



Marxism, from Ideology to Science: Evald Ilyenkov and His Contribution to Marxist Thought

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ABSTRACT: This text is a reflection on the current fate and prospects of Marxism. It discusses Marxism's retreat from science to ideology shortly after the passing of the founders of Marxism and the essence of ideology as false consciousness, understood in Spinoza's materialist logic. The role of Ilyenkov as a theorist close to Marxism, who took the first major step towards returning the latter to the dignity of critical science and the internal contradictions in his thinking that did not allow him to draw the obvious conclusions from his revolutionary new reading of Spinoza, is emphasised.

KEYWORDS: Science, ideology, Marxism, materialism, object-oriented activity, Spinoza, Marx, Ilyenkov, Lenin, Vygotsky.

*I would welcome
all the judgement of scientific criticism.*
(Karl Marx, preface to the first volume of Capital)

Introduction

"Communism is dead!", the world's media announced the day after the collapse of the USSR, which meant that the ideology that justified its inevitability had died, so Marxism died.

Not true, objected those who have lived for a century on the interest of speculating on the ideas of Marx and Engels. Marxist *ideology* is alive because we, its brokers, are alive. Yes, the CPSU no longer exists, but there are the Communist Parties of China and Vietnam, there are the Cuban Communists, finally there is the peculiar but socialist state of North Korea.

We categorically cannot agree with any of these statements!

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And we disagree because we are convinced that at the end of the twentieth century no “communism” but the most banal state-bureaucratic capitalism collapsed in Eastern Europe, whereas all the “socialist” or “communist” parties and the regimes they established are as similar to Marx and Engels’ scientific socialism as, to quote Spinoza ([1665] 2017), “Sirius the ‘dog-star’ matches the dog that is a barking animal.”

The scientific socialism of the classics of Marxism remained something purely theoretical, the unfulfilled dream of the oppressed classes. All practical socialist experiments ended in the USSR with the death of Lenin and with the removal from power of his comrades-in-arms in the Great October Revolution. As for “collectivisation” and “industrialisation,” which Stalinists are so proud of as major the allegedly “socialist” achievements of the USSR, in their actual class character they were no different from the expropriation of peasants in the era of initial capital accumulation and the subsequent industrialisation in the leading countries of capitalist development. After all, if the seizure of land from the peasants in favour of wage-labour-based big landholding and big industry is to be called socialism, then “country of victorious socialism” is not the USSR, but nineteenth century England.

Let us add that we do not consider “socialism” or “communism” to be just verbal labels, self-names, with which any dictators or native tsars have the right to adorn themselves and their authoritarian and cannibalistic regimes. To take this view is to take the position shared today by both the advocates of nomenklatura “socialism,” i.e., the Stalinists, and the fierce opponents of the latter, the liberals, is to abandon the class Marxist logic and return to the vulgar bourgeois point of view. In other words, it means abandoning objective truth-oriented scientific thinking, in which those who work are vitally interested, in favour of the sly academic verbosity that serves the interests of the ruling classes, abandoning science in favour of what Marx and Engels contemptuously defined as *ideology*.

What Does It Mean to Be a “Marxist”?

The task of our research is to continue Evald Ilyenkov’s work by moving along the path that would allow Marxism to regain the dignity of a critical science and thereby put its overextended historical streak of ideological humiliation behind it. But before we can seriously discuss the development of Marxist thought, we must define the object of our theorizing and decide what we call “Marxism.” For today this term is used quite irresponsibly

both in the West and in the East. Some call themselves “Marxists” to take on the fashionable academic mantle of “left-wing intellectuals.” Others pretend to be in the nomenclature class. Finally, a great many people today use the term Marxism as a universal swear word, as a synonym for world evil and label all their political opponents as “Marxists.” Thus, one hears with utter amazement that the executioner of the October Revolution, Joseph Dzhughashvili, and his victim, Lev Trotsky, and the grey party official Leonid Brezhnev, and the charismatic leader of the Chinese “cultural revolution” Chairman Mao, and the butcher Pol Pot, and the benevolent Senator Bernie Sanders were all “Marxists.”

For us to call someone a Marxist is to say that this person holds a certain system of scientifically materialistic views on nature of human beings and their society, hence, to say that he/she is a consistent democrat and humanist. The latter is not an abstractly moral assessment, not a compliment to us, but a logical consequence of consistent materialism.¹ On the contrary, among today’s left-wing theorists, such certainty is seen as something politically incorrect on the grounds that everyone supposedly has the right to label themselves a Marxist and to challenge this inalienable right is to adopt a «dogmatic and Stalinist» position. What these gentlemen fail to notice is that they propose to apply the liberal principle of “freedom of conscience” to Marxism, i.e., they sign off that they consider Marxism not a science, but a kind of quasi-religious ideology.

However, we are convinced that the term Marxism itself is a very inadequate one, as it does not highlight the content of a scientific theory, but only the name of its author. Marx himself took great irony in labelling the theory of scientific socialism with his name, for he was far from putting on a toga of the founder of a new world religion, and he viewed his main theoretical works, especially *Das Kapital*, not as *Tablets of the Covenant*, but as *scientific texts, that is, as texts criticised and developed*. And it is not his fault that a new revolutionary *Gospel of Marx* was fashioned out of his scientific theoretical heritage, and the development of scientific thought was replaced by a miserable apologetics.

The intellectual catastrophe did not come immediately after the founder of the theory of scientific socialism passed away, for his place was rightly taken by his friend and colleague Engels, who shouldered the task of publishing and completing the second and third volumes of *Das Kapital*. But

1. An extended proof of this thesis is tantamount to an extended proof of the validity of Marxism as such, and therefore cannot be argued in any comprehensive way in a single article.

the death of Engels himself marked the beginning of an intellectual hiatus that lasted more than a century.

From Christianity to Nationalism

The Age of Enlightenment and the French Revolution virtually eliminated Christianity as a universal political ideology. Henceforth, in developed countries, religion has been assigned a very modest role as a predominantly private, family value. But no place is ever empty. Ruling classes needed a *political* ideology and the nineteenth century produced one in the form of nationalism.

The ideology of nationalism was opposed to the scientific socialism of Marx and Engels with their proletarian internationalism and the doubtful merit of this opposition belonged to Eduard Bernstein, who proclaimed that the total annihilation of nationalities is a dream, and “an ugly one at that.”

To the taste of the patriarch of revisionism, scientific, proletarian socialism had to be “improved” by giving it the missing national features. And his call fell on the soil, well fertilised by all previous development, on which German National Socialism had flourished in the first half of the twentieth century and, a little further east, its historical twin—the anti-cosmopolitan, great-power patriotic Stalinist “socialism.” In the second half of the century the ranks of national socialisms were joined by “socialism” with strictly Chinese, Arabic, Latin American and many other similar national characteristics.

But while German National Socialism openly proclaimed the primacy of national or racial principles over class relations and declared the theory of Marx and Engels to be a product of “Jewish Bolshevism,” Stalinist national socialism preferred to build its ideology not on denial, but on... the apologetics of Marxism. And judging by the historical results, the Stalinist form of struggle against Marxism was in some ways even more successful than Hitler’s. The Nazis were in power for only 12 years and hopefully they are now irrevocably in the past². But the Stalinist regimes in their different

2. Less than six months have passed since these words were written. But today, life itself compels us to make a clarification. The war with Ukraine, unleashed by the criminal Kremlin regime, demonstrates that the phenomenon of Hitler’s classic Nazism has not gone into the past, but is capable of reincarnation, returning to current political reality in the form of Putin’s Nazism, a Nazism armed with the latest brainwashing technology and nuclear missiles, and therefore even more deadly to humanity.

“national” varieties continue to poison the public consciousness and deprive of hope and courage people who would like to find in Marxism a way to solve today’s acute social problems but cannot do so themselves because they mistakenly identify Marx’s scientific socialism with the Stalinist ideology.

The Challenges of Our Time and the Urgent Need for a Scientific, rather than Ideological, Understanding of Contemporary Society

The world today has finally become a global phenomenon and has entered a period rich in new threats and crises. In the nineteenth century, and partly in the first half of the twentieth, the cyclical crises of overproduction, characteristic of capitalism, posed a threat mainly to the leading countries of industrial development, while countries and continents not yet integrated into a global world capitalist economy were not seriously affected by these crises.

This is no longer the case. Derived not from the abstract evil will of mysterious “world centres of influence,” Masonic lodges or Jewish financial magnates, American or Chinese transnational capital, the Bilderberg, or Club of Rome, but from the banal fact that humanity’s production of its life is no longer broken up into separate, indifferent “national” economies, the current level of globalisation of the world economy is wholly due to the historically established present-day *world division of labour*. Accordingly, the problems posed by this single world production do not threaten individual regions or countries, but life itself on this planet.

These threats include the steadily approaching ecological catastrophe, the destruction of forests and global warming, which may render our planet uninhabitable in the foreseeable historical perspective. It also includes the threat of a global thermonuclear apocalypse from the neo-Nazi Putin regime, which has become real for the first time since the end of the Cold War era. Finally, the deepening chasm between the rich centre and the poor periphery, generating mass migration flows, which, in turn, return to the agenda of the prosperous “golden billion” the sharpest class contradictions, of which the inhabitants of this sleepy paradise have managed to forget over the past half century and the reaction to which is now taking the form of outright Nazism everywhere.

All these problems and many others cannot be solved in principle without an adequate, *scientific* understanding of the society which generates

them. Meanwhile, since the end of the nineteenth century, the public consciousness has been dominated not by a scientific understanding of the nature of modern capitalism, but by an ideology that imitates it, i.e., knowingly false consciousness, which does not reflect, but distorts the reality in the interests of the ruling classes. This applies not only to the “liberal” ideology popular in the West, but also to the supposedly opposing “Marxist” ideology (aka “Marxist-Leninist,” “Maoist,” etc.).

The Nature and Origins of Scientific and Ideological Consciousness

The question of the distinction between science and ideology is so important that before discussing the fate of Marxism, it is necessary to define, at least in general terms, what we mean by ideology. Engels’ entirely fair remark that ideology as a form of false consciousness beneficial to those in power is obviously insufficient, for a negative definition is, strictly speaking, not a definition at all. Already Aristotle noted that a straight line is a measure of both itself and the curve, whereas the contrary is fundamentally incorrect. Accordingly, the definition of ideology as false consciousness can only be understood through the definition of true consciousness, scientific consciousness, and not vice versa. Therefore, all arguments about ideology which are not based on a strictly scientific understanding of true or *scientific* consciousness are in themselves no more than a figure of speech.

Following Ilyenkov and Marx, we proceed from the Spinozist understanding of thinking as the practical action of the thinking body by the form of its object. And this naturally raises the question—what then is the essence of ideological thinking? Obviously, monistic, that is, not eclectic, but scientific, dialectical logic requires that the definition of ideological thinking is fundamentally the same as the definition of thinking in general. And this means that ideological thinking must also be understood as the action of the thinking subject by the form of its object.

The Opposition of Scientific and Ideological Thinking

What, then, is the difference between scientific and ideological thinking?

The answer is obvious, if we assume that both scientific and ideological thinking are thinking as such, then their difference can only lie in the difference in *the object* of the latter. Ilyenkov deals with this delicate subject in *Dialectical Logic*, without indicating, however, that it is a difference between

scientific and *ideological* thinking, but in accordance with the historical tradition, calling it the difference between “truth and error,” “good and evil,” “sin and righteousness.”

With that Spinoza also linked his profound theory of truth and error, developed in detail in the *Ethica ordine geometrico demonstrata* (*Ethics*), *Tractatus de intellectus emendatione*, *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, and in numerous letters.

If the mode of action of the thinking body as a whole is determined in the form of an ‘other,’ and not of the immanent structure of ‘this’ body, the problem arises, how ever are we to recognise error? The question was posed then with special sharpness because it appeared in ethics and theology as the problem of ‘sin’ and ‘evil.’ The criticism of Spinozism from the angle of theology was invariably directed at this point; Spinoza’s teaching took all the sense out of the very distinguishing of ‘good and evil,’ ‘sin and righteousness,’ ‘truth and error.’ In fact, in what then did they differ?

Spinoza’s answer again was simple, like any fundamentally true answer. Error (and hence ‘evil’ and ‘sin’) was not a characteristic of ideas and actions as regards their own composition, and was not a positive attribute of them. The erring man also acted in strict accordance with a thing’s form, but the question was what the thing was. If it were ‘trivial,’ ‘imperfect’ in itself, i.e., fortuitous, the mode of action adapted to it would also be imperfect. And if a person transferred this mode of action to another thing, he would slip up. (Ilyenkov [1974] 2009)

Incidentally, the reproach of immanent immoralism is not only typical of the critique of Spinoza’s philosophy but is a central idealistic argument against any philosophical materialism. Similar reproaches two or three hundred years after the great Dutch thinker’s death are directed not at Spinoza, whose moral virtues are now fashionably admired, but at the classics of Marxism and their teachings. After all, if freedom is understood as the imaginary ability of the individual to act not according to the form of the object, not in accordance with natural or social necessity, but according to his supposedly free and high moral will, then the Marxists have no choice but to abandon materialism and go to Kant, “enriching” their teaching with the proverbial categorical imperative, or, simply and without much philosophical contrivance, to return to the most banal religion.

But can we as Marxists be satisfied with Spinoza’s reference to “trivialness” or “imperfection” of the object of action, or Ilyenkov’s purely logical assumption that “delusion [. . .] begins only where a limitedly correct mode of action is given a universal meaning, where the relative is taken for the absolute” (Ilyenkov [1964] 1997)? For the “triviality” and “imperfection” of the object of action must themselves be justified. Similarly, the

attribution of a universal meaning to a limited right way of action must also be understood not as an occasional logical error of an individual thinking overestimating his insightfulness, but proceeding from the nature of the object itself, from its necessity.

Spinoza's really profound conjecture about the nature of truth and error becomes quite transparent if we see behind *scientific* or *true* cognition such an action in the form of an object, the object of which is wholly relied upon by the formative activity of this acting/thinking individual, while behind error, or ideological consciousness, we see such action of a subject, the object of which is relied upon by the combined action of a set of partial individuals connected with one another by the division of labour. Therefore, this object is simply not given to the individual as her/his object of action/thought.

Thus, an Indian cutting a pirogue out of a tree trunk acts/thinks completely rationally, for his object—in this case a log—in all its integrity confronts his activity. Conversely, the same Indian acts as a subject of ideology when he tries to comprehend, Nature or society as a whole, while his activity is not even vaguely capable of correlating with Nature or society in their entirety. Therefore, as a craftsman carving a pirogue out of wood, the Indian is no less rational than the constructor of the most modern ships. In contrast, as a member of a primitive community or of the most modern bourgeois society, the individual thinks of his/her society in purely ideological terms, for “[. . .] the narrower was the sphere of the natural whole with which the human dealt, the greater the measure of error, the less the measure of truth” (Ilyenkov [1974] 2009).

Therefore, individuals in everyday life and in their narrow professional sphere, unless of course these individuals are ideologists *ex professo*, act/think quite rationally. Conversely, where the object of their theoretical reflection is something about which they cannot act in practice, their consciousness must assume a perverted, ideological form.

Accordingly, in societies where all grassroots social activity is crushed by the authorities, as, say, in today's Russia, Iran or North Korea, the dominant type of consciousness must be purely ideological, for the vast majority of individuals are in fact deprived of the ability to act meaningfully in the sphere of social relations, i.e., to think about their society. And given that the very nature of material production in such a society is such that the purely productive activity of most individuals is something purely partial, it's not surprising that their theoretical thinking is just as “partial.” As a result, such a society is roughly divided into two opposing social

groups, the political technologists, and the plebs, or in terms of “Theses on Feuerbach” on the upbringers and the wards.

Government officials, top bureaucrats and the ideological, security and political servants they employ constitute a group that we have provisionally labelled 'political technologists'. Members of this group are engaged in specific “activities” to manipulate society in the interests of the supreme power. Correspondingly, their conception of society corresponds to their fraudulent activities. They present society as a set of easily deceivable simpletons or “suckers” who can be deceived for a modest price.

The rest of society, whose social activity outside personal and family relationships is limited to controlled by the authorities’ ritualistic actions, such as participation in initiated by the bosses Putin rallies (so-called ‘putings’), or in simulated “elections” without any choice to elect somebody, is the subject of an entirely ideological consciousness - mythological, fatalistic religious, conspiracy-based, loyalist, etc.

The only possible alternative to this dichotomy of society into crooks and suckers, with their complementary forms of ideological consciousness, can be and in fact are individuals who not only take an active social position, but assert it through their changing society revolutionary activity. For one can understand an object only by actively interacting with it, by shaping or ‘positing’ it through one’s active object-oriented activity.

But here it is necessary to specify—abstract activism is not a magic means transforming a victim of ideology into a subject of scientific consciousness. The latter is necessary if and only if the individual does not just blindly “break” society to suit his or her own individual will, but shapes it consciously, *relying not only on his or her own empirical experience*, but also on the historical, cultural experience of humanity as a whole, as recorded in classical philosophy and science. For it is only through participation in a historically given culture that the individual transcends his or her unilateralism and partiality, and hence gains the ability to see his or her object through the eyes of an evolving humanity.

Therefore, an objective obstacle to the formation of scientific, i.e., revolutionary consciousness is not only the policy of the authorities, aimed at restricting the social activity of individuals, but also the imposition of beneficial for ruling class ideological stereotypes, ranging from religious to nationalist, liberal and quasi socialist.

The objective dialectic of active social activity and theoretical culture is such that for an individual who is not a subject of such activity, for a loy-

alist philistine, a genuine theoretical culture simply does not exist. Moreover, when such a philistine accidentally encounters this culture, he perceives it as something personally harmful and hostile to him.

Finally, we should note another fundamental feature that distinguishes ideological consciousness from scientific consciousness.

The subject of scientific consciousness is usually self-conscious and does not make a secret from others of what is the object of his/her activity/thought. On the contrary, the real object of the ideologue's activity/thought is a great mystery. If not for the "thinker" himself, then at least for everyone else.

Thus, a physicist who studies the nature of, say, crystals, directs his research activity towards these very crystals. On the contrary, the theologian, as a typical ideologue, is convinced himself and tries to convince others that the object of his theorizing is a so-called 'god,' a mythological character that exists nowhere but in his own feverish imagination. The ideologue as a subject of thought also moves in the form of some object, except that this is not in principle the object of which he speaks. And it makes absolutely no difference whether he himself is conscious of this *qui pro quo*, or naively believes that he/she is investigating exactly the subject that is marked on the title page of his/her writings.

What is the Object of the Ideologue?

If according to Spinoza's materialistic logic, thinking is understood as the active action of a subject by the form of an object, then it is obvious that only something really existing can be thought in this way. An imaginary movement in the form of a mirage, existing only in my personal imagination, would be something purely subjective in the worst sense of the word. Meanwhile, ideology is not reducible to something merely subjective, the theologian who discusses God is not free to voluntarily ascribe any arbitrary definitions to his magical object. He really thinks about his object, that is, he actively moves by its form, although it is clear that it is not at all the "object" whose name some religions do not recommend mentioning in vain, and others—to depict on pictures, but something quite different.

No matter how critically we regard religion, we are clearly aware that it is not a figment of someone's subjective fantasy, but something historically quite objective, independent of the will of individuals. Therefore, it is not enough to repeat after Ilyenkov/Spinoza that the real object of the ideologue is a certain "insignificant" or "imperfect" object, but we must point

out *what* it is in the real object of the theologian that really makes it insignificant and imperfect.

So, what in fact is the ideologue's subject matter? By the shape of what thing does his thought move?

On the True Subject Matter of Ideology

To answer this question, we turn to the phenomenon of so-called "school verbalism," which we believe is not a narrowly school phenomenon, but a perfectly accurate model of a typical ideological consciousness. The essence of this phenomenon is that the verbalist pupil demonstrates "outstanding success" in mastering the school curriculum. But... he is completely unable to apply his school "knowledge" in practice, revealing utter helplessness when confronted with a real, not "academic," task.

What is the reason for this helplessness? Why does a student who has successfully navigated the form of a learning subject pass up the same subject in a non-instructional situation?

The answer is, in fact, very simple. Because pupils do not usually move in the learning situation according to the form of what their teachers consider to be the object of learning, but according to the abstract will of these teachers. This object itself, whether physics, mathematics or literature, is of very little interest and therefore does not attract students' subject activity/thinking, and more often not at all. Therefore, even if students did perform some school tasks, the sequence of which was methodologically aligned with the logic of the object, their actions were not THEIR own actions, whereas their own actions related to a completely different object.

And the answer to the question of the nature of this real object we have, in fact, already given above. The real object of the verbalist student is the socially determined will of the teacher, whose wishes he tries to guess and to whom he has tried his best to conform. For the ability to guess the overt and covert desires of superiors is a far more useful skill for the individual in modern society than the ability to scientifically reflect on the nature of the material world and far less dangerous than the ability to reflect meaningfully on the nature of society. In other words, the ideologue, and in particular the verbalist learner, even if he sincerely believes that he is solving a certain objective problem, is in fact engaged in something else entirely, the construction of a position of advantage in the system of social relations or so-called "socialisation."

One must be extremely naïve to seriously believe that there is anything behind the ideological mantras of anyone in power other than a desire to consolidate and, if possible, forever extend their hold on power. At the same time, it is obviously dangerous and counterproductive to admit this openly for the sake of that very purpose. It is far more advantageous to present the case in such a way that the so-called “elite” is guided not by a desire to seize and retain power and property, but by some lofty ideals—religious, moral, or political. And to convince others of this, one must act as if one believes wholeheartedly in the ideological formulas one proclaims. And it’s so much easier when you’re not making them up out of your head, but expressing through them the actual essence of the society you’re living in. Thus, ancient mythology was not an idle tale of spirits and gods, but the first naïve attempt to comprehend real, earthly society with all its emerging class contradictions.

Similarly, the reasoning of the Soviet ideologists about “socialism” and “communism” was not based on this or that interpretation of Marx’s ideas, right or wrong, but on a fairly accurate expression of the nature of the system of social relations that had developed in the USSR by the end of the 1920s. In other words, these or those political and economic decisions were made by Stalin and his successors not on the basis of this or that interpretation of the texts of Marx and Lenin, as presented by the Soviet propaganda and as is still presented today by the liberal critics of the USSR, which they interpret as an ideocratic regime, but these interpretations themselves, or what was presented as them, were a reflection of the real relations of production.

For example, Stalin and his ideologues willingly borrowed from Marx the idea that the first step of the communist revolution must be the nationalisation of the basic social means of production and that the essence of the revolutionary state is the dictatorship of the proletariat.

It was more natural for them to accept these provisions, since in the 1920s and later they themselves constituted real power, which had both the means of social production and the means of state violence in its hands.

But at the same time, neither Stalin nor Suslov’s “theorists” tried to ignore Marx’s idea that private ownership of the means of production was identical with the ability of private owners to “dispose of another’s labour force,” and from this perspective the USSR was dominated, although not by individual, but by associated, yet purely private ownership, the nomenklatura class on the one hand and the wage-earning class, the proletariat, on the other, opposed each other quite antagonistically. In the same way,

it was totally ignored that Marx and Engels understood the dictatorship of the proletariat as a necessary form of power now of revolution, but equally necessary to disappear, to be replaced by direct self-government of the workers, that a truly socialist state must die out and only a dying out state can be called socialist without violence to common sense.

Naturally, the Soviet rulers guarded the secret of the ideological nature of their consciousness with the apple of their eye, pretending to be some kind of “communist” augurs, experts in some supreme, only they knew the “scientific” truth, whose intimate knowledge was in fact meant to legitimize their claim to absolute power in the eyes of the working people.

Not surprisingly, it was not the liberal or nationalist critics of the regime who they considered the most dangerous to their power, but those who tried to see Marx’s texts not as ideology but as a science that allowed a critical appraisal of contemporary reality. For while the former strengthened the ideological myth of the Soviet authorities through their “dissidence,” the latter threatened to destroy this myth entirely. Among the latter, despite all his compromises, was undoubtedly E. Ilyenkov.

Finally, one last thing. We should not forget that ideology reflects its true subject from a specific angle. It is not a true or scientific reflection, but as Engels correctly stated, a perverse reflection. And the basis of this reversibility is not the class commitment of the theorist as such, but the commitment of historically doomed classes.

Any thinking, as an active process, is a process which must first be engaged by the thinking/acting individual’s own interests. But there is engagement and engagement. The class, which is on the rise, the class which has the future, has no need to distort³ the true situation. That is why, incidentally, the bourgeois era gave humanity its greatest thinkers precisely

3. Therefore, Vygotsky, in his famous formula that supposedly the psyche, unlike a mirror, does not so much reflect as distorts reality in favour of the body, very accurately defined, not the actual, objective thinking, but thinking purely ideological, perverse thinking. We do not say about the fact that he contrasted a passive mirror reflection to such subjectively distorting, essentially ideological thinking, as a reflection that is supposedly more exact and complete, than he unwillingly revealed his adherence not to the activist/materialist/Marxist logic, but to the sensationalist logic.

We can only add for ourselves that from the point of view of consistent materialism/Marxism, no mirror passive reflection can exist in principle. What we, as living, active beings, see as mirror images is entirely a product of our own visual activity, a product of our necessarily engaged or motivated activity. Therefore, until the young Earth was inhabited by visually endowed living beings, the Sun and clouds were not reflected in water mirrors at all. We understand that it is impossible to imagine, because any representation presupposes the presence of a thinking, representing living subject. The essence of the

when the bourgeoisie was a revolutionary class. Suffice it to mention the names of such giants as Hobbes and Spinoza, whose contribution to the scientific, i.e., materialistic understanding of nature and society cannot be overestimated. In contrast, the engagement of a reactionary class can produce only the most squalid forms of ideology. Such is the dominant academic ideology in the world today, whether positivist or postmodern. Therefore, to take a truly scientific, rather than ideological, point of view today, the theorist absolutely must consciously adopt the point of view of the only historically progressive class of modernity, the point of view of the wage-earning class. For only from this point of view can the theorist engage not in subtle apologetics for the existing social order, but in a revolutionary critique of the latter, that is, in a truly scientific understanding of contemporary capitalist society.

Ideological Apologetics or Critical Science?

One of the most striking differences between science and ideology is that the scientific approach assumes that both the subject and its theoretical reflection can develop, so it has an essentially critical view of things. On the contrary, ideology, being inherently a system of ideas aimed at maintaining a favourable *status quo* for those in power, is not compatible with any kind of self-criticism. Therefore, if the principle of the scientific perspective was formulated by Descartes in his motto "*De omnibus dubito*" (doubt everything), the universal ideological principle was ingeniously coined by Tertullian "*Credo quia absurdum*" (believe, for it is absurd).

Thus, under the sign of apologetics existed the entire Marxist "Soviet ideology," which insisted that the development of Marxism can and must not consist in deepening the theoretical ideas of Marx and Engels, which is impossible without discovering and sublating the contradictions contained in them, as in any developing scientific knowledge, but only in mechanically supplementing and illustrating Marxist theory with "recent" empirical facts.

difficulty is that reflection as a physical phenomenon is, of course, not related to any living creature; accordingly, sunbeams reflected from the water were successfully dancing on the coastal rocks before the emergence of life. But the beautiful picture of clouds reflected in water that we are used to will not exist. For it can exist and exists only due to our activity only in our active imagination.

As a result of such logic, Marx's dialectical philosophy has been turned into a collection of platitudes illustrating with a boiling kettle the "dialectical transition of quantity into quality," and political economy into a collection of scholastic definitions and "latest additions" that completely destroy Marx's logic.

The most characteristic example of this "development" is the still popular theory of so-called "imperialism,"⁴ which masterfully substituted the monistic method of Marx and the classical political economy of Ricardo and Sismondi for the eclectic empiricism of Rudolf Hilferding. Lenin's famous "Five Signs of Imperialism" was a typical example of this substitution of Marx's dialectic for empiricism. And in this connection, it is necessary to dwell on the figure of Vladimir Lenin and his role in the development and decline of Marxism.

Lenin

Lenin is undoubtedly an outstanding thinker and revolutionary who has left a profound mark on the history of the revolutionary workers' movement through his work. But that is why his theoretical work deserves the closest *scientific, i.e., critical* analysis. And such an analysis forces us to state that Lenin too bears a share of the blame for the transformation of Marxism from a science into an apologetic ideology. It is not even that, not being familiar with *Deutsche Ideologie*, Lenin participated in the rehabilitation of the term "ideology" itself, that he was at least involved in the introduction of the phrase "revolutionary proletarian ideology," impossible for Marx and Engels. This would have been half the trouble. Much worse, with his own theorising, Lenin set the apologetic standard of treating Marx's classical theoretical legacy, and above all his *Capital*, as an incomprehensible, finished text, as something that is fundamentally devoid of internal contradictions and therefore neither needed nor capable of development. "Imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism" is the most typical example of

4. Anticipating possible misunderstandings, we are not trying to be advocates of those historical phenomena which are commonly referred to as "imperialism" in left-wing journalism. We simply insist that "imperialism" is just a catchphrase that lacks any serious theoretical content that would indicate anything that would fundamentally distinguish so-called imperialism from capitalism as such. In this case, the reference to the fact that "imperialism" is a capitalism in which the law of value supposedly does not apply, because the so-called "free market" has been replaced by the arbitrariness of monopolists, in fact completely destroys the entire theoretical heritage of Marx. In other words, if numerous theories of imperialism are true, then Marxism is no longer a scientific theory. And vice versa.

such a dubious “enrichment” of Marxism. The work, which Soviet ideologists declared to be the latest stage in the development of Marxist political economy, hardly the fourth volume of *Capital*, is not a development of the categories of political economy, but a journalistic description of the empirical surface of the socio-economic and socio-political reality of the early twentieth century, a popular retelling of ideas far removed from the logic of Marx by J. Gobson and R. Hilferding.⁵

Lenin’s philosophical work *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* is not a breakthrough in Marxist philosophy, let alone the discovery of a “new stage” in Marxism. Its author’s undoubted merit is that he recognized of Bogdanov and Lunacharski’s latest positivism as a threat to Marx’s theoretical culture. And the basic shortcoming of this Lenin’s work is that its author tries to criticize positivism not from the point of view of activity materialism of Marx, but from the point of sensualism, that is from the point of view of “old materialists,” critically mentioned by Marx in his *Theses on Feuerbach*. As a result of this *qui pro quo*, Lenin’s defence of materialism in his work was frankly weak, and he had to replace the missing theoretical arguments with ‘voice,’ with vigour of formulation.

We do not, however, deny the enormous importance of the figure of Lenin for the history of scientific socialism. After the deaths of Marx and Engels, Lenin is undoubtedly the most important figure for the revolutionary movement. As a practitioner of the revolution no one of his contemporaries can be placed next to him. But precisely for this reason, if we are interested in the development of Marxist thought, that is, the theoretical reflection of this revolutionary practice, we must not repeat his mistakes in relation to the ideas of the classics, which can only be defended from destruction by moving the thought contained in them forward, that is, by finding logical contradictions in it and substantively removing the latter.

Note that when we speak of the contradictions to be sought and found in the classics, we are referring not only and not even so much to trivial and inevitable errors, for *errare humanum est*, as to those substantive contradictions in their theory, which are revealed by the course of history, the historical experience from whose height we re-read the classics.⁶

5. To be fair, Lenin himself modestly assessed his work on imperialism, not as a landmark contribution to Marxist political economy, but as merely a “popular essay,” as publicism.

6. For an analysis of some contradictions, contained in the most fundamental sections of Marx’s first volume of *Capital*, and above all in his definition of the nature of the value of labour, see Georgi Surmava’s research on his website: <https://georgesurmava.wordpress.com>

Ilyenkov And the Sixtiers Era

The period between Lenin's death and the appearance of Evald Ilyenkov on the intellectual scene is a period that paradoxically combined in the USSR, a record number and circulation of publications and translations of Marxist classics into the languages of the world with the almost destruction of authentic scientific Marxist thought. And this happened not only in the Stalinist and post-Stalinist "homeland of socialism," but also in the rest of the world, including Western countries with their rich tradition of leftist academic philosophizing. Not being able, or not daring, to provide a scientific, that is, first and foremost a political-economic analysis of the nature of the counter-revolutionary upheaval that took place after Lenin's death, "leftist" theorists concentrated their efforts on what they thought was a simpler and more urgent task—the purely ideological critique of "consciousness." This is how the substitution of Marx's scientific political economy with idealistic psychology⁷, which includes not only the psychology of Freud and his many epigones from among leftist ideologists, but also the currently fashionable "cultural-historical psychology" of Lev Vygotsky, was born and continues to prevail among leftist ideologists. Quasi Marxist psychology is still the favourite subject of left-wing theorists' quasi-theoretical speculation to this day, while scientific political economy (that is, strictly speaking, Marxism as such) has ceased to be of interest to anyone.

This is even though Marx's major work, *Das Kapital*, remains an incomplete work, containing many serious substantive contradictions, and therefore in urgent need of development.

The death of Stalin and the Thaw that followed briefly raised the hope that Marxism could regain the dignity of science. In the USSR, this hope was linked above all to the young philosopher and World War II veteran Evald Ilyenkov, around whom philosophers and cultural figures—later known as the Sixtiers—had clustered since the first half of the Fifties. The latter were united by the dream of reviving an authentic, revolutionary Marxism, destroyed not so much by Stalinist ideology as by Stalinist counter-revolutionary practice. But unfortunately, what also united the 1960s was their collective inability to dare to recognise the socio-political system that had emerged in the USSR as NOT socialism.

7. To see this, one need only compare how many researchers, in how many universities or in how many independent research centres funded by left-wing parties, are engaged in political economy research, developing and continuing Marx's theory, with how many of the public have devoted their lives to ideological eloquence, practising arguments about the nature of the so-called "psyche" with all its "complexes," "cultural signs" and "alienation."

Early Ilyenkov

Ilyenkov's first fundamental work, *The Dialectics of the Abstract and the Concrete in Marx's Capital*, which immediately made its author an international celebrity, was a bold attempt to implement Lenin's theoretical proposal—to abstract from Marx's major work—his dialectical logic. And with its appearance this book deservedly attracted the attention of all those interested in the development of Marxist thought. Firstly, because it was not a commentary on another opus by a Kremlin “genius of all times and peoples” like “Marxism and the Theory of Linguistics” or “Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR,” but in fact the first serious appeal in the Soviet years to Marx's own major theoretical work. Secondly, it was not a rehashing of the infamous “three laws of dialectics,” but an independent and profound exploration of several philosophical categories, whose meaning had been distorted beyond recognition by the official Soviet ideology. The author's free style, free of ideological rituals and unconventional in its appeal to the heart of the matter, was particularly striking.

Meanwhile, for all its undoubted merits, this book was the brainchild of the wholly compromised Thaw, and thus was unable to break entirely with the ideological interpretation of Marxism. This was already inherent in the very formulation of the problem of research, which was focused not on a substantive analysis of social relations, which was the focus of Marx's *Capital*, but on a purely academic analysis of the latter as a theoretical text. Following Lenin, Ilyenkov views Marx's major work as a kind of theoretical ideal, which, by definition, cannot contain any unmediated contradictions, so that he sees his task as a theorist not in seeking and removing these contradictions, and *thus not in developing* a theoretical understanding of the nature of capitalism, but merely in polemic with the wrong interpreters of Marx's theory.

The Dialectics of the Abstract and the Concrete in Marx's Capital contains a rather sharp critique of going back to Locke flatly empirical views of bourgeois economists (both Western and quite “Soviet”). But this was quite insufficient for the revival of Marxism as a science. To fully overcome the ideological denigration of Marxism, *it was necessary to critique Marxism itself*, not merely its positivist or postmodernist interpreters. The rejection of a petty and vulgar idea can only produce a very modest result. At best, the repetition and popularisation of ideas once already formulated by classics in the history of science. To obtain a significant result, one should undertake the task of a substantially more difficult one—the task of discovering and overcoming the contradictions in a significant theory.

It should be added that the *The Dialectics of the Abstract and the Concrete in Marx's Capital* is based on a traditional, nonactivist, and therefore by and large not Marxist logic, but on the “old materialist” notions that sensory perceptions and their verbal formulation supposedly precede the object-oriented activity as such, indeed are a necessary precondition for it. Ilyenkov writes:

The ability to express *one's sensual impressions* (hereafter italics are mine, A.S.) in speech, in words, in utterances, in a set of utterances—is, as is easy to understand, *an ability more elementary and earlier arising than the ability to think*; than the ability to reflect reality in concepts. The former is a necessary premise and condition of occurrence of the latter. But the second cannot be reduced to the first. Otherwise, indeed, the greatest talkers would automatically be the greatest thinkers. (Ilyenkov [1960] 1982)

The ability to perceive the external world sensually and to summarize these perceptions in words, according to this formulation of Ilyenkov, is not thinking in the exact theoretical sense of the word. To the latter, following Hegel, Ilyenkov includes only the so-called ‘thinking in concepts,’ which, according to his numerous explanations, is a dialectically contradictory and tense, system of theoretical positions. It is not difficult to notice that formally such definition of thinking cannot be applied not only to activity or “psyche” of animals, but also to consciousness of people engaged exclusively in physical labour and far from any theoretical reflection.

We note, however, that even in this discourse Ilyenkov characteristically distances himself from the positivist identification of thinking with speech, from semiotics. Thinking, he insists, can in no way be reduced to *passive sensations* (even if they were possible in principle, we might add) and to their arbitrary labelling with verbal signs. The thinking, he insists, can by no means be reduced to passive sensations, even if they were possible in principle, we might add, and to their arbitrary denotation by verbal signs. But so far, he interprets perception itself, the very ability to feel something *as a condition of possibility to think*, i.e., interprets it *sensualistically*. Note that this logic is not something special, which is peculiar only to Ilyenkov. Except for Spinoza, it is the logic of all pre-Marxist philosophy. Even the great idealist Hegel begins his *Phenomenology of Spirit* not with anything, but with “sensual authenticity” and “perception.” We find a similar thought in Lenin, who in *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* retells Holbach, formulating: “matter is that which, acting upon our sense-organs, produces sensation; matter is the objective reality given to us in sensation, and so forth” (Lenin [1908] 2000). Knowing Ilyenkov’s later Spinozist

texts, it is not difficult to discern in this Leninist definition a bizarre mixture of Cartesian “reflex” and Lockean “perception.” However, Ilyenkov himself mentions Spinoza in this work only in passing, as the antithesis of Locke, as a theorist firmly grounded in the view of substance, and finally as a convinced materialist “with the strongest aspiration for dialectics.”

Ilyenkov’s definition of Spinoza as a theorist with only “dialectical aspirations,” however strong they may be, is an obvious tribute to Soviet ideology, which ranked the great Dutch philosopher as an “old materialist,” that is, materialists who are not dialectical. It is our conviction Spinoza, as the thinker who proposed a materialistic understanding of the identity of thinking and being, i.e., who removed the most fundamental dialectical contradiction in the history of thought, deserves as a dialectician a much more unambiguous and high praise.

However, what is more important for us is Ilyenkov’s assessment of Spinoza as a materialist, for it is trendy today among “Spinoza specialists” to dispute this obvious fact. Materialism, they say, is too crude and primitive and too associated with Soviet ideology to admit that Spinoza was a materialist.

Ilyenkov—from Ideology to Spinozism

Going back to Spinoza and marking a decisive step towards a scientific understanding of human nature, the materialist definition of thinking as “the mode of action of the thinking body” was first formulated by Ilyenkov in his 1964 article “The question of the identity of thinking and being in pre-Marxist philosophy.”

“To understand thinking, one must understand the way of being of the thinking body, not the structure of this body in its inactive state. This is the whole point of Spinoza’s position,” Ilyenkov states. And he adds—“What does it mean to understand the way of being of the thinking body? It means to discover the way it interacts with other bodies, both thinking and non-thinking” (Ilyenkov [1964] 1997).

In those simple words is the greatest, essentially revolutionary upheaval in philosophy, the first meaningful, non-ideological treatment of the fundamental philosophical problem, the contours of a consistently materialistic solution to which were only outlined by Marx in his *Theses on Feuerbach*. And characteristically, this strikingly fresh and profound idea that thinking is not a function of the immaterial soul or the abstract brain, but the way a living subject acts in the form of the object, did not initially evoke any

substantive response among fellow philosophers. The only exception, however, which was also ignored by the scientific community, was the thesis “Principles of the Theory of Reflexive Activity,” defended in May 1988 by the one of authors of the present text, which was based on this idea of Ilyenkov-Spinoza. It took almost a quarter of a century for this idea to become the focus of a heated discussion in the new millennium, which divided Ilyenkov’s students into two rigidly opposing camps.

Without touching on the substantive details of the latter, we shall only say that one of its most active participants was the recently departed Lev Konstantinovich Naumenko. Elena Mareeva, who wrote about this, referred to the sides of the discussion as the “right” and “left” of the Ilyenkovites. There is probably a certain historical and philosophical sense in this designation, but we would prefer to refer to these parties more simply, “Lenin’s-style,” without subtle historical and philosophical allusions, as the party “forward” and the party “backward.” The first party, which apart from Leo Naumenko included the author of this article, tries to find a road to the development of Marxist thought, that is, to find and try to eliminate the theoretical contradictions in Marxist theory itself, relying on Ilyenkov’s sharp dialectical definition of thinking. The second insists that Ilyenkov was wrong in his main theoretical conclusion, that the concept of a “thinking body” is nothing more than a vulgar materialistic oxymoron, that Ilyenkov misunderstood and perverted Spinoza’s thought, and that “in fact” any material body is only able to stretch and move mechanically in space, while “thinking” is an ability unique to the immaterial “soul.” Such an appraisal in fact destroys the historical significance of Ilyenkov’s work and turns him into one of the many unimportant commentators on Marx?

We are ready to agree with Mareeva that, regardless of how literally this Ilyenkov’s position coincides with Spinoza’s Latin texts, we should “[. . .] proceed from the fact that it is certainly present in Ilyenkov’s *Dialectical Logic*” (Mareeva 2010). But along the way we should note that personally we are absolutely convinced that Ilyenkov’s interpretation of Spinoza’s *Ethics* is authentic to Spinoza’s main thought, its consistently materialistic tendency. Moreover, we are convinced that such a strictly materialist understanding of thought constitutes the essence not only of Spinoza’s materialist philosophy, but also of Marx’s philosophy, and thus an attempt to challenge this position is equivalent to an admission of total rejection not only of Spinozism, but also of Marxism.

Let us emphasize that this very materialistic definition of thinking was for Ilyenkov not a casual blooper, but the main theoretical conclusion of

his entire philosophy, his main contribution to the world treasury of thought. To be convinced of this is not difficult, if one reads all the texts written by him after 1964, in which he not just once or twice mentions Spinoza's activist understanding of thinking, but develops and deepens it, again and again coming back to it in his published texts and unpublished manuscripts.

Contradiction and Point of Growth in Marxism

Meanwhile, having recognized Ilyenkov's outstanding merit in the discovery of the modern materialistic understanding of thought, it is obviously necessary to take the next step—to realize this principle in actual research and to advance in this way further than he himself had succeeded. And this is all the more necessary because an analysis of Ilyenkov's texts leads to the conclusion that they contain serious contradictions, sublate which, while remaining faithful to Spinozist, that is, in materialist logic, he obviously failed to do.

And perhaps the most important of these contradictions for Ilyenkov was the contradiction between the consistently materialistic Spinozist understanding of "thinking as the action of the thinking body," that is, the understanding of thinking as an object-oriented practice and the strictly Kantian interpretation of "practice" as a euphemism for "moral arbitrariness," as something that is rooted not in the active relation of the live subject to the object world, but is only an abstractly social, "moral" relation. For Kant, as for an idealist, the world of Nature is a world alien to freedom, a world of abstract mechanical determination. On the contrary, freedom in his understanding is an attribute of an exclusively non-natural, incorporeal soul, for a corporeal, natural 'soul' would not, in his opinion, be free from the laws of nature. The named contradiction is a formulation of the problem, which all major philosophers of the New Age thought intensely about. And although it found a fundamental resolution in the theory of Marx and Engels as early as the middle of the nineteenth century, world academic philosophy, including ideological quasi-Marxism, failed to notice this historical event in theoretical culture.

What to speak of pathetic docent philosophy, if their own discovery was overlooked by the classics of Marxism themselves, who were obviously unaware of how close their philosophy was to the philosophy of Spinoza⁸. Although materialism for Marx was not something incidental, but the core of his teaching, Marx formulated his materialist understanding of thought as a practice only once, in his *Theses on Feuerbach*, in an explicit way, never to return to this topic again. To this we should add only that the essence of scientific materialism consists not in the energetic assurance of our belief in the objective existence of the proverbial “thing in itself,” but *in a materialistic understanding of the nature of thinking as such*.

On One Theoretical Mistake by Marx

The Theses on Feuerbach is undoubtedly a theoretical masterpiece, the quintessence of Marx’s philosophical worldview in a page and a half, his outstanding contribution to world philosophy. Moreover, by and large, *Theses on Feuerbach* is the conclusion of philosophy as such, for in this brief outline the only possible scientific solution to the problem of the identity of thinking and being, which is the central nerve of philosophy as such, its, as Engels put it, “basic question.” That is why, incidentally, when Marx wrote these *Theses*, he put aside his philosophical studies and engaged exclusively in political economy. The question of a theoretical understanding of the nature of thinking was exhaustively clear to him and he therefore preferred not to waste time on writing philosophical treatises on the subject and realised this understanding of thinking in actual research.

But paradoxically, already in the very first lines of *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx makes a serious theoretical error in the first thesis.

“The chief defect of *all hitherto existing materialism* (italics are mine—A.S.)—that of Feuerbach included,” Marx claims, “is that [. . .] sensuousness, is conceived, only in the form... *of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively” (Marx [1845] 2005). And the mistake lies in the fact that Marx quite wrongly equated sensualism, which really does not know the concept of object-oriented activity, the concept of practice, with “all previous materialism,” with materialism in general.

The reproach for the falsity of the very idea of passive contemplation is entirely true regarding the sensualism of Locke and his many epigones,

8. Judging by the well-known remark quoted by Plekhanov that “Marxism is a kind of Spinozism,” Engels may have guessed this at the end of his life. But neither he nor Marx ever made any definite statement on the subject.

starting with the French Enlighteners and ending with all varieties of the present positivists, but it is entirely unfair regarding the philosophy of the great materialists, Anaxagoras, and Spinoza.

To this should be added that, unlike the French Enlighteners who relied on Locke, many of whom sincerely wanted to be materialists⁹, Locke's own philosophy, with its flat sensationalism and aggressive unwillingness to admit the mere existence of matter or substance, is an open and uncompromising idealism.

Only the excessive apologetic deference to every letter of Marx by numerous "Marxologists" and "Marxists" prevents them from seeing this obvious fact and from ceasing to find any imaginary materialist features in Locke, the moralising hypocrite and slave trader, and furthermore to claim that "socialism" can follow from his philosophy in some, even the most indirect way.¹⁰ To persist in this today is to unreasonably repeat Marx's obviously erroneous assessment to the detriment of his own activist, revolutionary logic, is to replace science once again with ideology.

Contrary to Locke and all other sensualists, Anaxagoras directly and unambiguously connects thinking (psyche) of all living beings, including plants, with their ability to perform object-oriented actions, and he connects human rationality not with the device of his brain or "soul," but with the skilfulness of his hands. About Spinoza and the fact that he understands thinking as the action of a thinking body, we have already spoken, and we will not repeat it now.

So, it turns out that if we accept Marx's reasoning about the "old materialists," then we would have to expel the two greatest materialists Anaxagoras, and Spinoza from materialism.¹¹

It seems to us much more productive to assume that Marx simply did not know these two authors well enough¹², and therefore he came to a

9. It should be noted that sensualism is fundamentally incompatible with materialism. And therefore the materialistic tendency, which did take place in the social philosophy of the French Enlightenment, strictly speaking contradicted its own sensationalist epistemology borrowed from Locke

10. We are referring to the point made by Marx and Engels in "The Holy Family": "[. . .] there are two schools of French materialism: one which has its origin in Descartes, the other in Locke. The latter branch of materialism constitutes a predominantly French educational element and leads directly to socialism." (Marx [1844] 1956, 6.d.)

11. Which is, in fact, what the 'Spinoza experts' do, declaring the idea of a thinking body to be an oxymoron. See A. Maidansky <http://caute.tk/am/text/rescogit.html>

12. Modern scholars of Marx's work—see Bill Bowring, Birkbeck College, University of London, "What if Ilyenkov had known Marx's transcription of Spinoza?"—cite convincing

materialistic understanding of thinking as practice independently, rediscovering and developing what his two great materialist predecessors had already once discovered. Let us add only that such a situation is quite typical for an evolving science. A distinctly Spinozist position was developed in his research by Nikolai Bernstein, who considered it senseless to follow in the footsteps of Ivan Pavlov with his laboratory modelling of senile sensationist ideas, and engaged in the study of practical, including instrumental object-oriented activity in humans and animals. At the same time, like Marx, Bernstein was apparently not familiar with Spinoza's *Ethics*, but apparently arrived at Spinozism by moving along the logic, by the form of the subject matter of his research—the object-oriented activity of living beings.

Let us repeat that in *Theses on Feuerbach* Marx himself expounds nothing less than a materialist, i.e., precisely a Spinozist understanding of the nature of thinking as a practical activity. And to be convinced of this, one need only reread the famous eleven theses without introducing into this reading the Kantian prejudice that interprets practice as an abstractly social phenomenon.

We are clearly aware that by asserting this we are taking up the generally accepted view that Marx and Engels were singers of abstract “sociality,” who believed that the nature of human thinking should be inferred not from the specifically human (instrumental) relation of a human being to Nature, not from the action of a human hand armed with a tool “in the form of an object,” but to see it in the “totality of social relations” arising at the abstract arbitrariness of the Almighty or of the individuals themselves.

Marxist or Pseudo-Marxist Proviso?

The question about the Marxist, or, more simply, scientific, materialistic understanding of thinking and its coincidence or noncoincidence with Spinoza's understanding of thinking is so important that it should be discussed in more detail. And since it appeared in Ilyenkov's *Dialectical Logic*, we shall first reproduce this very “reservation,” which is quite laconic.

evidence that Marx was well acquainted with Spinoza's political treatises and correspondence. But nowhere in his texts is there any substantive reference to his major philosophical work, the *Ethics*. Of course, Marx's critical reference to Spinoza's so-called “geometrical method” cannot be counted as such.

Having discerned from Spinoza and set out, at the very end of his dedicated to Spinoza second essay of *Dialectical Logic*, the only possible consistently materialistic understanding of thinking as a mode of action of the thinking body, Ilyenkov with a light movement of his pen crosses out his discovery, stating that such a definition is fundamentally insufficient, that for Marx “only nature of necessity thinks, nature that has achieved the stage of man socially producing his own life.”

What prompted Ilyenkov to pronounce these words, we can only speculate today. The fear that otherwise numerous ill-wishers would surely report “to the right place” that an ordinary, unclassified researcher of the Institute of Philosophy was taking such audacious theoretical liberties by challenging the canonical formulas of Diamat. The fear that he would not be forgiven for such an over-appreciation of the ideologically dubious Spinoza, about whom neither Marx nor Lenin ever said a single kind word.

However, to write off the “proviso” as merely a forced reverence for ideology would be excessive and inadequate simplification of one’s task. There were ideological motives too, of course, for Ilyenkov, like any Soviet theorist, unless he was prepared to retrain as a stoker or night watchman, i.e., to become an open dissident, had to reckon to some extent with the official ideological framework. But Ilyenkov would not have deserved not only serious analysis but even a mere mention if his work had been reduced to such ideological fictions.

The point is that Ilyenkov is not simply repeating traditional ideological banality, but to a large extent sharing a view deeply rooted in classical New European and above all German philosophy, a view particularly clearly articulated by Kant with his dualistic opposition of the natural world as a world of mechanical causality and the world of “morality,” the world of “culture” as a world in which abstract magic, abstract arbitrariness is possible.

Kant vs. Spinoza

Kant’s ([1788] 2018) popular aphorism of liberal publicists: “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and the more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above and the moral law within” indicates more than clearly that despite frequent and persistent reflections, Kant never came close to a rational understanding of the nature of the two wonders he had mentioned. How can a blind Nature, subject to Newtonian mechanical laws, produce such a beautiful and

harmonious world and how can a human being as a natural being, that is, according to this primitive logic, subordinated to mechanical laws, be capable of having a conscience? These are the two questions to which Kant has no answer and which he declares to be something which can only be admired, but which cannot be understood in principle, and therefore nothing else remains but to declare them to be an abstract irrational *Miracle*.

In other words, the outcome of Kantian reflection is a hopeless dualism and agnosticism which can only be overcome in the imagination. Specifically Kantian dualism is as deafening dead end of thought as Descartes' dualism.

Again, as with Descartes, the only alternative to Kantian dualism is Spinoza's materialistic monism. It is not by chance that Spinoza contrasts Kant's moral enthusiasm for the imaginary magical powers of man to act contrary to natural necessity, or, in Kant's language, natural "impulses," with a sober materialist understanding of the fact that neither man nor anyone else has the power to overcome material necessity by abstract arbitrariness. The only way to find freedom is to understand this necessity and thus to act not as a blind puppy, but as a seeing active subject who understands both his object and himself. And so one must not bemoan the imperfections of the world, not resent them impotently, not revel in their postmodern absurdity, but ... understand the world in its necessity and through this gain genuine, not imaginary, freedom.

Hence the opposite of Kant's moralising maxim of the materialist Spinoza ([1665] 2017): «*Non ridere, non lugere, neque detestari, sed intelligere.*»¹³

There is no doubt that Ilyenkov saw well the difficulties facing the theorist who was trying to rationally untie the tight knot of Kant's antinomy of freedom and necessity. Hence, for example, his genuine interest in the problems associated with zoo psychology. In fact, the question whether animals thought or were mechanical Cartesian automata, albeit very complex, was also a concern to Spinoza. And Spinoza, though censored by the popes, but at the same time quite definitely (*sapienti sat*) declares his belief that animals are intelligent beings.

"[. . .] animals [. . .] are said not to have reason (to consider them soulless after we have learned the origin of the soul is in no way possible)" says Spinoza ([1665] 2017). The idea of the rationality of animals was close to the mature Ilyenkov, who not once or twice discussed with the participants

13. "I have laboured carefully, not to mock, lament, or execrate, but to understand human passions" (editorial note).

of his seminar (1974–1979) the ability of crows to act as tools, which, however one chooses, cannot be deduced from the inborn mechanical ‘reflexes’ of crows, but is obviously conditioned by the fact that crows *understand* the objective problem facing them and here and now find a radically new (for the crows themselves), rational solution.

Do Animals Think?

In connection with the above, it should be noted that the question of the presence or absence of thinking (psyche) in animals is not an abstractly academic question. It is inextricably linked to an understanding of the nature not so much of animals as of human beings, and hence to the question of their freedom. Therefore, all any serious philosophers have touched on it in one way or another, discussing above all the nature of human rationality.

And, while in earlier times reasoning about the nature of animals was more or less speculative, in the twentieth century zoologists and psychologists began to systematically, including experimentally, investigate this issue. Gestalt psychology has made a significant contribution to the solution of this problem. Köhler’s experiments made it clear that chimpanzees are capable of instrumental activity, which cannot be explained without the assumption that the animal is able to comprehend the object situation and not simply act mechanically through random combinations of stimuli and reactions. In this case, however, it turned out that without a clear philosophical-theoretical understanding of the nature of thinking as such, the results of all experimental research of thinking are worth little.

So, if a researcher started from the abstract-idealistic understanding of thinking as a purely spiritual process, as a process unrelated to the “extended” material world, or “related” to it by a purely spiritual arbitrariness of a “thinker” who has a magical ability to give names (signs) to his “sensation complexes” caused by some external stimuli, such researcher faced a very simple and joyless in its simplicity alternative. Either staying on the knowingly dead-end subjective-idealistic, essentially solipsistic position, to declare the scientific cognition of thinking (psyche) something fundamentally impossible, because no one is allowed to make introspection in the “head” of another individual, so all theoretical conclusions obtained from the only personal introspection available to a researcher are doomed to remain *just something subjective* in the flattest sense of the word.

Alternatively, such a theorist, in an attempt to avoid the dead end of solipsism, but who fails to see the role of object-oriented activity, that is, who tries to abstract from practice, from genuine subjectivity, that is, from object-orientedness, is forced to declare thinking a purely mechanical process, and to identify it with these or those material processes that take place inside the brain of the supposedly ‘thinking’ individual. The misfortune of these theorists is not that they turn to the corporeal to understand thinking, but that they take as their thinking body not a living, coherent object-acting body with its paws, wings, beaks, and human hands, but a stump of this body—an abstract “brain.”

Whichever of these alternatives one chooses the human being in this framework turns out to be a purely unfree being entirely determined either by the mysterious magic of his incorporeal ‘soul’ or by the equally mysterious magic of the mechanical device of his brain. Accordingly, the theorists who remain within the framework of this alternative differ only in their interpretation of human unfreedom. The former, i.e., the overt idealists, “explain” human freedom by an irrational property of the “soul” called “free will,” i.e., they sign off on their inability to rationally explain the very possibility of freedom. Whereas the latter, reductionists, i.e., actual idealists, deduce human unfreedom from the malevolent materiality of his body, which hopelessly subordinates the human individual to an external mechanical, stimulus-reactive determinism.

The most popular among “leftist” theorists, who claim to profess not a “primitive” and “crude” materialism but a refined, “Hegelian Marxism” (read: the most banal idealism), is the notion that overcoming the dualism of body and soul is possible only through communion of the living, physical subject to some abstract spirituality, whose secret is that this spirituality has a purely social nature. Accordingly, the lack of thinking capability within this logic is associated with abstract asociality, with imaginary “zoological individualism.” According to this point of view, animals, not to mention plants and other living beings, are thoughtless and unfree automata, programmed either by Nature or by the Creator to react to external stimuli based on their own selfish individual interests. In contrast, thinking and freedom allegedly arise only when these inherently zoological individualists are enlightened from above—aware of their unfreedom, together with the power bestowed by a higher power to arbitrarily give things binding names (Hegelian—*Namensgebung kraft*), a power which they naively take for thinking as such.

The Magic of the ‘Social Contract’

A typical example of this logic is the theory of the so-called “social contract” popular in New Age philosophy—the magical ability to turn an un-free individual subject to “natural” egoism, a zoological individualist, into a concentration of social, civic virtues.

In a naively frank form, this notion was the central idea of a book published in 1962 by the Soviet theorist Yuri Semenov, *The Emergence of Human Society*. “Every animal,” Semenov argued, “seeks to satisfy its own and only its own instincts. No other needs but its own exist for the animal. By its very nature, by its very essence, an animal is an ‘individualist.’ Zoological individualism reigns supreme in relations between animals” (Semenov 2022).

It is easy to see that this reasoning is a typical *ideological judgement, that is, a judgement with a substituted object*. Without even realizing it, Semenov is describing something else, which has nothing to do with animals: a system of strictly economic relations in a commodity-capitalist society. It is the latter that is characterised by the very “zoological individualism” that the author attributes to animals.

Meanwhile, the development of science, including the development of zoology and biology in the twentieth century, has clearly demonstrated the complete falsity of the idea of animals as ‘zoological individualists.’

Emerging at the dawn of the New Age, this ideological fiction, which speaks of the imaginary asociality of animals, remained popular in the twentieth century, especially among theorists who naively saw themselves as Marxists. Even today, Marx’s formula emphasising the social nature of man, claiming that man’s essence is “the totality of social relations,” is recited with an enthusiastic gasp as a magical formula which supposedly contains almost the main secret of Marxist wisdom, his main epochal discovery.

In stating this, we are infinitely far from attempting to challenge the social nature of human consciousness (psyche). Of course, human activity, and thus human consciousness, is profoundly social. But no less social are all other living beings. We do not deny the sociality of the human being, but merely that it is not abstract sociality which makes man a thinking and free being, but his object-oriented activity, his labour, which is necessarily instrumental, given that human instruments, unlike those of animals, are in general not made by the individual himself, but by others within the framework of the division of labour.

In other words, we argue that Marx's discovery in understanding human nature lies not in the discovery of the hitherto unknown 'social' nature of the latter, for all living things are no less social than a human being, but in a correct, materialistic understanding of the nature of *human* sociality itself.

It is not their identity, but their difference, their complementarity, that binds the individual individuals into a single social whole, be it a single multicellular organism or a community of living organisms. But this means that, before humans, all living individuals could only be linked to one another by the difference in their organic bodies. On the contrary, human sociality is based on the difference in human cultural bodies, that is, on the historically given distribution of human instruments. Failure to understand this obvious fact leads positivists to confuse human sociality with the sociality of the rat community, attributing abstractly biological laws and mechanisms to human society.

From the point of view of the latter, among whom we must mention Ivan Pavlov and Lev Vygotsky, the transition from biologically unfree existence to human freedom takes place not in the development of instrumental object-oriented activity, human labour, but in the hypothetical act of the invention by prehistoric, uncultured and unsocial individuals of some magic verbal or 'cultural' signs, the response to which should replace the reaction to natural stimuli and thereby transform the zoological individualist into a social subject, into a subject of freedom and morality. Needless to say, the above is nothing else than Pavlov's theory of speech as a "second signalling system" and Vygotsky's theory of the emergence and development of "higher mental functions." In other words, we insist that both Pavlov and Vygotsky only repeated in the twenties and thirties of the twentieth century the "social contract" theory, which has become thoroughly mouldy by this time.

The popular interpretation of Marx's statement about the essence of a human being as an ensemble of social relations overlooks the obvious fact that Marx's materialistic philosophy is just a direct and resolute negation of the idea of "social contract" and a refutation of the latter as the emptiest idealistic (=ideological) fiction. As a materialist, Marx in principle links the very possibility of human freedom not to a magical awakening of morality in zoological individualists, but to such a development of social-human material production, and, hence, of the initially social individuals themselves, at which *the entire totality of social production becomes the object of their practical activity, and hence, of their thinking*. The latter definition, we note

in italics, is, we believe, the only possible scientific definition of communism.

Under the existing historical division of labour, most individuals, creating all the material wealth of society by their labour, are active for the most part only in relation to the material world. On the contrary, the minority, which disposes of the social means of production of people's lives, and thus of people themselves, is engaged exclusively in "social" activity. But this, in the materialistic language of Spinoza and Marx, means that the former think exclusively of the material world, not of the whole world, not of all nature, but of its small fragment opposed to them as an object of their activity, accidentally taken from the natural whole, while the object of activity/thought of the latter is society as such.

These latter, who proudly call themselves "elites," are, in good old Marxist language, nothing more than the ruling, exploiting classes. Of course, the "elites" are also no strangers to activity, sometimes quite intense activity, but they cannot call it labour, because this "labour" of the latter has a completely different object than that of most people. The notorious elites are engaged only in disposing of other people, organizing their joint labour activity. The primary subject of activity, i.e., the subject of thinking of the elites is the very social relations between people, their sociality as such.

As a result, it turns out that in a society in which the means of social production, i.e., in fact the total inorganic body of humanity, belong to a special class of individuals, those individuals who reproduce by their labour the common and their own life, find themselves cut off from the organisation of their own life, not active in relation to their own society, from the social links that unite them in the process of labour with other similar workers. But this means that workers find themselves really excluded from the process of social reflection, social cognition, that they do not think about their own sociality.

But this, in the logic of Spinoza and Marx, means that these individuals, when it is a question not of their material labour but of their social relations, turn out not to be subjects of the latter, but passive screws in the machine of social production which functions with their hands but is not under their control in the least. Without being objectively active in relation to their own society, individuals find themselves totally unfree in the latter.

On the surface of the phenomenon, it looks as if these (working) individuals are by their very nature asocial individuals, zoological individualists who know nothing but their own bodily instincts and drives. And this

illusion is not something arbitrary, but a fairly accurate reflection of the actual state of things. Hence, i.e., the fact that, as a rule, the working majority is not active in relation to the society in which it lives, except for brief episodes of violent upheaval—riots and/or strikes—leads to the fact that its general form of consciousness is not scientific (“Marxist”) consciousness, but rather an abstractly ideological consciousness. The latter is all the easier to impose on the working masses by the ruling “elites” because workers have only private and partial experience in the social sphere and therefore do not conceive of society as a whole, whereas the latter in its entirety is the commonplace object of the manipulative activities of the elites and their intellectual lackeys.

Hence the purely bourgeois illusion that the social individual, the thinking human being, is supposedly only a representative of the ruling class, while workers are mere unthinking cattle, “sheeple,” the passive object of cynical manipulation. From this, too, arises the general interest in “cultural-historical” and all other “psychologies.” For, in involvement in the secret “psychological” knowledge of the human being, one sees a way to get attached to the “elite,” to earn the role of its highly paid academic and political advisers and acolytes.

Typical samples of such belief were observed in the early 90s of the last century, when Russian psychologists with naïve frankness argued at the Department of Psychology of Moscow State University that with their knowledge of secrets and mechanisms of human psyche they could be extremely useful to the new Russian Rulers, but... the latters do not understand it yet.

However, this misunderstanding did not last long. Very soon, the profession of the so-called “political technologist”—that is, professional fraudster and manipulator who provides paid services to the powers that be during elections and who can give his criminal abilities a kind of pseudo-academic veil—became the most sought-after profession by the authorities for its political needs, and yesterday’s specialists in supposedly Marxist “cultural-historical psychology” like the famous “methodologist” Peter Shchedrovitsky became notable political figures.

Conclusion

“Even animals have a history,” Engels wrote in *The Dialectic of Nature*,

Precisely a history of their origin and gradual development to their present state, but this history is made apart from them, for them, and since they themselves take part in it, it takes place without <conscious ultimate purpose> of their knowledge and desire. Men, on the other hand, the more they are removed from animals in the narrow sense, the more they begin to make their own history consciously, the less the influence of unforeseen factors, of uncontrollable forces, becomes on this history, and the more the result of historical action corresponds to the goal established in advance. (Engels [1873–1882] 2006)

Engels' reflections on the role of animals and the role of man in the history of their own historical formation and development are extremely interesting and highly relevant today. Although much in these reflections requires radical reconsideration from the perspective of a truly modern science, i.e., from the perspective of Anaxagoras, Spinoza, Marx, and Engels himself, multiplied by the results of research by the activity physiologist N.A. Bernstein and A.I. Mescheryakov, as well as many other researchers who reflected in the twentieth century on human nature and consciousness, Engels captured the main thing in his reflections correctly.

Indeed, human life is a bizarre mixture of practical, wholly rational, object-oriented activity with totally irrational purely ideological prejudices, so that the algebraic sum of the former and the latter constantly leads a man not at all to the place he himself would like to go. Why it is so and how to get out of this vicious circle—this is the question that can only be answered by a serious scientific theory based on classical philosophical thought, which explains both the origin and nature of rational consciousness and the nature of ideological consciousness. This means that we will inevitably have to return time and again to the above authors, and to the work of E.V. Ilyenkov, who immortalized his name by demonstrating the power of Spinoza's genuine scientific, materialistic thinking in an age of ideological imitation, in a positivist banality and flat irrationalism, and thus opened the perspective of a critical and scientific rethinking of Marxism itself, the perspective of returning Marxism to its scientific status.

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Biography

Alexander Surmava is an independent researcher. From 1967 to 1988 he studied physics, political economy and psychology at Lomonosov Moscow State University. In 1971 he became acquainted with Ilyenkov’s philosophy and with him personally. In 1975 he participated in the organization of a philosophical seminar on dialectical logic under the leadership of Ilyenkov, which lasted until 1979, i.e., until the death of its leader. In 1988 he wrote the theoretical work “Principles of the Theory of Reflexive Activity,” in which he formulated a theoretical understanding of the essence of life, which represented a further development of the ideas of Spinoza, Marx, and Ilyenkov. He is currently working with Alexander Simakin on a study of the theoretical contradictions in Marx’s and Ilyenkov’s philosophy and the possibility of their sublation in terms of Spinoza’s activistic materialism (*deiatel’nostnogo materializma*). Being formally, according to his university degree, a “psychologist,” he is convinced that psychology as a science is fundamentally impossible, since the so-called “psyche” or “soul” is not something substantial (not *causa sui*) and, regardless of the good intentions of the authors, is a totally idealistic discipline, fundamentally hostile to Marxism. In Marxist theory he is an advocate of a return to the Marxian antithesis of science and ideology. He is convinced that the community of theorists who stand on consistently democratic, left-wing positions today faces

the urgent task of reviving Marxism as a science, which is possible only through an uncompromising self-criticism of Marxist theory.