



Ilyenkov in Practice

Corinna Lotz and Kyrill Potapov

Writing to Alexander Suvorov, a student at the Zagorsk school for deaf blind children, Evald Ilyenkov puzzled over why human beings have “acquired such a troublesome ability as consciousness.”

While the present issue of *Marxism & Sciences*, “Ilyenkov in Practice,” takes the work of this Soviet philosopher into new places, both geographical and academic, it is Ilyenkov’s approach to questions of first philosophy—the nature of thought, ideal phenomena, dialectics and what it means to be human—that has stimulated these new lines of research.

Our collection follows the wider aims of Marxism & Sciences to demonstrate Ilyenkov’s relevance to contemporary science and culture. The contributions here span fields from pedagogy to anthropology, psychology and cognitive science. In addition, new translations mean that Ilyenkov’s voice is becoming accessible to wider global audiences. We note that this is the third journal issue in English devoted to Ilyenkov’s centenary, following the Marxism and Sciences edition of April this year, as well a special issue of [Studies in East European Thought](#). This wealth of new material speaks to an Ilyenkov Renaissance one hundred years after the thinker’s birth. One of our Russian contributors has noted that Ilyenkov is now being recognised as a “classic” by academic authorities. For a philosopher who spent his adult life in a deeply troubled relationship with the Soviet authorities of the time, such retrospective recognition is bittersweet, to say the least.

Natalia Listratenko’s review of *Ilyenkov’s Image in Memories* provides a flavour of how Ilyenkov was seen by his contemporaries, and by those for “whom Ilyenkov was, and remains, an important part of their lives,

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a source of creative energy, friend, colleague and teacher.” Her description is tantalising, referencing many individuals, including his wife Olga Salimova and nephew Nikolay Rozanov. “Reflected through people closest to Ilyenkov, the real space of Ilyenkov’s existence is revealed: fragments of everyday life, working days, participation in public affairs and points of contact with the key events of his time. We catch hold of Ilyenkov’s portrait which now acquires tangible contours,” she writes.

Isabel Jacobs, Martin Küpper, Trevor Wilson and Sascha Freyberg provide an illuminating overview of *Through the looking glass: Images of the Ideal*, a symposium devoted to Ilyenkov held in Berlin in May 2024. The Berlin event, which was the second and largest international conference devoted to Ilyenkov within two years, included a screening of Emanuel Almborg’s film *Talking Hands* with newly unearthed additional footage of Ilyenkov’s close friend and collaborator, Alexander Meshcheryakov, as well as Sasha Suvorov. The film poetically charts Ilyenkov’s involvement with the Zagorsk school for deaf and blind children.

The nature of the universal was a theme that preoccupied Ilyenkov from his earliest writings and it provides a unifying background for several articles. Martin Persch and Felipe Felizardo tackle widely diverse subjects, but they both draw on Ilyenkov’s understanding of culture “itself as a structuring structure.” Based on his field research into the peoples of the Amazon basin, Persch critiques French structuralist Philippe Descola’s approach to animist cultures, which he says, “downgrades anthropological analysis to a mere aesthetic,” ignoring the concrete logic of the various cosmologies.

Critiquing conservative and dogmatic views of universality, Felizardo advances the potential of Ilyenkov’s concept of the universal for pedagogy. He unfolds his concept of radical universalism as a vital approach to pedagogy: not as a closed system but as opening itself up for transformation at both ends. He sees “generality as the mediation between the particular and the universal.” He also points to the limits of traditional pedagogical frameworks in motivating a dialectical logic, the precise character of which is, perhaps necessarily, still to be undetermined.

In discussion with Kyrill Potapov, Ezequiel Di Paolo, a pioneer in the study of embodied cognition and complex systems, discusses the connections between enactivism, Marxist thought, and contemporary cognitive science, arguing for a dialectical approach that takes historicity and concrete experience seriously. He highlights the relevance of Ilyenkov’s

work on the ideal and dialectics, suggesting that this could provide a theoretical framework drawing together threads of contemporary research.

The question of deduction and induction has long concerned social scientists considering epistemological approaches to data collection. Giannis Ninos explores the issue of deduction, drawing on Ilyenkov's analysis in *The Dialectics of the Abstract and the Concrete in Marx's Capital*. He views this as fundamental to dialectical epistemology, given that a proper understanding of speculative deduction is key to grasping the specificity of the dialectical method in contrast to other stages and methods of cognition. Arguing that, within dialectics, deduction differs from its conventional form, due to its intrinsic connection to genuine historicism, Ninos contends that dialectical deduction plays a crucial role in enhancing the functions of knowledge.

In a pioneering study, Olga Ivashchuk compares British-American psychologist Gregory Bateson's (1904-1980) "double-bind" theory with Hegel's logical form of contradiction. Using insights from anthropology and psychology, Bateson shared with Hegel a "culture of movement in contradiction" as a way of discovering causes and solutions. Ivashchuk compares this with "the Ilyenkov-Meshcheryakov strategy" which sees "the logic of contradiction as a fundamental characteristic of reality itself and therefore a logical condition of truth in cognition and adequacy in behaviour." She notes that a methodology that treats double-bind only negatively limits its analysis to the mechanisms of social production of evil, while a methodology of contradiction resolution demonstrates the ability to address questions about the social production of creative individuality or high cultural patterns.

Undergraduate students Huang Hongjie and Zhai Yifei first encountered Ilyenkov's writings only two years ago. In a revealing interview, they describe Ilyenkov's reception in China, and the spread of his ideas, in part due to their own, ongoing, translation work. They feel that their contemporaries are drawn to critical and humanistic thinkers, given that they "face multiple life challenges in this era of change, which make them consider their very own existence and the future of their homeland." In translating Ilyenkov's work they hope to challenge the widespread image that "all Soviet intellectuals were servile" which they feel "is extremely harmful to their views on communism and its history."

Iurii Maksymets' translation of *The Machine and the Human*, Cybernetics and Philosophy shows Ilyenkov and his comrades at the height of their polemical powers, with tell-tale signs of our philosopher's own,

signature rapier-like irony. This essay was first presented at a 1966 Moscow conference at a time when the new science of cybernetics was at first denounced by the Stalinist bureaucracy, only to then be over-enthusiastically adopted as a key focus for Soviet science. Ilyenkov and colleagues insist that “the ability to think is not inherited by a human with a brain, that this ability is not ‘encoded’ in the human generically, biologically.” The authors’ guns are directed against the capitalist “machine” and even more tellingly, the technocrats in the Soviet Union, who “think, that communism can be built along the way of mathematical electronic improvement of the current system of relations... perpetuating the current state of affairs... transferring the current governance functions of the state machine not to a democratically organised human collective, but to other machines.” The essay showcases Ilyenkov and colleagues’ multifaceted engagement with the lively debates on cybernetics and its relation to human psychology, culture, and ideology.

Finally, we are proud to present the first-ever writings by Ilyenkov to appear in a Scandinavian language. Norwegian scholar Sigurd Lydersen has translated two historically crucial writings into his mother tongue: the notorious 1954 theses which so scandalised Ilyenkov and Valentin Korovikov’s academic superiors, and Ilyenkov’s agonised letter to the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party, “On the Situation for Philosophy,” written around 1967. As a sidenote and as another first, readers will be pleased to learn that Ilyenkov’s *Dialectics of the Abstract and Concrete in Marx’s Capital* has just been translated into Finnish by Jaakko Virkkunen and Juha Pihlaja.

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