Contradictions within the Ideal, mediation and transformation in global capitalist society

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Abstract

The publication of the full version of E.V. Ilyenkov’s *Dialectics of the Ideal* for the first time in English is a milestone in the re-discovery of creative Soviet materialist dialectics. His focus on the essential and contradictory nature of the Ideal – its origins in transformational social human activity and its objective independent existence – is a powerful tool for understanding the nature of today’s economic, ecological and political crises. We connect the dialectics of the Ideal with Lenin’s conspectus of Hegel’s *Science of Logic* to outline a process and practice of cognition, ascending from the concrete to the abstract and from there to practice. The paper explores the active nature of the Ideal as a concrete universal in three key aspects of today’s crisis: our place in nature, the value-form of globalised capital and the state and democracy. We show how the conflict between the Ideal and the real generates movements that require systemic change in order to succeed. Finally, we touch on the need for new forms of revolutionary organisation in the light of contemporary conditions.
What is it about the Ideal?

The tortuous history behind the publication of The Dialectics of the Ideal tells its own story. It has taken 40 years for the English translation of Ilyenkov’s original text to reach us (five years after the Russian). His Concept of the Ideal first appeared in English in 1977. Exciting as this was for all those with an interest in challenging forms of Soviet philosophy, most readers had no way of knowing that it was a truncated and substantially re-written version of the philosopher’s original.

The reasons for the painful tug-of-war over Ilyenkov’s contribution lay both within and without the world of academic philosophy. Indeed, the change from the original name of the essay – just like that of Ilyenkov’s first book, The Dialectics of the Abstract and Concrete in Marx’s Capital (rather than “in Thought”) – was significant. The alterations and outright censorship of a philosopher who had received the Chernyshevsky Prize back in 1965 indicated just what it was about Ilyenkov that so enraged those who dominated Soviet philosophy in the 1970s.

Ilyenkov wrote this extended essay in 1974, during the Brezhnev period of stagnation which suffocated every aspect of Soviet society. In the realm of philosophy, it was de rigueur at the time to write about historical and dialectical materialism in general terms. But to conceptualise how the material and social world and human activity including political activity are objectified in the form of representation was anathema. This is what made The Dialectics of the Ideal a philosophical time-bomb. As we know, accusations of Hegelianism and “gnoseology” abounded.

Ilyenkov and his comrade-in-philosophical-arms Valentin Korovikov disowned the division into “Histomat and Diamat” in favour of materialistic dialectics and a materialistic understanding of history, an attitude that was “tantamount to suicide”, as Sergei Mareyev has recorded.1 Investigating the Ideal and uncovering its contradictions was provocative under conditions when the prevailing dogma proclaimed ad nauseam that the “Ideal” of socialism had actually been achieved in the Soviet Union. It was a paradigm which Ilyenkov challenged as we now know.

By insisting that the content of the Ideal was the Real, and that philosophical investigation had an objective content and existence, in itself and for the Other of itself, Ilyenkov was certain to incur the wrath of the philosophical establishment. Investigating how thought (or “gnoseology”
as it was derisively termed by Ilyenkov’s tormentors) rises to a central category in dialectical logic was a profound challenge to established orthodoxy.


Because the Dialectics of the Ideal was about investigating the contradictions within all forms of the Ideal, i.e. social consciousness, state structures, philosophical constructs, etc., Ilyenkov’s approach was perceived as a threat by official party ideologists to the bureaucratic state power whose interests they defended and served. The hostility within the Soviet hierarchy to this aspect of Ilyenkov’s work had, and continues to have, its counterpart in Western schools of Marxism where a determinist form of historical materialism is often uncontentious and even semi-mainstream. The creative form of materialist dialectics was and still is debased into Diamat, or simply ignored. Ilyenkov’s insistence on reflexive truth-content – “knowability” – remains controversial in an era in which mass image creation and corresponding ideologies dominate discourse.

Ilyenkov’s investigation of the Ideal as a category was in struggle against positivists, East and West, who reduced knowledge – and by implication – the Ideal to a complex of physiological sensations derived from experience and/or to individual consciousness. “The problem of the ideal has always been an aspect of the problem of the objectivity (‘truth value’ [istinnost]) of knowledge”. Too often it “is understood as a simple (almost unnecessary) synonym for other phenomena … most commonly, the phenomena of consciousness – consciousness in itself”.

He aligned himself with the essential thrust of Lenin’s approach to theory and epistemology, not simply as a protective cover, but to cast off the leaden weight of ossified “Marxism-Leninism”. In that sense, Ilyenkov’s was a personal contribution to a potential renewal of Soviet society, a kind of early perestroika if you like.
The Ideal arises as a category from the need to distinguish between the fleeting states of an individual on the one side, and the “universal, necessary and because of this, objective, forms of knowledge and cognition, independent of one’s existing reality” on the other. It is, he goes on to say, “a thought-out theoretical designation of a well-known category of phenomena”.

Here we have the special contribution of German classical philosophy in formulating the problem that Plato had already grasped: “The objectivity of universal knowledge, the objectivity of universal (theoretical) definitions of reality … their absolute independence from humans and from humanity…”. German classical philosophy “correctly identified them as universal norms of that culture within which an individual awakens to conscious life, as well as requirements that he/she must internalise as a necessary law of his/her own life activity”, Ilyenkov notes. In other words, the Ideal constitutes a peculiar category of phenomena, which are absolutely independent of an individual. They are universal, commonly-held image-patterns, as opposed to the awareness of an individual “soul”.3

Moreover, the relationship between the Ideal and the phenomenon itself is law-governed. As Ilyenkov insists in Dialectical Logic, Marx, Engels and Lenin’s materialist re-thinking of Hegel’s dialectics was “linked with the affirmation of the objective reality of the universal [Ilyenkov’s emphasis], not at all in the spirit of Plato or Hegel, but rather … in the sense of the law of their being joined together in the composition of some whole, in the context of a self-developing totality or aggregate…”.[emphasis added]4

Or, as he writes in Dialectics of the Ideal: “Put differently, it is the problem of the truth-value of universal knowledge, understood as the laws of knowledge…, remaining invariant in all diverse changes in ‘mental states’, and not only ‘individual’, but also entire intellectual formations, epochs and peoples”.5 Here Ilyenkov, taking issue with idealist, physiological explanations of “Ideal” formations, introduces his notion of representation. One material object comes to represent the universal nature of another object, whilst still remaining itself. Expressed another way, it retains its form but becomes filled with another content. It is both itself and the Other of itself. And this Other, from the standpoint of materialism, must be another material object, process, event or state.

In the relationship between these two objects, the “material object, while remaining itself, performs the role of a representative of another object, or more precisely the universal nature of this other object, the universal forms and laws of this other object, while remaining invariant in all its variations”, Ilyenkov notes.
The Ideal is precisely: “This sphere of phenomena – a collectively-built world of intellectual
culture, an internally organised and disjointed world of historically established and socially
established (‘institutionalised’) universal representations by people about the ‘real’ world…”

Ilyenkov reinforces the objective nature of the Ideal, existing independently of consciousness
and the ground on which it is formed. The Ideal is “the world of representations and not the
actual (material) world”.

This “representation” is itself the result of a law-governed negation process in human social
consciousness, from the individual to the universal. This is the self-relation of the universal and
the individual, and through the individual back to the original source of sensation in the
external world. It is the way in which the law-governed movement of the real is negated into
thought in the development of dialectical concepts of the universal. In turn, this thought,
through the negation of the negation, is embodied in corporeal objects and processes
(representations).

As materialists, we must and can explain the arising, the nature and content of complex
“products” and creations of mental-physical activity, such as theatrical performances, works of
visual art, architecture and urbanism as well as scientific, political and philosophical theories
and concepts. David Bakhurst summarises this very well: “Ilyenkov argues that the ability of
our minds to make contact with reality is enabled by the appropriation of social forms of
thought embodied in culture. A human child is not simply born into a physical environment.
She enters a world of meanings, norms, rules, traditions, practices, reasons, values, and so on –
the ideal realm of thought, which is embodied not just in forms of social consciousness but in
the very form that the humanised world takes on through our active engagement with it.”

While the Ideal and the material are “fundamentally opposite categories of phenomena” and
their boundaries must not be blurred, the mutual transformation of the Ideal into the real and
vice versa is what human beings do every day as part of their material, social life-activity.
Human beings through labour make not only a material but also ideal products. That “Ideal”
then “becomes a critical component of the material life-activity of social man, and then begins
the opposite process – the process of the materialisation … of the Ideal”.

Even though it remains “an internal pattern of the activity of consciousness, as a pattern
‘immanent in consciousness’, Ideality can have only an illusory, phantasmal existence,”
Ilyenkov notes. But it does become real in two quite opposite processes or movements: “In the
course of its reification, objectification (and de-objectification), alienation and dis-alienation”.
Ilyenkov’s concept of the Ideal offers a powerful way of grasping the transformative possibilities within social constructs. The potential for developing revolutionary consciousness and practices arise out of the contradictions within the thing itself. The Ideal provides an abstract dimension of knowledge which is deeper than the sum of the parts that give rise to it as a category. For example, the value form which Ilyenkov repeatedly cites, exists independently of the parts that comprise capitalist production, exchange and distribution but nonetheless is their universal form. This Ideal is in reciprocal cause and effect relation with the material world of which it is a representation. In this way, the Ideal brings us into a closer approximation in thought to the movement of the real, both as a whole and through the interaction and relationship of its parts.

The path of cognition – immediacy and mediation

Given the objective nature of the Ideal, both in its origins in human activity and its independent existence, it has both “immediacy as well as mediacy”. It is formed from abstractions of human activity but also exists in moments of the external world, under the aspect of time. Thus the path to understanding the category of the Ideal is through the process and practice of cognition. It is in the study, the mediation, of parts – given to us through the interactions of human activity and things unfolding in the present – that we build up dialectical, theorised concepts of the Ideal. Deconstructing and reconstructing the movement of cognition from living perception to abstract thought and from thence to practice enables us to recognise and grasp the changing forms of the Ideal in the contemporary world.

Identity of thought and being

This holistic, Spinozan view of the substantial relationship between the concrete and the abstract is based on the concept of the identity of thought and being which Ilyenkov defended. He stood for, as Andrey Maidansky says eloquently: “the materialistic principle of the identity of ‘thought and being’. The relation of thought to reality was always nothing else than an ideally expressed relation of reality to itself … of concrete historical reality – ‘social being’.”

Cognition is “socially constructed” in the sense that we cognise the world as active social human beings operating in a social and historical reality which is handed down to us. But it is nonetheless cognition of something objective and external, independent of us, both as
individuals and social human beings. This is equally true of humanly-created objects or processes as well as those existing in deepest space-time.

Nature, society and thought reflect into us as sensations in moments of *living perception*. Sensation is the *direct connection* with the world outside our thought. The movement of cognition is from an “outer” thing, things or processes – the living perception of a thing, or “part”, reflected into us through the thought images of our sensations. The “thing” has its own objective self-movement due to its internal contradictions.

The advance of knowledge is the result of the movement from the non-existence of something, to its arising or coming into being, its birth, its initial entry into the world. It is the self-movement (becoming) of a thing or process from (or to use Hegel’s expression) “Not-being towards Being”. The cognition of the moment of *becoming* “must be determined by the nature of the subject and the content itself”. This self-movement of the thing itself, is the “content that stirs” in cognition. In other words, the world beyond thought contains self-movement which embraces the power to reflect itself into an Other.

The unclear, sketchy or “indeterminate” beginning is crucial. Its indistinct, hypothetical and provisional nature needs no apology, as Hegel says, and Lenin strongly approves, saying: “It is impermissible to depreciate this indeterminate beginning.”

The “identity” of the source of sensation (Nature, or the “First Term” – the thing or part) into “difference” in thought is the first negation as well as the “Second Term”. The thought image is not the same as the thing imaged. But this identity is not a simple or formal identity.

It is, as Lenin says, contradictory, as it contains the Other of itself – the moment of the external impulse. In other words, it contains a Difference within itself. It is an abstraction in thought of the contradictory movement of the source of sensation. Because of its contradictory nature, the indeterminate beginning, as a finite chance quality, as the “effect of a cause”, moves in a second negation back to the identity of the original source of negation. This is to a new, further moment outside of itself.

**Semblance**

The movement back into thought gives rise to the moment of “semblance”, which while necessarily preliminary and fleeting, is nonetheless an objective and determinate moment of
Semblance is defined by Lenin as (1) nothing, non-existent which exists and (2) Being as moment – or “the negative nature of essence”.

Through its self-movement to a new moment of the external object, semblance containing essence gives rise to a synthesis, Hegel’s “Third Term”, which is the union of the logical and the historical, the moment of becoming and the movement of time. Further negations back to and from the external world establish new parts. Each of these has a separate existence, connected with but also in opposition to other parts.

The cognition of “parts” or “phenomena” is of forms operating in and of themselves through their own internal contradictory self-movement. We study the relationship of each of these parts in connection and in opposition to each other. Through yet further negations, from the inner, intro-reflected thought back to the external world and from the outer, external world into thought, the contradictory nature of essence is established as a sum and unity of opposites and a relation between essences. This is informed by what Lenin describes as “the endless process of the discovery of new sides, relations, etc.”

The movement of cognition is “the endless process of the deepening of human knowledge of the thing, of phenomena, processes, etc, from appearance to essence, and from less profound to more profound essence”. This constitutes a spiral of development of knowledge. The emphasis is on the study of contradiction in the very essence of objects, and not only in appearances.

Lenin writes that, to reflect living life, “human concepts are not fixed but are eternally in movement, they pass into one another, they flow into one another … The analysis of concepts, the study of them, the ‘art of operating with them’ (Engels) always demands study of the movement of concepts, of their interconnection, of their mutual transition”.

Until now, the movement of cognition has been from the concrete to the abstract, from the individual to the particular. But from this point onwards cognition ascends from inner abstract (intro-reflected) moments back to the concrete, the outer. Through the unity of semblance and existence, and the negation of further causes from the external world there is a transition to “appearance” – the moving form of the phenomenon.

Through the union of analysis and synthesis, Lenin writes, in his recasting of Hegel’s “Determinations of Reflection – Identity, Variety and Opposition”, the “blunt difference of variety, the mere manifold of imagination” is sharpened into essential difference, into opposition. Only when raised to the peak of contradiction, do the manifold entities become
active (regsam) and lively in relation to one another, – they acquire that negativity which is the

*inherent pulsation of self-movement and vitality*.  

It is when we understand Lenin’s twelfth element, “from coexistence to causality” together
with the “sharpening into essential difference”, that the *law-governed relationship* of the parts
to each other and to the whole begins to appear. In the deepening of knowledge of phenomena,
cause and effect are revealed as “moments of reciprocal dependence of (universal) connection”
as substance and causality begin to assert themselves. Eventually, through the moments of
actuality, possibility and necessity, we arrive at the abstract notion and the end of subjective
cognition of the negated part of the external world. From this there is a leap to the theoretical
idea, the notion. We are now under the aspect of practice in the external world as we move
from the practical idea to practice.

If the Ideal is the negation (sublation) of the real into abstracted objects and processes, then its
constituent parts include the practical activities along with their origins in the labour and
purposive activities of the human beings that carried them out. As a result of the existence of
its own contradictions, plus the movement of time (“under the aspect of eternity”), the
connections between the universal and the individual are all negated into Ideal forms. These
contain the aspirations that motivated the original actions of millions of people, in both realised
and unrealised forms. The Ideal is thus already an active and disruptive force, which is infinite
and in constant movement and change. The Ideal which arises from the process and practice of
cognition thus embraces negated parts and wholes of this objective world, whilst being
simultaneously abstract and concrete.

**Developing dialectical concepts out of the Ideal**

Forms of the Ideal are humanly constructed things, processes, physical and intellectual
phenomena such as language, the globalisation process, the state, the value form of capital,
ideas about our place in nature, works of art, literature, architecture, political and philosophical
thought. Ilyenkov noted that “ideality” only exists through its “reification” – that is by being
turned into the forms and relations of things. He emphasises that it becomes real only through
reification, alienation and objectification but also and crucially the *converse* – de-
objectification and dis-alienation. Ideality embraces the dialectics of people’s developing self-
consciousness and “the actual phases and metamorphoses in whose succession alone the
‘ideality’ of the world exists”.

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Thus the Ideal is an objectification of human activity in universal, social thought and is not passive but a dialectical process and practice. Ilyenkov’s form of materialist dialectics takes from “intelligent idealism”\textsuperscript{26} the notion of the Ideal as an active, mobile force that calls forth activity. This activity can take many forms – from desire for the admiration or love of another human being, for a good life, for the rule of law, for a political cause, a national or ethnic identity, or in our case for the revolutionary transformation of society.

Willem de Vries,\textsuperscript{27} notes that for Hegel, “A concrete universal is different from the abstract universal, which previous thinkers in the classical tradition took to be the object of thought”. De Vries quotes Hegel: “The universal of the notion [concept] is not a mere sum of features common to several things, confronted by a particular which enjoys an existence of its own. It is, on the contrary, self-particularising or self-specifying, and with undimmed clearness finds itself at home in its antithesis.”\textsuperscript{28}

The concrete universal is “alive, dynamic and dialectical: it is essentially a part of a self-developing system”, and its foremost characteristic is that it is active. De Vries then expands on the notion of concrete universals as self-constituting activity, saying that Hegel “ultimately transcends representationalism” with his provocative dialectical thought that every concrete universal and all concepts possess “a self-constituting activity”.

This is the same thought expressed by Ilyenkov, when he says that for Hegel “the ‘ideal’, understood as the corporeally embodied form of the activity of social man, really exists – as activity in the form of the thing, or conversely, as the thing in the form of activity, as a ‘moment’ of this activity, as its fleeting metamorphoses.”\textsuperscript{29}

The Ideal contains both past activities and human and social aspirations. In other words the lack or absence (as Roy Bhaskar would call it) of realisation of a purpose is also a “presence”, a negative and potentially restless one. This makes the Ideal into a mobile, active force that calls forth activity with the aim of transforming the Real into the Ideal. The negation of new wholes out of the contradictions between the parts to “reconstruct an objectively true image of the surrounding (external) world, the means and ability to reconstruct this world in accordance with the object’s tendencies and lawful nature of its development”.\textsuperscript{30} This provides a constructive approach towards contemporary forms of the Ideal and its contradictions.
Our place in nature

Nature is understood as both outside and inside of us. Nature is primary, and exists independently of us, it performs through us and we perform through nature. Humans are negated out of nature and in turn transform it. Nature is thus both self and Other. This constitutes the Ideal of our place in nature. As Ilyenkov describes the relation: "Yes, only nature as a whole, understood as an infinite whole in space and time, generating its own partial forms from itself, possesses at any moment of time, though not at any point of space, all the wealth of its attributes, i.e. those properties that are reproduced in its makeup of necessity and not by a chance, miraculous coincidence that might just as well not have happened."31

As humans organised in society we have a particular relation not only with the parts but with nature as a whole. We are able to grasp this dialectical relationship as a whole in the Ideal of our place in nature. It is this fact that allows us to imagine acting to transform our relations with it as a whole, by transforming our interactions with other parts.

The universal Ideal of nature is being overthrown, as the parts are being overthrown in reality. The Holocene, an age of relative quiescence during which it was possible for life to proliferate once again, is being brought to a brutal end and we have entered into the Anthropocene. This is the age where human activity and society have become the dominant force in nature transforming every part. Human actions under the dominance of capitalist property relations have produced a qualitative leap in nature in itself (as self) outside of us in the form and essence of climate change, species loss, the physical destruction of land forms and oceans. The Ideal of our place in nature, as consciousness and a theoretical abstraction, has been conditioned and changed as a result.

The growing contradictions within the Ideal of our place in nature are:

1. we are natural beings living in an alienated, commodified, reified relation to nature
2. the impact of this on the other parts of nature has been boundless
3. as a result the Ideal of our relationship with nature, the universal whole, is being overthrown in the Ideal as it is in material reality
4. living and producing in our habitats using existing methods of production is increasingly difficult and unsustainable
5. corporate-driven globalisation has distorted and transformed the parts of nature, driving species and habitats to extinction, which continuing unchecked will create the conditions for our own extinction.
Our concepts of nature contain past relations and connections – including many crucial moments of art and culture – and these continue to exist in the Ideal as an opposite to today’s hyper-alienation. It is this contradiction between past and present that creates restlessness and a drive for change. Science, art and those who actively oppose the status quo, are showing the possibilities for a new, harmonious, non-destructive relationship with nature. In science, the objective and concrete reality of our existence as part of an interconnected whole of nature is being established through the concept of co-evolution, and a growing understanding of the necessity of diversity for life. Co-evolution, not domination; and diversity, not a dramatic reduction in the number and kind of species, are the keys to evolutionary success.

Marx's whole aim in writing *Capital* was to identify the germ cell of capitalism's totalising power, in order to signify how to end these alienated social relations. He explained how capitalism requires an alienation not only of the worker from the product of her labour but from nature as a whole:

"It is not the unity of living and active humanity with the natural, inorganic conditions of their metabolic exchange with nature, and hence their appropriation of nature, which requires explanation, or is the result of a historic process, but rather the separation between these inorganic conditions of human existence and this active existence, a separation which is completely posited only in the relation of wage labour and capital.”

We can never have an entirely pacific relation with nature and we must continue to carry out our exchange with it as humans, with our tools and knowledge at whatever level they have reached. The advent of the Anthropocene means that we and only we can take the actions necessary to ensure our survival as a species; for that matter, it is only our species that can now ensure the survival of other species. Through the development of a new concept of commons that comprehends the whole of nature and which cannot be transformed into private property, we can create a new universal ideal of planetary stewardship. Achieving this requires an active negation of the parts of our own human social whole that act as an impediment to further human progress. These are in particular private ownership of the means of production and exchange and the system of capitalist types of states.

**The value-form and globalised capitalism**

As Marx explains in *Capital*: “Commodities … are something twofold, both objects of utility, and, at the same time, depositories of value. They manifest themselves therefore as
commodities… only in so far as they have two forms, a physical or natural form, and a value form.” In its outer appearance, the commodity’s value is hidden and “seems impossible to grasp”, and yet it exists. How is it manifested? Marx says that “the value of commodities has a purely social reality … they acquire this reality only in so far as they are expressions or embodiments of one identical social substance, viz., human labour, it follows that… value can only manifest itself in the social relation of commodity to commodity.” [emphasis added]

And in the same section of Volume 1, when analysing the money-form of commodities, Marx concludes that like value generally, it is a form quite “distinct from their palpable body form” and is, therefore, “a purely ideal or mental form”. [Emphasis added]

In the Dialectics of the Ideal, Ilyenkov reminds us that while this “mystical, mysterious reality [value form] does not have its own material body”, it nevertheless controls “the fate and movement of all those individual bodies that it inhabits”. This process is clearly manifested in the present global economic crisis, where the contradictions within the value form continue to have profound social, financial and economic consequences. The contradictions within the ideal of the value form embodying human labour were intensified during the period of globalised capitalism which was negated out of the collapse in 1971 of the Bretton Woods inter-state trade, currency and movement of capital arrangements.

Capital pressed for a continuous decrease in the value of labour by moving production across the globe but, conversely, for a continuous increase in the quantity of its money-form representative. The inherent imperative for growth and the need to realise the value contained within the explosion of commodities brought to the market, opened a gulf between the value of commodities produced annually and the quantity of numerous, novel value-forms of money and of credit and their opposite, debt. By 2007, the global total of personal, corporate and sovereign debt was equivalent to three times the value of annual world Gross Domestic Product.

Creating new quantities of the money-form was made easier by the fact that in the digital age, the corporeal existence of the value-form has moved on from coins and paper notes. Increasing the quantity of global credit needed to finance growth requires only a few keystrokes, but each extra unit of credit added reduces the quantity of value that each represents.

The contradictions within the financial system and its relation to the “real economy” led to the formation on a vast scale of what Marx termed “fictitious capital”. As he notes in Volume III of Capital: “… a large portion of this money-capital is always necessarily purely fictitious, that is, a title to value – just as paper money.” As a result the currency of money and of credit
became so debased that the financial system came crashing down in 2007-8. The law of value had reasserted itself. A new, deeper financial crash is at present under way, driven in part by the futile attempts of central banks to revive the global economy through quantitative easing, also known as the printing of money.

No longer satisfied by the declining profits to be gained from the exploitation of predominantly manual labour in manufacturing, capital has widened its focus to the so-called “weightless”, knowledge economy. Now a small number of giant corporations are connected to each other and to billions of individuals by a technological web of wires and waves carrying symbols coded into strings of charged particles notable only for their presence or absence. The demand for access to diversified markets accelerates the commodification of the individual as consumer. All are sucked into the vortex of targeted adverts via social media apparently free-at-the-point of use. The digital revolution encroaches on every aspect of human activity, transforming the ideal into a swirling global social reality.

The advent of digital technologies offers the possibility of making the products of thought available to all, simultaneously, as a universally accessible Ideal, but this conflicts with the reality of capitalist social relations. Deriving a profit from an infinitely reproducible commodity means inventing ways of excluding their use, putting up legal and technical barriers. The development of this global network to suit the needs of for-profit corporations has brought its own opposite into existence. Billions now communicate through previously unimagined channels, promoting their creative products, bypassing corporate control and organising the overthrow of brutal regimes.

Hundreds of thousands of creative individuals develop the constantly changing foundations of the web. They supersede the model of privately-owned products protected by patents and copyright with a new regime and collective products legally constrained to be freely available to all. Co-operative forms of ownership and control in every country challenge the notion that private ownership of capital is the end of economic and social history. At the same time, the unprecedented levels of social inequality, the ecological crisis in all its forms, including the threat to food supplies, alongside corporate greed, discredit the Ideal of capitalism as the only possible economic system. The transition to a sustainable, not-for-profit democratic economy focused on the creation of use values is made possible by the contradictions within the value-form ideal.
The state and democracy

The state as the political entity of a nation is an objective Ideal, existing historically from generation to generation in constant evolution. It is a universal abstraction that is a representation of an ensemble of institutions that manifest ultimate power in society. The state as a whole does not exist as such and cannot be identified at a single point. It exists only in and through the exercise of state power by real people operating within the parts that understood as a whole constitute the state.

What is the purpose of the state, its raison d’être? Marxist sociologist Bob Jessop says: “The core of the state apparatus comprises a distinct ensemble of institutions and organisations whose socially accepted function is to define and enforce collectively binding decisions on the members of a society in the name of their common interest or general will.” (emphasis added)

The state in general is thus immediately contradictory. It is a thing which stands outside of us, over which we have no control and which has coercive power. It enters the domain of ideology, developing hegemonic notions that can speak on behalf of “common interest” or “general will” in society. These are reinforced by the process and practice of representative democracy. Why is it important to attempt to speak for all citizens? Because, as a rule as Frederick Engels noted, it is the “state of the most powerful, economically dominant class, which, through the medium of the state, becomes also the politically dominant class”.

(emphasis added)

Göran Therborn expands this approach, indicating that the state achieves a relative autonomy over time: “In the historical course of the class struggle, the state apparatuses come to crystallise determinate social relations and thus assume a material existence, efficacy and inertia which are to a certain extent independent of current state policies and class relations.”

Thus the state’s inner contradictions are objective: institutional separation from the core of capitalist production; alienation from its citizens, requiring constant re-legitimating through forms of democracy; institutions that have their own bureaucratic development and conflict with other parts of the state.

The present period of corporate-led globalisation have exacerbated these tensions to breaking point. For the last 30 years, the capitalist state has been in transition from the post-1945 model of mediator between different class interests into a more direct, subordinate relationship with capital. Transnational economic and financial forces have driven changes in the state as subject, including the formation of powerful supra-state agencies.
The present-day post-welfare, market type of state is identified with unprecedented social inequality and polarization; austerity resulting from the global financial crisis and recession; the weakening of welfare safeguards; the withdrawal from the provision of public goods in favour of private markets; mass surveillance of persons and communities; and an inability/refusal to tackle global issues such as climate change. As a result, an historic crisis of legitimacy now exists in many state systems which in turn have called into question representative or bourgeois democracy as a hegemonic form. A wave of democratic struggles, peaceful as well as violent, began in Tunisia at the end of 2010, swept through many Arab states, most notably Egypt, and found their echo in Spain through the Indignados movement and, in the United States and Britain, in Occupy.

In Greece, discontent with the subordination of the government to the European Union, European Central Bank and the IMF produced people’s assemblies. In Ukraine, the uprising against the authoritarian regime was organised in the streets in Maidan. While, as yet, the potential of these movements is to be fully realised in self-emancipation, they mark a new revolutionary moment. Called into question at the same time is the notion of sovereignty exercised through the system of nation states and borders that was laid down in the middle of the 17th century.

Anthropologist David Graeber, who participated in Occupy Wall Street, notes: “Clearly, when Americans embrace democracy, they can only be thinking of something much broader and deeper than mere participation in elections (which half of them don’t bother to vote in anyway); it has to be some sort of combination of an ideal of individual liberty with a notion, so far unrealized, that free people really ought to be able to sit down together like reasonable adults and govern their own affairs. If so, it’s hardly surprising that those who currently govern America are so afraid of democratic movements. Taken to its ultimate conclusions, the democratic impulse can only lead to rendering them entirely unnecessary. [emphasis added] This “impulse” is, therefore, towards the realisation of the Ideal of democracy that is contained within the contradiction of existing state power.

The revolutionary Ideal and today’s movements

As we gain new and more subtle insights into Ilyenkov’s contribution to philosophy, it is worth reconsidering why he was so persecuted. We know that his work was considered to be so
inflammatory by the Stalinist authorities that he was not allowed to travel beyond Austria and Prague to take part in philosophical conferences. He was persecuted by KGB agents such as Elena Modrzhinskaya. As Andrey Maidansky has shown, Ilyenkov in his would-be contributions to Hegel symposia insisted that alienation still existed under “socialism” in the USSR and that he believed that state property was “public” only in name only. This was a heretical view and could have only added to the concerted assault on his work.

Ilyenkov, unlike those for whom “philosophy” was a dogmatic assertion of banalities, understood it as an instrument for the investigation of reality and as a guide to future practice. As a member of the CPSU, he had a wider purpose: to revive the revolutionary content of Marxist theory in the Soviet Union in the post-Stalin era. He was keenly aware, as his defence of Lenin’s *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* demonstrates, of the political implications of what may appear to be remote philosophical disputes.

Ilyenkov was to make the point a few years later in *Leninist Dialectics and the Metaphysics of Positivism*, that “in philosophy … as in a seed, or as in genes, are concealed the still undeveloped, but sufficiently clear contours and features of future positions (and disagreements) concerning the most stirring problems not only of today, which have already taken shape, but of tomorrow, which have barely begun to show in outline.”

Ilyenkov’s conclusion that Lenin’s *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* (written against the group within the Bolshevik party known as the Machists) centred on “the most profound fundamentals of Marxist cognition, on the logic of the analysis of reality,” was not simply citing Lenin for self-protection. He understood and agreed with Lenin’s work in revealing the political aspects of epistemology and its role in approaching and analysing political and social processes – cognition, that is, with a purpose. His assertion of the truth value of the Ideal, “Hegelian” as it may have appeared, had a logic of its own. The thrust of his championing of philosophical thought was that those promoting “Diamat” were charlatans who lied and bullied and refused to deal with the truth.

That chapter of Soviet philosophy has thankfully come to an end. But the association of Stalinist dogmas and political parties with “dialectical materialism” continues to have an eerie afterlife. And the real measure of oppositional Soviet thinkers’ contribution to the development of dialectics is only now becoming clear.

The organisational forms that Lenin, Ilyenkov and others in the post-Second World War era understood as the vehicles for developing political awareness were political parties. As we
move deeper into the 21st century, those forms of organising, training, educating and developing strategies are being transcended by new social and political realities. Widespread disaffection with the effects of corporate capitalism – ecological devastation, unprecedented increases in inequality, repressive anti-democratic regimes, the suppression and persecution of ethnic and religious minorities, particularly since the financial meltdown of 2008 is continuing to take new forms.

The Arab spring, Occupy Wall Street (and elsewhere), the movements and uprisings in Brazil, Turkey, Bulgaria, Ukraine and Spain arose independently of established political parties and trade unions. Social and digital media are being used more and more, shaping and developing interactive and democratic forms of discussion, organising and decision making.

Many of the changes wrought by globalisation have been theorised by thinkers who champion ideas of revolutionary transformation. Toni Negri and Michael Hardt have long proposed that their Ideal, the “Multitude”, could overwhelm/transform capitalism into something more benign, in their trilogy of books about “alter-globalisation” (Empire, Multitude and Commonwealth). Sociologist John Holloway and anthropologist David Graeber, popular among Occupy and grassroots movements around the world due to their anti-hierarchical approach, propose transitions beyond or through the present form of capitalism by means other than political parties.

Graeber sheds light on how an abstract ideal, even though it may appear hackneyed and appropriated by the status quo, can become a motivating force: “For most of them [Americans], democracy is ultimately something of an abstraction, an ideal, not something they’ve ever practiced or experienced; this is why so many, when they first began to take part in the general assemblies [of Occupy] … felt … as if their entire sense of what was politically possible had transformed overnight.”

Philosopher-cultural critic Slavoj Zizek has given a provocative and personalised overview of the relevance of Hegelian dialectics, which he brings together with Freudian and Lacanian analysis, most recently in Less than Nothing – Hegel and the shadow of dialectical materialism (2012). He brings the dialectic back into the arena, making wide-ranging connections between political hegemony, philosophy and today’s culture. Also seeking to develop revolutionary Ideals in theory and practice are theorists and activists like animal rights campaigner Steven Best, geophysicist Brad Werner, and Marxist educationalists Peter McLaren and Glenn Rikowski.
Economist-geographer David Harvey, launching his *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*, said: “... it is vital that alternatives be broached, however foreign they may seem, and, if necessary, seized upon if conditions so dictate. In this way a window can be opened on to a whole field of untapped and unconsidered possibilities. We need an open forum – a global assembly, as it were – to consider where capital is, where it might be going and what should be done about it.”

The ideas of these theorists, whatever their strengths and weaknesses, are nimbly leaping around the world, stimulating debate and criticism via the Internet and social media. They are slipping over and under the barriers presented by the rapidly increasing costs of higher education (up by 827% in the United States since 1980), which as Benjamin Kunkel points out, in the last decades made higher education a class privilege in the US and elsewhere.

There is now a wide and intense global discussion in assemblies and plenums on the ground and via websites, facebook and blog platforms. We need to develop contemporary revolutionary and democratic forms of organisation that give expression to this new content which is the substance of the abstract universals of today’s revolutionary ideals. Ilyenkov’s ideas are part of this great collective enterprise.
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