late project of “onto-gnoseology,” which started from “the assumption that reflective and ‘ideal’ elements are part of the non-human world itself.” Penzin reported that in the 1990s “Cosmology” circulated in leftist activist circles in Moscow long before it became more famous and translated. He finally pointed to Ilyenkov’s relevance to contemporary projects of “speculative materialism” and theories of (in)activity.

Focusing on Ilyenkov and aesthetics, Angela Harutyunyan (Universität der Künste Berlin), further explored the debate between Ilyenkov and Lifshitz in more detail. Her presentation situated Ilyenkov’s concept of the ideal in Soviet aesthetics from the 1960s to the early 1980s. Harutyunyan argued that the split between Lifshitz and Ilyenkov on the problem of the ideal was “symptomatic of a fundamental split between two versions of Soviet Marxism, one that ontologises nature,

following Hegel and Engels (Lifshitz) and the other that bypasses the question of nature as such and adapts a more socially constructivist approach (Ilyenkov).”

Sascha Freyberg (MPIWG Berlin) staged an overdue encounter between Ilyenkov’s late philosophy of personality and Ernst Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms. Titled “Cosmos, Praxis, Personhood: Outlines of Ilyenkov’s Philosophy of Culture,” Freyberg’s talk demonstrated how Ilyenkov was “able to come to terms with what he calls ‘consistent materialism’ while locating his critique of ‘naturalism’ or ‘vulgar materialism’ in his ‘materialist dialectics.’” Focusing on the notions of praxis, form and personhood, Freyberg developed a new view on Ilyenkov’s project as a materialist philosophy of culture.

Perspectives

Why read Ilyenkov today? As speakers at *Images of the Ideal* emphasised, Ilyenkov's philosophy states a clear need for an active, radical, and non-reductive materialism that attends to larger problems of culture and society. After more than half a century of efforts to bridge the challenge of “immaterial” or abstract cultural production and the vicissitudes of concrete activity—for example, in the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, global activity theory and in more recent accounts of so-called “new materialism”—Ilyenkov's thought continues to stand unique.

An important feature of his position is that he draws on the entire history of philosophy. At the same time, Ilyenkov insists on a special form of philosophical thinking, i.e., a form which, as a science *about* thinking, can appropriate the methods and results of other sciences and at the same time reveal their categorical and social limits. Ilyenkov’s philosophy still offers a viable framework for not only proclaiming interdisciplinarity, frequently demanded in contemporary academia, but also putting it into practice.

Synthesising Spinoza, Hegel, Marx and Vygotsky, Ilyenkov’s philosophy is a refreshing shortcut into current debates. His original take on notions of culture, personhood and matter can productively contribute to contemporary discussions of automation, artificial intelligence, and critiques of technocratic solutions to fundamental socio-economic problems. Such problems are not new but their relevance in an increasingly technological political landscape positions Ilyenkov as apt to bridge the

problem of the dialectics of the abstract and the concrete in an explicitly Marxist critique of capitalist culture and society.

From 15–17 May 2024, *Images of the Ideal: Evald Ilyenkov at 100* took place at the Leibniz-Zentrum für Literatur- und Kulturforschung (ZfL) in Berlin. The event was co-organized by Zaal Andronikashvili, Matthias Schwartz, Isabel Jacobs and Martin Küpper. Sascha Freyberg and Trevor Wilson participated in curating the programme.