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2020-01

Maidansky , A & Oittinen , V 2020 , ' Evald Ilyenkov and Soviet Philosophy ' , Monthly Review , vol. 71 , no. 8 , pp. 15-20 . <
<https://monthlyreview.org/2020/01/01/evald-ilyenkov-and-soviet-philosophy/> >

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/310069>

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Evald Ilyenkov and Soviet Philosophy

by [Andrey Maidansky](#) and [Vesa Oittinen](#)
(Jan 01, 2020)

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Evald Ilyenkov's philosophy revisited by Vesa Oittinen.

Andrey Maidansky is a professor of philosophy at the University of Belgorod, Russia. He has published, in Russian, many books and articles on Baruch Spinoza, Marxism, and history of Soviet philosophy. One of his main interests is the well-known and controversial Soviet philosopher Evald Ilyenkov (1924–79), who left behind a vast archive of unpublished materials that will be published in a ten-volume collection edited by Maidansky.

*Vesa Oittinen is a professor at the Aleksanteri Institute, University of Helsinki, Finland. He and Maidansky are longtime collaborators. They edited a book together on the activity approach in Soviet philosophy of the 1960s and '70s, *The Practical Essence of Man: The "Activity Approach" in Late Soviet Philosophy* (Haymarket Books, 2017).*

Vesa Oittinen: The Soviet philosopher Evald Ilyenkov died in 1979. Since then, his fame has steadily grown, slowly at first, but he has received increasing international attention in the last few years. How would you explain this phenomenon? After all, Soviet philosophy in general has the reputation of being rather dull.

Andrey Maidansky: Indeed, Ilyenkov's popularity has been growing, especially over the last ten to fifteen years, while the rest of Soviet Marxism (with the exception of Lev Vygotsky's cultural-historical psychology) has practically turned into a museum piece. Almost every year we see new translations of Ilyenkov's works, especially into English and Spanish. Recently, in Western Europe, the International Friends of Ilyenkov group was formed (their second symposium was held in Copenhagen the summer of 2018).

I believe that two main factors contribute to the growing attraction of Ilyenkov's works.

First is a new wave of interest in Karl Marx and creative Marxism around the world, against a background of rapid social transformation, expectations of another economic crisis, and so on. And Ilyenkov managed to take the best from Marx—that is, Marx's method of thinking and his critical spirit. In Ilyenkov's work, there is minimal ideological veiling and scholasticism, which turns many intelligent people away from Marxism. Secondly, there remained many texts in Ilyenkov's archive that he could not publish during his lifetime, and they were sometimes even more interesting than his published works. Here, I would mention his impressive *Cosmology of the Spirit* (which was recently translated into German and English for the first time); his writings on psychology and pedagogy; his study of the phenomenon of alienation of man in modern society (his critique of

machine-like socialism is especially interesting); and his quest for historical ways of shedding alienation. The flow of publications of Ilyenkov's manuscripts has continued unabated, rousing public curiosity. More than half of his handwritten heritage remained on his desk. He had not managed to print even his cherished *Dialectics of the Ideal*.

VO: You mentioned the Cultural-Historical School of Soviet psychology (Aleksey Leontiev, Lev Vygotsky). Indeed, it seems that Ilyenkov was in many respects close to this school. The common ground between them was the theory of activity, or *activity approach* as it was called.

AM: Yes, Ilyenkov considered himself a champion of this powerful school in psychology. He wrote about "the superiority of Vygotsky's school over any other scheme of explaining the psyche," explicitly associating himself with this school. Ilyenkov worked along the lines of Leontiev and Petr Galperin's activity theory. This is one of the branches of Vygotsky's school, which presents the psyche as a form of search and orienting activity in the outside world. In the case of human beings, this activity is performed in the world of cultural objects, artifacts, created by human labor.

Ilyenkov was especially interested in the process of interiorization—the mechanics of *enrooting* (Vygotsky's term) cultural functions within the individual (initially a nonhuman animal) psyche. At that moment, a human personality, or an own *self*, arises. This subtle process is seen especially clearly, as in a slow-motion film, in the Zagorsk experiment with deaf-blind children. Ilyenkov devoted more than ten years of his life to this experiment. After his tragic death (he committed suicide in 1979), his deaf-blind student Sasha Suvorov wrote a poem-dialogue, "The Focus of Pain," about her teacher and another student, Natasha Korneeva, named her daughter Evaldina.

VO: Despite these affinities to the Soviet cultural-historical psychology, Ilyenkov was not a psychologist, but a philosopher. I believe we might say that it was he who started the activity approach in Soviet philosophy, an approach that previously was applied only in psychology?

AM: Ilyenkov was primarily a philosopher, of course, and in the field of psychology he dealt mainly with the problems of general methodological order: how the psyche is formed and what its primary "germ cell" is, what personality is, and so on.

As for the activity approach, it was formally declared in textbooks of Marxist philosophy, with relevant quotes from Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* about objective-practical activity and the need not only to interpret the world but to change it. The term *activity approach* is not used in textbooks, but Ilyenkov did not use it either (*activity* as an adjective, *deyatel'nostnyj*, does not occur in his works at all). Nonetheless, it was Ilyenkov who first turned his attention to the challenge of explaining the genesis and structure of human thought on the basis of objective activity—labor.

In the most general terms, the case appeared to him as follows. Human labor, as it were, turns natural phenomena inside out, revealing in practice the pure (ideal) forms of things. And only afterward, these forms, melted in the "retort of civilization," imprint themselves on the human mind as "ideas." The practical changing of the world serves as the basis and source of both artistic perception and logical thought, as well as of all specifically human abilities.

This principle was adopted by Ilyenkov's talented students—Yury Davydov, Lev Naumenko, Genrikh Batishchev, and some others. Unfortunately, their main works were not translated into foreign languages. An English reader can get an idea of them perhaps, but only from the book we edited a couple of years ago.

VO: Ilyenkov thus was not only a professional philosopher, but also wanted his ideas concerning the role of activity in education to be applied widely in Soviet society. Here, we can see a union of theory and practice.

AM: It is true, Ilyenkov never was an armchair philosopher. During the Second World War, he served as an artilleryman, in peacetime he designed radio devices (including a huge tape recorder with excellent sound quality), and even installed a lathe in his study. He also worked a lot on economics and pedagogical psychology.

Ilyenkov was tormented by the question: Why did the state not wither away in the socialist countries, contrary to Marx's prediction? Why does society not evolve into a self-governing commune? On the contrary, the power of the state over the human personality grew tremendously. Ilyenkov concluded that in order to build a society with a so-called human face, human personality itself had to be transformed. Hence his keen interest in the Zagorsk experiment with deaf-blind children, in which the principles of nurturing a new kind of personality could be honed and tested in practice. Cultural-historical psychology and developing pedagogy should teach us how to form a harmonious personality, one that could shed the yoke of megamachines of alienation—the state and the market.

Someone might call it a pedagogical utopia. Maybe. But, as Oscar Wilde said, “a map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing.”

VO: Seen from today's perspective, Ilyenkov's most original contribution to Marxist philosophy was perhaps the concept of the ideal, a concept that has since then been much debated.

AM: The 1962 publication of Ilyenkov's article “The Ideal” in the *Philosophical Encyclopedia* caused a huge upsurge of controversy in the Soviet philosophical community. The ideological iron curtain prevented discussion of it reaching beyond the Soviet Union. Ilyenkov's most important work on that subject was fully translated into English only quite recently and published in *Dialectics of the Ideal*, with comments clarifying the polemical context around the notion of the ideal.

The fate of this late manuscript was not simple. The director of the Institute of Philosophy, a former Communist Party official Boris Ukraintsev, did not allow *Dialectics of the Ideal* to be printed for several years. The manuscript was published only posthumously, after being abridged and under a modified title. So, *Dialectics of the Ideal* brought Roland Barthes's hyperbole into practice: the reader's birth had to be paid for by the death of the author.

This 1979 publication heaped fuel on the controversy around the concept of the ideal. Mikhail Lifshits, a coryphaeus of Soviet aesthetics, joined in the dispute. Ilyenkov treated Lifshits with great respect. (By the way, Lifshits was also a close friend of Georg Lukács.) Lifshits spoke out against the *activity* understanding of the ideal. According to him, the concept of the ideal sets a standard of perfection for anything and is applicable to all and everything in nature.

For his part, Ilyenkov saw in the ideal “a kind of stamp impressed on the substance of nature by social human life-activity.” Everything that falls within the circle of this life activity receives the “stamp” of ideality, becoming (while the activity persists) a dwelling place and a tool of the ideal. The cerebral cortex becomes an instrument of thought, silver and gold become money, and fire appears to be the deity of the hearth. Even the stars in the sky turn into zodiac signs, into a compass

and a calendar. Ilyenkov calls the ideal a “relationship of representation” of things (of their inner essences and laws of existence, to be more precise) within the compass of human activity, within the process of producing social life.

Ilyenkov was deeply interested in the problem of ideal social order. In his book *On Idols and Ideals* (1968), he attempted to draw the vector of the communist movement in the modern world. He understood communism as the process of transferring the functions of managing social life into the hands of individual people, or, in other words, as the process of replacing the market and state machines with a “self-governing organization.” The young Marx called it the “removal of alienation” and the “reappropriation of man” (*der menschlichen Wiedergewinnung*).

To Ilyenkov’s chagrin, that very “cybernetic nightmare,” the idol of the Machine that so terrified him, appeared in the Soviet Union under the guise of the communist ideal. It was a *machine-like socialism* that was built in the country, instead of a society “with a human face.” I believe this undermined his will to live. George Orwell’s *1984* (which was banned in the Soviet Union) became his favorite book. Ilyenkov read it in German and even translated it into Russian for personal use.

VO: Ilyenkov had the reputation of being a Hegelian Marxist. It seems to me, however, that he was not the same kind of Hegelian as, for example, the Abram Deborin school of the 1920s in early Soviet philosophy. Maybe we could compare him with Lukács?

AM: As a philosopher, Ilyenkov grew up with Hegel’s books. He was deeply impressed by Hegel’s pamphlet *Who Thinks Abstractly?* He translated and commented on it twice in twenty years. At the same time, he reproached Hegel for thinking too abstractly—namely, for turning dialectic formulas into “*a priori* outlines” and for a “haughty and slighting attitude towards the world of empirically given facts, events, phenomena.” The leading lights of dialectical materialism (Ilyenkov mentions the names of Georgi Plekhanov, Joseph Stalin, and Mao Zedong) inherited this original sin of idealism from Hegel.

Ilyenkov made a similar rebuke against Plekhanov’s followers led by Deborin. These people created school courses of *diamat* and *histmat* (short for *dialectical and historical materialism*), which nauseated Ilyenkov. In Western literature, it is often claimed that Ilyenkov continued Deborin’s line in Marxist philosophy. Such opinion seems incorrect to me, although I do not deny the affinity between the two in their understanding of the subject of philosophy and certain categories of dialectics, as well as the fact that they have common sympathies for Hegel and Spinoza.

Lukács is quite another matter. Ilyenkov valued his book *Young Hegel and the Problems of Capitalist Society* very highly; he translated and commented on it jointly with his students. In Ilyenkov’s archive, his review of Lukács’s *Ontology of Social Being*, from the early 1970s, is preserved. It is written with great respect for Lukács, who died in 1971, despite the fact that Ilyenkov was an implacable opponent of the ontologization of dialectics. In his eyes, Lukács is a representative of the best, most vibrant Marxist tradition, in contrast to the stillborn scholasticism of *diamat*.

VO: You are at present editing the *Collected Works* of Ilyenkov. Could you tell me a bit more about this publication project? It would also be interesting to know whether the unpublished material from the Ilyenkov archive will affect the hitherto established image of his philosophy.

AM: In February 2019, the first of ten volumes of Ilyenkov's *Collected Works* appeared in Russian. We have prepared three more volumes for printing. Academic Vladislav Lektorsky, Ilyenkov's daughter Elena Illesh, and I worked on them.

Publication of the remaining materials from the Ilyenkov's archive may add certain new features to his portrait, but it is unlikely to affect his current image significantly. The main part of his archive has already been published. Among the still unpublished works, I would single out the manuscript of his final book, which criticizes the technocratic project of building socialism, which Ilyenkov believed was being carried out in the Soviet Union. Since he was not allowed to criticize actual machine socialism directly, Ilyenkov argued with its ideologues, such as Alexander Bogdanov (V. I. Lenin's closest ally, up to a certain period, and his opponent in philosophy) and the contemporary Polish Marxist Adam Schaff.

However, Soviet censorship tightly blocked everything that was written by Ilyenkov on this topic. Only a year after his death was his last book published—and even so, in a heavily censored form and under a title chosen by some censor: *Leninist Dialectics and the Metaphysics of Positivism*.

VO: Yet a final and inevitable question: Do you see any lacunae or problematic points in Ilyenkov's philosophy?

AM: Great thinkers, like Ilyenkov, make intelligent mistakes. Their mistakes provide valuable material for reflection and indicate the growth points of a theory. That is, they are *objective* mistakes, conditioned by the spirit of the times and by contradictions in the very object of research, and not by a subjective weakness of the mind.

There are problems over which Ilyenkov cudged his brain long and hard, but could not cope with—such as, for example, the already mentioned withering away of the state. And the most serious lacuna can be found in that area. Ilyenkov frequently and wittily criticized the idea of designing a “Machine smarter than man,” that is, a supercomputer capable of planning economic development and managing social life better than living people. However, he never raised the obvious (for Marxists) question: How can a programmable electronic machine help us in “removing alienation” and the “reappropriation of man”? If “the hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill society with the industrial capitalist” (Marx), then what society does a computer-based mill give us?

To me, personally, the mental arguments with Ilyenkov are especially interesting and useful. The concept of “thinking body,” which Ilyenkov attributed to Spinoza, seems to me inadequate and confused (I had to wage a fierce debate with Ilyenkov's students about that concept). Or, quite recently, in the pages of *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, I defended Vygotsky's view of affect as a “germ cell” of psyche against Ilyenkov's position, which considered sense image as such a “cell.” But even in such cases, I am accustomed to viewing things through lenses of logical categories polished by Ilyenkov. I have yet to encounter better theoretical optics.