

## A Theory and Practice of Cognition for Our Time: Building on Ilyenkov's Dialectical Logic<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** This article focuses on taking seriously Marx's statement that the point of philosophy is not simply to explain the world but to change it. This was a gauntlet thrown down to the future to develop an epistemology, a theory of knowledge, that arises from human beings' actual relations with nature and even the wider cosmos of which they are a part. It demands that we focus our attention in areas where philosophers sometimes fear to tread—the actual role and purpose of (in this article's argument) thinking, that is, *conscious* thinking—cognition—in materialist dialectical concepts. I argue that we can trace out the process and practice of cognition with a view to revolutionary transformation. I focus on two thinkers who developed materialist dialectics boldly with this specific aim in view—Vladimir Lenin, especially in his reading of Hegel, and Evald Ilyenkov, whose work on *The Ideal* took materialist dialectics into new and exciting territory. Using these two sources and in company with many others I trace the path of cognition. It is a challenge to Marxists in this moment of global disorder as new generations seek the resources for positive transformation of our global society.

**KEYWORDS:** Epistemology, cognition, self-movement, materialist dialectics, sensation, negation, concepts, *Ideal*, practice.

### Introduction

Co-creating and developing a theory of revolutionary change under the new conditions of global pandemic, economic crisis and war in Ukraine is vital. That must come out of a study of capitalist society from a materialist and dialectical philosophical standpoint. If we are to act in a world in constant

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change and transformation, it's vital that we develop our own, independent outlook—in opposition to the ideas passed down to us. For this, the role and nature of our theory of knowledge is vital. In this essay, I seek to demonstrate in a simple and direct way, how a materialist, dialectical approach works. In other words, I'm talking about the process, the activity and practice of cognition<sup>2</sup>. The aim is to understand cognition or “knowing” as a conscious practice for the purpose of acquiring a dynamic concept of the object of scrutiny, be it a physical object, a natural, mental or social process, or a product of artistic activity. We strive to do this from the standpoint of transformative social practice. We seek to outline cognition as a complex, physical and embodied activity, carried out by living human beings who are naturally, socially and historically formed. For context, I briefly and inadequately reference the contribution of philosophical and political thinkers to this approach, refuting, I hope, the stereotypical dichotomy of “Western” and non-Western Marxism.

### Lenin's Legacy

As the Soviet oppositional philosopher Evald Ilyenkov noted, the problem of the theory of knowledge and dialectics was not only special but fundamental in the work of Lenin. The importance of Lenin's study of Hegel's *Science of Logic* in connection with the struggle in the Bolshevik party at a time of war and revolution is, of course, of far more than academic interest. In his notebooks Lenin (1972b) traced out Hegel's contribution to understanding the crucial nature of dialectical concepts and why this is indispensable for the theory and practice of social transformation.

Since Lenin's time, developing an independent materialist dialectical<sup>3</sup> theory of knowledge has been a neglected and rocky road. I will note only a few key figures here. In the period after Lenin's passing, Lev Vygotsky's

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2. The term “cognition” is used in the sense summed up by (1) Encyclopedia Britannica: “the states and processes involved in knowing, which in their completeness include perception and judgment. Cognition includes all conscious and unconscious processes by which knowledge is accumulated, such as perceiving, recognizing, conceiving, and reasoning” and (2) Merriam-Webster: “the act or process of knowing including both awareness and judgment; also: the product of this act”. I distinguish this from the usual connotation of “cognitive studies” which tend to approach cognition from the standpoint of individual consciousness, psychology, linguistics, computation or neuroscience.

3. I use the term “materialist dialectical” to distinguish it from “dialectical materialism,” often conflated with “diamat” dogma.

pioneering contribution to cognitive development was cut short by political persecution and ill health. The wide international reception of his ideas, particularly in the post-war United States, was at first largely confined to psychology, and detached from Vygotsky's Marxist roots and aspirations. Today, the significance of Vygotsky's approach in the creation of an independent dialectical epistemology is being explored and reinterpreted by a new generation of philosophers and educationalists.

Lenin and Vygotsky's work on epistemology was taken up during the post-World War II period, most notably by Evald Ilyenkov and his followers.<sup>4</sup> Other Soviet-era philosophers in this field include Gyorgy Lukacs, Aleksei Bogomolov, Pavel Kopnin, Valery Bosenko, Merab Marmadashvili, Teodor Oizerman, Zaira Rodríguez Ugidos and Vladislav Lektorsky, to name but a few. Antonio Gramsci's contribution in this field remains outstanding and highly relevant, as Deb Hill (2009, 5–20) has shown (Lotz & Feldman 1994).

In the United States and Britain, those focusing on materialist and Marxist-oriented epistemologies from a revolutionary and/or socialist political standpoint in the second half of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries included Barrows-Dunham, Roy Wood Sellars, C L R James, Raya Dunayevskaya, John Hoffman, David-Hillel Rubin (1979), Sean Sayers, Kevin Anderson (2022) and critical realist Roy Bhaskar.

In this regard, the British Trotskyist leader Gerry Healy was exceptional in his insistence that dialectical theory of knowledge is essential for revolutionary politics. Inspired by Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks*, which first appeared in English translation in 1961, Healy (1989) sought to develop them into a teachable "process and path of cognition." He held international schools about the dialectics of materialist consciousness and made a particular study of the role of concepts in cognition (Healy 1990b). Crucially also, he was the first to introduce Evald Ilyenkov to English-speaking as well as Greek and Spanish political activists.

Today, researchers involved with the International Society of Cultural-Historical Activity Research, Marxism & Sciences, the International Friends of Ilyenkov are, amongst others, taking forward Vygotsky and Ilyenkov's work on education, psychology and materialist-dialectical concept development. The National Technical University of Ukraine currently

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4. The thinkers listed here are restricted to a handful. For a more extensive account see my references to excellent overviews by Lektorsky & Bykova (2019) and Mikhail Epstein (2019).

runs a course in dialectical logic taught by Vasily Pikhorovich and Andrey Samarsky, based on Ilyenkov and Bosenko's approaches.

### Challenging “Received Thinking”

More than ever before, in our epoch of mass digital communication and social media, the dominant philosophical outlook very much reinforces the status quo. It encourages us to think that the capitalist system is both permanent and natural and that revolutionary change is dangerous and can never succeed. Purely empirical, positive approaches, particularly typical in Anglo-Saxon thought, separate out in thought processes that in actual reality are connected to each other. This makes developing an alternative, materialist dialectical approach vital.

Received thinking, enforced by the educational system, strengthens the tendency to examine reality in a static, unchanging, non-historical way and we're encouraged to hold a binary, black and white view. Something is either one thing or the other. The arising of contradictions is viewed as a problem of thought rather than a natural phenomenon. So too often this leads to subjective and impressionistic approaches to knowledge. In the following sections I seek to trace the path of cognition. This path begins in the world beyond thought and passes through both quantitative build-ups and qualitative transformations. The origin of the process involves the energy of movement outside from outside (external to) the individual mind through living perception which is “negated” into the intro-reflected world and the abstraction of concepts. This activity of thought, while beginning with external reflection, is not a passive absorption, or simple “emergence,” but in a dialectical movement involving abstraction, contradiction, absences, leaps and multiple negations.

The aim of this approach is to capture the movement of the real in our thinking to develop advanced concepts for practice. I will explain how we achieve this through a sequence of logical thought concepts and categories. Achieving this will help us conceptualize revolutionary change.

This future oriented thrust is well-described by Manolis Dafermos:

The projection of what could or should be in the future and the implementation of future-oriented actions is especially important in times of a socioeconomic crisis that it is reflected in a cascade of disappointment, gloominess and hopelessness. Imagining the future is not a simple or a linear projection into the future of the present or past tendencies. Each form of temporality includes not

only continuities but also *discontinuities, ruptures, and breaks*. The transition toward the future is internally connected with an agonizing search for unusual paths, alternative ways and unpredictable and original solutions of open-ended questions and complex problems. (Dafermos 2020, 24–25)

### Self-Movement

The first and crucial concept to be explored is that of “self-movement.” The dialectics of materialist consciousness has at its very heart the concept of infinite self-movement as an underlying epistemological principle. The world, and the wider cosmos of which we are a part and which we help to co-create, is in self-movement and transformation.

This is true of the interacting forces that create and move galaxies, black holes, gravitational lensing, and stars, down to the high energy invisible particles that make up matter. Paul Dirac, one of the founders of quantum mechanics, explaining the motion of elementary particles, remarked: “the state of no motion is the state of no particles.” In other words, motion is an inherent property of matter.

All biological life is also characterized by “self-movement.” The formation of galaxies, a sprouting seed and a growing child, the arising of social movements are all examples. This understanding leads to the concept of “self-movement.”

As we and society are part of matter in motion, self-movement includes the firing of neural networks in our brains, the exchange of commodities and reflexive self-consciousness of human beings in society. The constellations of human social relationships, including the movement of classes and nations are also in movement and transformation, where the laws of dialectics are manifested (Lenin 1972b, 141).<sup>5</sup>

### Sensation

It is the self-movement, the energy, for example, of clouds gathering in the sky, or a person saying hello, which stimulates the senses and gives rise to

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5. Paraphrasing Hegel on self-movement in enthusiastic fashion: “Movement and ‘self-movement’ (this NB! arbitrary (independent), spontaneous, internally-necessary movement), ‘change,’ ‘movement and vitality,’ ‘the principle of all self-movement,’ ‘impulse’ (*Trieb*) to “movement” and to “activity”—the opposite to ‘dead Being’—who would believe that this is the core of ‘Hegelianism,’ of abstract and *abstrusen* (ponderous, absurd?) Hegelianism? This core had to be discovered, understood, *hinüberretten* (be saved), laid bare, refined, which is precisely what Marx and Engels did.”

sensation. Sensation, therefore, is the initial connection with the physical world outside of us. The impact of its self-movement in sensation constantly leads us to adjust, reassess and examine our initial, thinking connection with what is taking place in the world outside of us. As Lenin put it:

For every scientist who has not been led astray by professorial philosophy, as well as for every materialist, sensation is indeed the direct connection between consciousness and the external world; it is the transformation of the energy of external excitation into a state of consciousness. This transformation has been, and is, observed by each of us a million times on every hand. (Lenin 1972a, 51)

Thus, we should view *reflection* as both a physical and mental process. There is a self-moving, autonomous aspect to it as well as an internal, conscious, deliberate, “intro-reflective” aspect. It is therefore entirely *dialectical*, connecting and embracing the self-related opposites of the world outside individual consciousness and the “internal” world of perception. Our physical presence and activity in the world, our labour in a class-dominated society, give rise to psychological and mental activity.

At first, our immediate relation with the changing world is characterized by sensations—the impulses which we have absorbed through our nine and possibly more senses—which produce impressions flashing by. For our purposes in social transformation, it is the moving *parts* of the system in which we live that are the source of sensations.

For example, we hear on the news that there is an injustice or that the police have attacked a demonstration. Or there is evidence of a growing economic crisis. We have identified that a friend appears unwell. There is something different in herself. So, any identity contains *difference* within itself. This transition of identity into something different is what we call *negation*. A transformation of one thing into its opposite. Health into possible illness. This single moment, the moment of identifying difference, is the beginning of *analysis*. We become aware that something has changed. Thus, within any process of cognition, there are *finite* starting points, moments, things, and processes. The transition from the infinite to finite occurs continuously.

It is a new moment because something in the world beyond our thought—in your friend’s existence—has changed into something different. In practice, we think like this every day at some time or other.

There is an interruption and a connection at the same time. She is still your friend, with the same face that you recognize, but is different. As we shall see, this is the first of further negations.

The arising of difference may jar our consciousness. It may appear simply as insignificant, a chance anomaly, *wrong* or out of place, because it does not fit in with our earlier understanding. It is easy to dismiss it rather than grasp it as the beginning of something utterly new and different, which requires further examination.

### **Contradiction or Identity Containing Difference**

What is key is grasping how even the simplest identity of a thing given to us as in sensation is, like all matter, inherently contradictory—it contains *difference* within itself. Given that it is in movement and change, something both “is and is not.”

Although we and the world form a unity, an identity, there are *differences within that identity*. This is as true of natural and physical processes as it is of mental and thought processes. A new moment that arises strikes us because an identity has changed into something different.

This way of understanding “identity” is of course fundamentally different from the formal, or Aristotelian “law of identity” or  $a = a$ . In formal logic something can only be only equal to itself and cannot contain change or difference. But, on closer examination, this can only be true as an abstraction. In the material, physical world true, concrete identity, as Engels wrote in *Dialectics of Nature*, “includes difference, change [as] [. . .] shown in detail by natural science” (Engels 1987, 496).

The path of cognition begins with the negation (transformation) of an identity into difference because of its internally contradictory nature. The term “negation” in this context does not mean obliteration or cancelling out. Rather the original source of sensation is still there as a material connection and content, but it comes into us as a moment of “difference” from what was there before. I will demonstrate this shortly in a concrete way in relation to the Covid pandemic.

### **External Reflection**

In the movement of cognition, a mobile reflection of the world outside of us into us, via our sensations, sets us off on our journey to consciousness. This can be termed as “external,” in the sense that it does not originate from us, even though we may indeed be consciously seeking it and by engaging in various forms of activity are affected in different ways. The world

external<sup>6</sup> to ourselves is itself a constellation of processes and things, which includes social and ideal phenomena, “ideal” in the sense pioneered by Ilyenkov, as we shall see later.

Changes and transformations at first appear in an indeterminate way—a flow of sensations or impressions. This moment is not a clear moment. It is a moment of transition where something is being “negated” into something else, but we don’t yet fully grasp it. It’s like trying to identify someone emerging out of a fog, or a ship that first appears as a speck on the horizon. In social movements it may be the action of one individual, such as the fruit vendor in Tunisia who set himself alight in response to measures by the state. It may be what appear as sporadic cases of a new type of “flu” in a Chinese marketplace. Or a corrupt practice by the government. Or menacing words by a dictator.

### The Moment of Becoming

The “lack of” or “absence,” of knowledge can be described as an “Other.” It is something not yet in existence, which however is beginning to emerge. It is a concrete and “self-related” moment of negation, in transition from not being to being. This contradictory, fluid moment is otherwise known as “becoming” (Bhaskar 1993).<sup>7</sup>

The entry of a finite moment of the infinite material world as a thought image of sensation is a unity of opposites. It is a moment of negation, whereby “difference is a negative image containing the qualitatively positive image of its own identity” (Healy 1990a, 54).

The moment of “*Schein*” (translated as “semblance” or “show” in English—it is not the same as “appearance”) is closely analyzed by Lenin. He notes that “in the inessential, in Semblance, there is moment of not-Being”

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6. I use the word “external” in a similar way as thinkers such as John McDowell, Maria Isabel Aldinhas Ferreira, who reference the external world outside the individual (see, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/perception-episprob/>). The external world, as I note above, includes “internalized” or “negated” social and individual realities, which can be forms of the Ideal. External and internal are, as noted above, self-related opposites. The nature of the “external world” will vary depending on each individual’s activity in time and place and includes the world of the “Ideal.”

7. “Real negativity, understood most simply as absence, or, qua process, absenting, and a fortiori the critique of ontological monovalence, is vital to dialectic. Absenting processes are crucial to dialectic conceived as the logic of *change* – which is absenting. Absenting absences, which act as constraints on wants, needs or (more generally) well-being, is essential to dialectic interpreted as the logic of *freedom*.” (Bhaskar 1993, 41)



(Lenin 1972b, 130). In other words, the moment of becoming is the transformation of being into not-being. It involves a negation, and a break in continuity. At the same time, while it is a different moment it is still an “expression of essence” (Lenin 1972b, 129–134).<sup>8</sup>

Such a fleeting moment constitutes the material connection between the world outside of us, which exists independently, (the object) and our consciousness (the subject).

Dogmatic or formal thinkers tend to dismiss this initial moment or to make it conform to their previous knowledge. It’s often easier to dismiss something new than to allow it to become an impulse for new thought. An example of this is the Covid pandemic, which some initially dismissed as just another type of flu. Or Putin’s tanks surrounding Ukraine, as simply an empty threat.

### The Operation of Dialectical Laws

The unclear nature of the “something as yet unknown” that has arisen in the world outside an individual’s thought drives the inquiring mind back to the origin of the sensation, the source that gave rise to it. Out of the flow of sensations, we begin to distinguish interconnected “parts.”

Law is the term that describes the essential and stable interconnection of things, which conditions their development. It is one side of the essence of a process. In scientific cognition, we discover or derive laws as we move from the empirical facts to understanding the essential relations between things. In social processes the discovery of tendencies as well as their interaction with subjective moments, accident and chance is vital if we are to be ahead of change, rather than trailing behind it.

Our cognitive process is law governed. It occurs in the context of objective dialectical laws. These are summarized as the unity, interpenetration and transformation of opposites.

We can understand them as follows: we can only exist as a part of, *in unity* with nature and society. Our unity with the world in is thus primary. Nature and society *interpenetrate* and interact with us and in us. A good example is breathing, whereby we breath in oxygen and we exhale carbon dioxide, a gas exchange that is vital to life. A social example is the class struggle. In capitalist society the worker and the capitalist are mutually

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8. In Lenin’s notes on Hegel’s Doctrine of Essence, these five pages are entirely devoted to the subdivisions of Essence, the first of which is “semblance.”

dependent but also in conflict. For example—the workers who fulfil orders for Amazon.

The second dialectical law is the *transformation* of a quantity (identity) into a new quality (difference) and vice versa. For example, plants use solar energy, water and carbon dioxide to create chemical energy and oxygen through the process of photosynthesis. So a quantity of sunlight is transformed into a new quality—chemical energy in the form of carbohydrates. In history, a new nation arises from an oppressed one, thereby *transforming* itself into a new “quality” of independence. These new qualities in turn give rise to new quantities.

This is of course in the spirit of Engels’ *Dialectics of Nature*, where he wrote:

It is, therefore, from the history of nature and human society that the laws of dialectics are abstracted. For they are nothing but the most general laws of these two aspects of historical development, as well as of thought itself. (Engels 1987, 356; for a discussion see, Arencibia 2022).

### **Negation of Negation—A Mental Union**

We have arrived at the application of the third law of dialectics, the *negation of negation*. What does this mean? This is a two-fold process. The thing that we are studying and our investigation of it may seem to repeat earlier events and knowledge. For example, the invasion of Ukraine in some respects is the same as the invasion of Chechnya in 1994 or Czechoslovakia in 1968. But it is not. It is a negation of those events because while it seems to be the same kind of action, there are entirely new circumstances. The Soviet Union no longer exists. Ukraine has been independent since 1991. Putin’s invasion is something different and new. So, we are developing a new concept of it. We study the parts of this phenomenon which may include the internal political trajectory in Russia, the country’s relationship with its Soviet past, its perception of a “threat from the West” via NATO, the desire of former satellite states to look to Brussels rather than Moscow and so on.

In developing our knowledge, we have synthesized our individual and collective historical knowledge with the moment that we have just negated. Therefore, it is a negation of the negation, both in material reality and in our thought. If we consciously embrace, rather than exclude, contradictory opposites—the old knowledge and the new—which is often quite challenging, the impulse from reality enters and enlivens thought. In this way, we

enrich and deepen our knowledge. Instead of empty, dead abstractions we strive for concepts filled with a living content.

Instead of viewing the world as unchanging and simply repeating itself, this is the understanding that in development, there is a connection between the old and the new. The old is not at all lost. It reappears, but in a new and different form at a higher stage of development. As something *self-develops*, its inherent contradictions are sublated at a different level. For example, neoliberal globalization has features in common with early forms of globalization, such as global corporations. But these features operate under different conditions and grow to become dominant and all-pervasive, rather than simply being *aspects* of capitalism.

### Deepening Our Understanding

As we seek to understand more about the new thing or process that has arisen, there is an interpenetration of opposites:

- 1) The coming into being, the immediacy, or “form” of the thing we have perceived through our senses interpenetrates with the inner nature of the process which gave rise to it—its “content.” This is an unstable, passing moment.
- 2) The essence of the thing itself, its necessary nature.

There is a continuous reciprocal and dialectical movement from outer to inner and from inner to outer. The “outer” object or process that we are studying and its reflection into us is a mutually driven process.

As we saw earlier, the negation of identity into difference is a contradiction as the two are mutually exclusive. The identity of something with itself requires difference from anything else.

In the movement of cognition, the transition of identity (*the old*) into (*the new*) difference is the impulse that drives us back to seek further properties and qualities in our quest to understand a new phenomenon.

### The Dialectics of Whole and Part—The Abstraction of Parts

It is the interaction between a moving *whole* (any natural, social or political process) and us as a *part* that stimulates us. Thus, the whole is “negated into” (appears through) a part and the part negates itself into the whole. You cannot have one without the other. Without our unity with nature we could not exist, without things being parts of wholes they could not exist.

### Diving Deeper—Negation of Negation

In seeking to grasp the essential nature of things, we move from the abstract ideas to increasingly concrete concepts. To enrich and update our concepts, we negate more “parts” from the external world.

The arising of the new is a contradictory process of “negation” of identity into difference. The difference is a self-related, concrete, objective moment, which however is incomplete. It requires a second negation, a more complex reference back, uniting the new part with its source in the objective world outside of the subject.

In this activity of cognition, the incompleteness, the lack of, the absence (to use Roy Bhaskar’s expression) is a negative force driving our cognition.

The movement of time is important here. We are examining a new moment that has arisen. This now comes together with our earlier, historical, body of knowledge. So, there is a double transition, as time moves continuously. Our previous concepts and understanding are now evaluated, adjusted, and possibly overturned, as we may seek extend or expand an old concept. We may arrive at a *judgement* which requires a new concept (Lenin 1972b, 211).<sup>9</sup>

It is at this point that we begin to form new dialectical concepts. The interaction of the parts with each other gives rise to—negates into—a new necessity and driving force. The world and we have both moved on in time. New quantities from the external world are continuously negating into the parts we have been analyzing.

### From Abstract to Concrete—Vitality and Life

“Abstract self-identity,” as Hegel wrote, “has no vitality, but the fact that the positive in itself is negativity, causes it to pass outside itself and to change. Something therefore is alive only as far as it contains contradiction, and it is this power to comprehend and endure contradiction within it” (Lenin 1972b, 139).<sup>10</sup>

The challenge is to keep on holding together these opposites of identity and difference. This is the activity of negating each moment from a moving and changing world of space and time into a new moment in thought.

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9. Quoting Hegel: “This equally synthetic and analytic moment of the *Judgement*, by which (the moment) the original universality [general concept] determines itself out of itself as other in relation to itself must be called dialectical.”

10. See also, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1914/cons-logic/ch02.htm>

Through this, we can allow the independent and spontaneous movement of reality to reflect into our thought.

In this activity of cognition, we begin to overcome the incompleteness, the abstract nature of our understanding as we deepen and enrich our knowledge.

In this approach, after breaking down a process into its parts, we then examine the parts in relation to the whole. This leads to a moment in cognition which is simultaneously analytical and synthetic—a union of analysis and synthesis. It is a process of endless discovery and deepening of knowledge, but with crucial moments of qualitative change, which take the form of leaps. Thought moves from “appearance to essence and from less profound to more profound essence” (Lenin 1972b, 223).<sup>11</sup>

By now we have negated initial unquiet, fast-moving moments of “semblance” into multiple “essences.” Our intro-reflected world thus becomes increasingly “high-resolution” as it fills with ever richer and more contradictory content. The external movement of reality is negated into the inner impulse within our thought which now acquires self-generating power and force. At crucial points in history these qualitative leaps give rise to a leap in class consciousness which opens new possibilities.

We have now arrived at a moment of “negativity.” This is the turning-point of the movement of the concept. It is by grasping this “dialectic soul,” the “innermost and most objective moment of life and spirit,” the “criterion of truth,” (Hegel’s expressions) that our thought acquires real power. We can overcome the opposition between abstract thought and reality and become freely acting, dynamic agents of change. This is the moment when thought becomes a guide to effective action, because we have our finger on the pulse, our eye on the ball.

Lenin summarized this as the “characterisation of dialectics: self-movement, the source of activity, the movement of life and spirit; the coincidence of the concepts of the subject (human being) with reality (the most objective moment)” (Lenin 1972b, 229).

### Back to Practice

From now we are on *the beginning of* a path back to practical activity, thinking under the influence of the world of practice, but not yet there. We have

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<sup>11</sup> The 11th of Lenin’s elements of dialectics.

moved on from identifying “difference and contradiction” to bringing things into relation with one another, as we seek an ever clearer, richer and “high definition” focus.

But simply “grasping contradiction” is not enough. It’s the transition from difference to contradiction which is the most important.

A “*third* moment of cognition,” again involves the negation of negation. This is when we “sharpen the blunt difference of variety [. . .] Into *essential* difference, into *opposition*. Only when raised to the peak of contradiction, do the manifold entities become active (*regsam*) and lively in relation to each other—they acquire that negativity which is the inherent pulsation of self-movement and vitality” (Lenin 1972b, 143). This means that we begin to reflect and experience the power, the “substance” of the self-movement of reality within our thought.

So we move from mobile concepts to possibilities—from *necessity* to theoretical ideas to practical ones which guide our new actions. Moments of social and historical transformation involve real negation. Liberating human beings from the capitalist framework requires just such a process. We seek not only to encourage the human forces in conflict with the present system, but to devise concrete political and social practices that can move society off its present destructive trajectory.

### **A Concrete Example of The Dialectical Cognitive Approach: Understanding the Pandemic**

Understanding the sudden emergence of the corona virus mutation in China in late 2019 is a good exercise. In the moment of gene reproduction and mutation, the new virus came into being.

Mutations arise when the identity of a gene changes into difference. A thing (the Covid virus) comes out of itself (the gene) as its own other. Instead of an accurate reproduction of an identical gene, a “mistake” may occur in cell division (known as mitosis). Or a structural change may have been genetically engineered. Thus, a microscopic change of identity to difference, a change to a new quality, took place. This “part”—the virus—now interacted with other “parts” of today’s world of the globalized economy, and China’s role within it, and acquired a powerful, *quantitative* force. From a localized infection, a global pandemic mushroomed within weeks. The interaction of China with other “parts” of globalized capitalism is characterized by law-governed tendencies which drove the pandemic.

The way it happened was not predictable nor inevitable, as it depended on the actions of states and individuals. It was a new part, a new phenomenon, which “negated” earlier historical pandemics.

The identity of the pre-pandemic world has been “negated” into a new “whole,” a different world from that we have been experiencing since 2020. The pandemic has affected everything—the global economic system, the political sphere, the way in which people work and relate to their employers, the state, their mental health, education, and so on.

### **Making The Ideal Real—Realising the Ideal—From Concepts to Practical Ideas**

Developing dialectically flexible concepts is a deliberate mental practice. We make the connection between the concrete world outside of us to create abstract thoughts with a view to developing new practices, to bring about change.

It is here that the work of Ilyenkov provides new avenues to enrich the understanding of concepts in cognition. His Ideal is a “concrete universal” which has its own contradictory driving force, impelling human beings to transform their world. For him, the Ideal as “the corporeally embodied form of the activity of social man, really exists—as activity in the form of the thing, or conversely, as the thing in the form of activity, as a ‘moment’ of this activity, as its fleeting metamorphoses” (Ilyenkov 2014, 178).

The Ideal embodies both past activities and human and social aspirations. In other words, the lack, or *absence* of realization of a purpose is also a *presence*, a negative and potentially restless one. This endows the Ideal with mobility, making it a force that calls forth activity with the aim of transforming the Real into the Ideal. The negation of new wholes out of the contradictions between the parts allows us to “reconstruct an objectively true image of the surrounding world, the means and ability to reconstruct this world in accordance with the object’s tendencies and lawful nature of its development,” as Ilyenkov puts it. This can provide a constructive approach towards contemporary forms of the Ideal and its contradictions.

Ilyenkov theorized a truly dialectical understanding of the world of “mind” and how thought develops in relation to physical activity. He saw this as vital within the development of individuals and society as a whole. It was inseparable from the socialist ideal of constructing an alternative to capitalist society.

Rather than seeing “ideal” phenomena—abstract entities and concepts such as value, democracy, freedom, national identity—as the automatic outcome of physiological or neurological activity or consciousness, Ilyenkov did something different. He showed how such ideals are the result of human social practice and labour and inherent in our desire to realize our own nature. They have a social and historical reality outside individual minds. In this understanding of mental phenomena, Ilyenkov built on the contributions of earlier philosophers such as Plato and Hegel who studied the nature of the Ideal, and of course, Marx and Engels study of alienated, upside-down consciousness in capitalism.

For Ilyenkov, the Ideal “constitutes a peculiar category of phenomena, which are *independent* of an individual. They are *universal*, commonly held image-patterns, as opposed to the awareness of an individual “soul” (Ilyenkov 2014, 153). Thus, the Ideal and Ideals are not something that exists only in the mind of an individual person, but rather they are integral components of the objective social and political realities and practice of humanity.

This concept of the “Ideal” helps us grasp how the Ideals, passing into the real, become an objectively real social force, crucial as Lenin said, “for individuals and for history” (Lenin 1972b, 114; Quoted from by Ilyenkov in the opening of *Dialectics of the Ideal*). This means exercising our ability to develop concrete dialectical concepts.

When ideas seize hold, they have great power. This is true, for better and for worse. We saw how a sense of powerless, frustration and alienation fuels and drive political movements. Reactionary politicians from Trump to Putin are sensitive to this, to exploit it and wreak destruction on invented “enemies.” Putin’s fantasy of reverting to a Tsarist-Stalinist empire does not spring from irrationality or madness. He is driven by his autocratic “ideal” that the democratic aspirations that resurfaced and began to flourish in Russia and the post-Soviet world, and particularly in Ukraine, are a threat that must be destroyed.

The ideal of democracy itself is, like all phenomena, contradictory. While we strive for control over our lives, for self-determination, the ruling classes don’t only resist—they seek to undermine and even destroy this ideal. Most frequently they present it as a one-sided construction, where democracy is limited to elections.

Freeing ourselves, our own consciousness, from one-sided, dogmatic constructs in place of examining reality more deeply is vital. For most peo-



ple, the ideals of real democracy, freedom of expression, political and economic self-determination, the desire for a decent life and a future, looking after our fellow human beings are part of their human consciousness and sense of justice. We are in a huge global struggle to make these real.

Social and political revolutions over the millennia have in one way or another been inspired by such ideals. But today's ruling classes and their states preside over a system which is destructive, and cataclysmic in its very nature.

### **Making The Transition**

The truth content of our cognitive efforts is decisive. But *possibility* needs to be transformed into *necessity* as a driving force. That means discovering and identifying the forces within today's society that can make a transition beyond capitalism possible.

Understanding the logic, the underlying laws which drive the system, and the contradictions that shape people's thoughts and actions is vital if we are to develop possibilities for new practices. No one single person or group of people or movement can have a premium on the truth.

Grasping the revolutionary potential in today's technologies can facilitate a wider and deeper understanding of complex realities than ever before. Let's outwit, outstrip, the dominion of the masters of capital. What matters is making this world into our world. We can and must use every means possible to let loose the inherent creativity of human beings and the mass desire to live unfettered by capitalism and its horrors.

Understanding the logic, the laws which drive the system, social being and social consciousness is the only way we can operate effectively. This brings us to exploring possibilities for new practices. But possibility needs to be transformed into necessity. The truth content of our cognitive efforts is decisive here. Our aim from the beginning has been to discover the internal contradictions, the impulses that drive transformation for the purpose of revolutionary transformation.

That means discovering and identifying the forces within today's society that can make a transition beyond capitalism possible. To fulfil our aspirations to real democracy at all levels in society, giving us ownership and control in our communities, workplaces, schools and universities, we must develop strategies and concepts to remove those in power before it's too late. Then we can develop collective practices to achieve our ideals. For

that we need learning-doing organisations that have a soberly realistic and yet confidently revolutionary outlook.

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## Biography

**Corinna Lotz.** Her principal interest is in the development of a Marxist theory of knowledge that can contribute to a revolutionary approach to thought, political transformation and artistic creativity. In 2012 she co-founded the International Friends of Ilyenkov. She co-organises the Real Democracy Movement, which campaigns for a democratic revolution. Writings include: *Finding Evald Ilyenkov: How a Soviet Philosopher who stood up for dialectics continues to inspire* (Lupus Books, 2019); *Time's Up for Neoliberalism* (co-author, 2018); *Seeds of Bullets* (co-editor, 2016); *Revolution 1968* (2008); *A World to Win: A Rough Guide to a Future without Global Capitalism* (co-author 2004); *The Right to Self-determination* (1996); *Gerry Healy: A Revolutionary Life* (co-author, 1994). She holds a degree in art history from the Courtauld Institute, London University. Recent books and articles include [Frances](#) (co-author) and [The Poet Uncancelled](#). She lives in London.