



Interview with Keti Chukhrov

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Abstract

This short interview explores the influence of Evald Ilyenkov's work on contemporary philosopher, art theorist, and writer Keti Chukhrov. The interview focuses on Evald Ilyenkov's contributions to Soviet culture, dialectics, and epistemology. She reflects on the distinct intellectual milieu of Soviet thinkers like Ilyenkov, Vygotsky, Davidov, and Lifshitz, who established connections between Marx and the broader world culture. The interview also addresses Žižek's interpretation of Ilyenkov's cosmology, emphasizing the ethical dimension of Ilyenkov's communist spirit. Furthermore, Chukhrov touches on Ilyenkov's critique of cybernetics and its relevance in contemporary discussions about AI and philosophy.

Keywords Ilyenkov · Soviet culture · Epistemology · Dialectics · Post-structuralism

Keti Chukhrov is a Tage Danielsson guest professor at the Linköping University. In 2022–2023 she was a guest professor at the University of Arts and Design in Karlsruhe. Until November 2022, she worked as a professor at the School of Philosophy & Cultural Studies at the Higher School of Economics (Moscow). In 2017–2019 she was a Marie Skłodowska Curie fellow in UK. Her latest book Practicing the Good: Desire and Boredom in Soviet Socialism deals with the impact of socialist political economy on the epistemes of historical socialism. Her full-length books include: To Be—To Perform; 'Theatre' in Philosophic Critique of Art; and Pound & £; and a volume of dramatic writing, Merely Humans. Her research interests and publications deal with such topics as the philosophy of performativity, comparative epistemologies of capitalist and noncapitalist societies, and art as the institution of global contemporaneity.

KP: *How did you become interested in Ilyenkov?*

KC: My first encounter with Ilyenkov was in 2009–2010, when I came across his text on the Universal (Ilyenkov 1975). I was then writing a paper on early avant-garde

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experiments with labor and its cultural connotations and Ilyenkov's interpretation of labor, as something which can be considered as *culture* and as *the ideal*, as well as his treatment of the *Universal* through social activity which appeared very unusual to me. It made me feel that I want to understand what he was doing.

Do you think that Ilyenkov broke out of the mold of Russian–Soviet philosophy, for instance, with respect to imperialism or other social issues?

I think quite a number of Soviet thinkers—Vygotsky, Ilyenkov, Yuri Davidov, Mikhail Lifshitz—had made new connections to Marx and the thought antecedent to him, i.e., generally to world culture (including Russian culture), which leads to the idea of socialism—to Western thought leading to Marx. This was their intellectual milieu, rather than say the so-called religious Russian philosophy, or any quasi-imperialist ruminations. Therefore, it is a question of whether it would be possible to mention “Russian and Soviet thought” in any unified context.

The only two figures who belong to Russian, Western, and Soviet contexts simultaneously are probably Alexander Kojève and Gustav Shpet, successor of Husserl, translator of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and one of the founders of the State Academy of Artistic Sciences.¹ Shpet was executed in 1937. Russian philosophy, as a whole, is rarely referenced among Soviet thinkers. One might argue that the path of religious Christian quasi-theological thought, and its protagonists—Vladimir Soloviev, Pavel Florensky, Sergey Bulgakov—were not regarded as the successors of the continental “Western” philosophic “tradition” inherited by Marx and therefore this path of Russian philosophy was unheeded by Soviet Marxist thinkers. Soviet philosophy thought of in this sense is much more a part of Western continental thought than so-called “Russian thought”. Even when the Soviet thinkers mention certain specimens of Russian literature (for instance, Lifshitz refers to Russian literature very often), they do so in the broader context of the world culture. The notion “Russian–Soviet” seems to be rather a geopolitical unit than a historical one. There is a bigger gap between the Russian and the Soviet than between the Soviet and the Western. One of the main reasons for the incoherence between pre-Revolutionary Russian and Marxist post-revolutionary thought resides in the attachment of the former to religion and its symbols and terminology. For thinkers like Ilyenkov, Russian religious philosophy was not merely metaphysical, but it was not yet a philosophy in the proper sense of the term.

You have written about Ilyenkov's dialectics. Do you see any differences between his approach or understanding of dialectics and that of other thinkers?

Ilyenkov's treatment of dialects through the quid pro quo principle—the assumption that each thing is simultaneously the self and the other-determined nonself—is quite distinct from that of numerous Hegelian and Marxist thinkers. Most of them approach dialectics either as cyclicity, as the law of unity and struggle of opposites, or as a contradiction to be sublated, i.e., the thesis-antithesis-synthesis construct.

Yet another approach is Lacanian and post-structuralist, as encountered in the work of Dolar and Žižek, which associates dialectics with *difference*. This approach

¹ IAXH, Gosudarstvennaya Academia Hudojestvennih Naouk.

discards any notion of teleology and expediency—dimensions that remained important for Ilyenkov’s perspective on dialectics. For psychoanalysis, the teleological perspective was regarded as problematically holistic and premodern. In the Lacanian context, specifically, cognition cannot achieve affirmative results; it is mainly suspended, split. Ilyenkov’s innovation stemmed from Marx’s method—it characterized dialectics as a tool of cognition. Principal in this was the assumption that external manifestations of the thing cannot express the true relationship of things. For Ilyenkov, dialectics was a specific tool of generalization as opposed to formal abstraction, which does not simply distill an invariant from empirical or semiological data, but was also able to bring together mind and body: the concrete facts and abstract speculation.

In post-structuralist semiology, mind and body can concatenate performatively, but this is done through dispensing with the signified, through evading the semantic genesis of signs. This means that the signified, i.e., the plane of reality, also becomes semiological, the real objects, things, and activities are also taken to be signs. Therefore, there is no need for the meeting of objective reality and thought but, instead, their contingent coalescence. In Ilyenkov’s dialectical logic, conversely, the notion² should have the opportunity to be embedded in real activity and thinghood, whereas a thing has to acquire a noumenal, semantic dimension, i.e., it has to be generalized in the mode of a notion. The interpenetration of things and concepts is indispensable and can be achieved only through a dialectical procedure because, in dialectically exerted generalization, the notion will not be torn from reality. At first sight, it seems that one needs identification to relate mind and matter. But, Ilyenkov shows that the dialectical procedure of generalization, of uniting the concept and thing, resides in the act of disidentifying othering. This is due to the fact that any identity happens to be other than itself—the thing being other than itself due to its semantic aspect, and the notion being other than itself due to its material concretization, but any object being other than its literal self due to the history of production and its relations.

The ideal form is a form of a thing, but outside this thing, namely in man [sic], as a form of his dynamic life-activity, as goals and needs. Or conversely, it is a form of man’s dynamic life-activity, but outside man, namely in the form of the thing he creates, which represents, reflects another thing, including that which exists independently of man and humanity. ‘Ideality’ as such exists only in the constant transformation of these two forms of its ‘external incarnation’ and does not coincide with either of them taken separately. (Ilyenkov 2014: 61)

Are there any interesting consequences (philosophical or political) from the contrast between Žižek’s emphasis on gaps, lacks, the negative and Ilyenkov’s emphasis on production and positive sublation?

You probably mean Žižek’s (2021) interpretation of Ilyenkov’s “Cosmology of the Spirit”. Žižek claimed that Ilyenkov, in his assumptions about the entropic eclipse of the Universe, which he casts as a voluntary act of self-destruction by the communist mind, reverts back to the premodern image of the cyclicity of being. Žižek overlooks here that Ilyenkov’s communist mind (spirit) commits this voluntary act not merely

²In Hegel’s sense.

out of a transgressive will for annihilation, but because it needs to surpass the mere cooling down of the Universe and thus incite the act of perishing, which is only able to generate the excessive energy necessary for the birth of another new world. Indeed, Ilyenkov's picture of the perishing Universe is cyclic. However, he does not ignore the negativity and ruptures of being. Nor is he merely depicting a premodern interchange of cosmic death and birth. For Ilyenkov, the human spirit's motivation for self-destruction derives from the preemptive self-resignation in the name of new life. It is this ethical act of self-resignation that is principal; it is not confined to transgressive self-destruction. Rather, it is about an excessive effort of the communist Subject to foster with her self-resignation a clinamen in the inevitable process of entropy. Self-resignation is an important aspect of the Anderssein³ in dialectics, and a confirmation of nonliteralness of things, as well as Subjects that posit the anti-Narcissist condition in sociality.

Ilyenkov also wrote about cybernetics. Is Ilyenkov's critique of cybernetics still relevant today?

Ilyenkov's goal was not a critique of technology or the role of science as such, rather he analyzed the pretensions of cybernetics in its attempt to occupy the place of philosophic epistemology. Unlike Western countries, where the philosophic and epistemological hegemony of AI has only started to be discussed 20–25 years ago, the Soviet cyberneticists suggested from the very start an overall shift from the dialectical, Marxist epistemology to the positivist one. They went much further in molding both the humanities and hard sciences in accordance with this stance. In the Soviet case, cybernetics was not seen as just a management tool for economics and production—it had to become the principal mode of cognition. Interestingly, Ilyenkov's points of critique gains relevance in numerous recent texts in contemporary media and AI theory (Pasquinelli 2023). Ilyenkov is not criticizing the technology of cybernetics but the modes of thought it reifies.

Is part of your project and your approach to dialectics and Soviet culture in general the desire to rescue its achievements from being consigned to history?

I approach the texts from the Soviet period as evidence that could serve in a more general comparative analysis, allowing us to compare epistemologies of capitalist and noncapitalist socialities, respectively. Indeed, in the interpretation of Soviet culture, there are two prevailing tendencies: post-Cold War Slavonic studies, with their focus on the critique of totalitarianism, and, on the contrary, the nostalgic rehabilitation of the authoritarian history of the Soviet Union. However, recently, we see interesting research done by social anthropologists, who, by means of area studies, vernacular sociology, or Foucauldian socio-cultural archeology, have obtained some rare materials (Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov 2019, Anna Kruglova 2017, Anna Ivanova 2022). It would therefore be productive to delink certain ideas, thoughts, and theories from the geopolitical East–West and cold war narratives and address them in the context of their concrete social (socialist) genesis.

³being-other

Declarations

Competing Interests The authors declare that there are no relevant financial or nonfinancial competing interests to report

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