

# Radical Currents in Soviet Philosophy: Lev Vygotsky and Evald Ilyenkov

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# *Radical Currents in Soviet Philosophy: Lev Vygotsky and Evald Ilyenkov*

Arto Artinian 

## **The problematic of Soviet Marxism**

Soviet Marxism is often understood as a tradition that with the exception of figures like Vladimir Lenin or Leon Trotsky, managed to produce very little of significance for twentieth-century Marxist political thought.<sup>1</sup> It is often seen as a void in the overall trajectory of Marxism, made particularly tragic given its origin in the state that emerged from the first successful anti-capitalist revolution. In such a reading, thinkers Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) and Evald Ilyenkov (1924–1979) in particular, are often portrayed as incredible exceptions to this rule, bright stars<sup>2</sup> who stood out from the grim, boring, and intellectually mediocre corpus that is often given the label “Soviet Marxism” (or Soviet philosophy).

Vygotsky is often presented as the “Mozart of psychology,” a young genius who exploded with creativity before dying young of tuberculosis, having very likely been spared the indignity of perishing in the Great Terror of the late thirties. His contributions are generally positioned in the fields of psychology and literary criticism, rather than political philosophy. Ilyenkov, in turn, is the “oddball” philosopher, the thinker who in the immediate aftermath of the Battle of Berlin in 1945, as a young artillery platoon commander, visited Hegel’s grave as his first peacetime activity in liberated Germany.<sup>3</sup> Though brilliant, it is suggested that he never really fitted the Soviet Marxist tradition, having been sidelined by academic bureaucrats, or by his own eccentricities (overemphasis on the thought of Hegel and

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1. Unless otherwise specified, all italicization in quotes is by the author being quoted.
  2. A characterization applied especially to Vygotsky, given his widespread exposure in the West.
  3. See Aleksey Tsvetkov’s article *Dialektik* (The Dialectician), <https://alexeitsvetkov.wordpress.com/2013/09/12/iliienkov/>

Spinoza, for instance).<sup>4</sup> And his contributions, though clearly significant in the fields of materialist dialectics, are explicitly connected neither to the domain of Soviet Marxist political thought proper, nor specifically to Soviet politics.

My reading rejects such a characterization of these thinkers, and of Soviet Marxism as a philosophical current itself. On the contrary, I would like to propose that Soviet Marxism reached its height in the work of figures like Vygotsky and Ilyenkov.<sup>5</sup> As committed supporters of the unfolding Soviet political project (and I emphasize this point), their presence is unique in the history of twentieth-century Marxist thought, for it represented an attempt at a revolutionary philosophy of praxis from *within* the Soviet Union, a society-in-formation beyond capitalist forms of social reproduction. Both thinkers understood and approached their struggle toward establishing hegemony within the ideological spaces of Soviet philosophical thought as a struggle of prime importance for the continued social reproduction of revolutionary politics.

But beyond this re-reading of the outlines of Soviet Marxist thought, I will argue that Vygotsky's and Ilyenkov's work can be read as an innovative and important addition to contemporary Marxist political thought, where it can contribute to a leftist articulation of effective responses to the functioning of hegemony and ideology within the complex experiences of capitalist everyday life. In doing this, I will propose that Vygotsky articulated a concept of *freedom*, expressed through human development of a specific type, as a goal of Soviet revolutionary politics. Building on the Marxist tradition, this was an attempt at outlining ways of thinking about freedom, about this final (one could say, strategic) goal of the revolutionary struggle.

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4. His persistent "love" for Hegel is noted along with his reversal of standard philosophical categories that were held to be axiomatic in Soviet Marxist thought. Ilyenkov and his close friend Vladimir Korovikov declared in the early 1950s that there is no such thing as dialectical materialism, but simply materialist dialectics understood as a dialectical logic. For this statement, they were thrown out of Moscow State University, never to return there as professors. A detailed discussion of this polemical battle appears in the recently published "Strasti po tezisam o predmete filosofii" [Passions Over the Theses Regarding the Subject of Philosophy], published in 2016 by "Kanon" in Moscow.
  5. But also, others such as: Mikhail Lifshits, Alexander Luria, Vassily Leontiev, Vladimir Bibler, and even thinkers like Merab Mamardashvili through the 1960s and 1970s. Alexander Zinoviev, whose early works date from the 1950s and 1960s, was a close friend of Ilyenkov's. There are still others, but the excavation of their names would require another paper.

To this end, I want to read Vygotsky's concept of *perezhivanie* (переживание)<sup>6</sup> as a synthesis of the effects of hegemony and ideology as *one political phenomenon*, an instantiation of the effects of hegemony and ideology in political space (as internalized ideology, internalized consent, hegemony-as-lived-life). It is a description of everyday life structured by specific political struggles, and by the functioning of hegemony and ideology as a unitary political phenomenon. And since it denotes *lived experience*, it connects directly to questions of social reproduction, although not so much through the lens of socio-logical (or political economic) analysis as through ontological structures of what I refer to as *Becoming* and related concepts.

But how is *perezhivanie* – the lived experience (both collective and individual) of Soviet society – itself shaped? The answer is offered by Evald Ilyenkov's persistent arguments on the importance of Marxist philosophical thought in shaping the *ideal* (and what he called "Ideal-ity"), the generalized ways of thinking, or the abstractions that Soviet society would have to develop as it struggled to form its new political community. His interventions on the problematic of the Ideal, or the interiorization of culture, could be read as explicitly political interventions, developing what Vygotsky was able to only implicitly hint at in his concept of *perezhivanie*. For Ilyenkov, undoing bourgeois hegemony across everyday life, then, presupposes the establishment of hegemony on the level of the Ideal, understood as "the objectifying and disobjectifying of collective human activity" (what he calls culture). Such hegemony<sup>7</sup> over what could also be called *ideological space* (the aggregate of ideological frameworks active in Soviet lived experience at a specific time, say 1964) must be maintained if *perezhivanie*, the lived general patterns of Soviet everyday life, is to continue a movement toward socialism.

### Vygotsky and the problematic of freedom

Lev Naumenko, the prominent Soviet-Russian philosopher, writes that human freedom is rooted in the fact that we emerge in life from Nothing(ness), but can *become* "everything":

[At birth] a human being doesn't know anything, he must struggle to learn how to do everything, even how to walk, how to eat and drink, to say nothing of

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6. *Perezhivanie* was the third major reformulation of the meaning of consciousness that Vygotsky was able to undertake.
  7. I am using hegemony following the writings of Gramsci and Lenin (specifically Lenin's post-1917 writings).

anything else. This is why a human is free, because he is “nothing.” And precisely because of this, he is able to become it “all.” (Naumenko 2014: 33)

This problematic of human freedom, and the movement toward its emergence as a process of *becoming*, was a core preoccupation within the revolutionary current in Soviet Marxism. Here it is important to note that, contra the popular dogmatic articulations of Soviet Marxist thought (from both within and without the Soviet Union) as a synthesis of Marx, Engels and Lenin, it is more accurate to assert that radical interventions in Soviet philosophical thinking reflected a more complex and much broader synthesis of Spinoza, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche and Lenin. This is the philosophical horizon that overdetermines the thought of Lev Vygotsky and Evald Ilyenkov.

In Vygotsky, this search for freedom is present in a number of registers. Above all, it is articulated through the problematic of *human development*, and specifically the ability to engage in *freedom of action (activity)*. Vygotsky’s focus on understanding the specifics of this synthesis that enables free activity – including “affect-in-concepts” and the movement of thought and practical activity – is about fostering a movement of self-transcendence, of human *becoming*. The concept of *becoming* is to be counterpoised here to *being*, understood as a well-formed, and entrenched political *subject*, the product of bourgeois hegemony and political reaction (“conservatism”).

Within the context of Vygotsky’s own politics, this was a fundamental contribution to the initial formulation of the meaning of the “New Soviet person,” which is to say it was another way of engaging with the problematic of *ideological space* (the patterns of everyday life as shaped by hegemony, ideology, and political will/struggle) (see Zavershneva 2015: 97–101). The condition of human freedom begins at the moment of deliberate *detachment* from the most immediately concrete and literal in everyday life. To be free means to engage in that which is contingent and aleatoric, to break away from the rhythms of the routine, the well-formed, and that which is expected. This freedom from a “concrete situation” is enabled by “thinking in (through) concepts” (2015: 100). It is the activation of:

... symbolic operations that make possible the emergence of a completely new psychological field, one that is not rooted on what is available in the present, but sketches out the outline of the future, in this way creating free action, independent of the immediate situation. (2015: 97)

In sum, Vygotsky understood freedom as a condition made possible by the practice of *abstract thought*, which is to say of directed

human creativity on the unified planes of thought: affect and action. The point is to be able to “rise above the field” of the most immediately present here-and-now. This means deploying abstract concept-formation not only in terms of thought and speech, but also in related psychological fields such as *affect*, which is for Vygotsky inseparable from the *will to power*; both are part of the same continuum of human becoming. This is clear in an entry in his notebook from 1931–32, titled “On the will”:

... the will is a concept that has become affect; the strong-willed person is a personality that has determined its actions and way of life through the affect of the “I.” (Zavershneva 2015: 95)

Still, the necessity for abstract concept-formation is not sufficient to permit freedom of action. The cycle must be completed back to the *concrete* reality in which one is living. Thus, when faced with a specific, concrete *situation*, the formation of a unity of the intellect with affect and action, is a response to this situation. As Vygotsky writes in a letter to collaborators Zaks and Kogan, “the degree of the departure (displacement) of the produced concept (generalization) from the concrete object being confronted “determines the degree of the transformation of the object’s affect into the affect of the concept.” In Zavershneva’s succinct summary: “free action is adjusted to the world, to the concrete task, which defines the degree of departure from reality, as well as the practical means of its solution” (2015: 100).

In this field of creative human intervention into the patterns of a concrete lived situation, Vygotsky notes the importance of being able to derive thoughts and actions that are the *least* obvious. It is not the ability to do the obvious that marks the condition of freedom, but the creative process that forces the free person to derive, to invent an action, and to trust one’s affective signals indicating that a particular course of action (in this particular situation), is or is not the way forward. There is an intentionality in this conception of freedom, coupled with what Zavershneva calls “affect in concept.” Vygotsky gives the example of such “affect in concept” in his discussion of chess champions. It is the affect, the emotive configuration together with analytical thought, that indicates to the chess grandmaster that a specific potential next move is too obvious, and thus not satisfactory:

... if [such an obvious move] emerges into one’s head on its own, then any fool will play it; affect prevents this thought from getting into one’s head; it is the will in thought that must bring it in there, the line of greatest resistance. (2015: 104)

Why is thinking about freedom like this important? What is the political relevance of this insight? In one immediate sense, it is the prerequisite to fighting against being subjected to the will of *others* (against hegemony) – a condition where the oppressed (those without freedom) are confined to the *field of the visible*, to the concrete world of their most immediate needs. Not only does hegemony force adherence to the most immediate in everyday life, but it also forces one to internalize this reality as the only one possible (and even desirable). For living life by only responding to the signals coming from a specific concrete situation would mean a direct abandonment of one's will to power, a cessation of the process of *subjectification* in favor of a permanently solidified *subjectivity*; existing as a Being rather than a Becoming. This can be compared with the condition of *generalized proletarianization* described by Bernard Stiegler (2010) as a condition of profound *loss of knowledge* – leading to loss of *activity* – in two dimensions: how to live (*savoir-vivre*) and how to do (*savoir-faire*) (2010: 40).

It is clear that thinking about freedom-as-action assumes enormous importance in revolutionary politics. Think of the political context of Vygotsky's times: a devastated living space, where the rhythms of everyday life have been shattered by the carnage of World War I and the subsequent Russian civil war. In this moment of flux (a condition of civil war, as the ancient Greeks put it), the single most important political intervention, one of direct consequence for the very survival of the revolutionary struggle, becomes the articulation of a new *field of meaning* (*different from the immediately visible and perceivable*), and a new articulation of the *will* (understood not only, to borrow Zavershneva's apt phrase, as the "fullness of Being," but rather, as a *world in-information*, a becoming which unfolds through the processes of human development and activity) (Zavershneva 2015: 87–88). Both outline what the revolutionary struggle is aiming towards: in Vygotsky's words, achievement of the peak of human development, of *freedom*.

This problematic of freedom in Soviet intellectual history has been understudied, but it was perhaps the central question posited by a number of thinkers, including Vygotsky. To be free, or to strive towards this condition means to *become* human. This was articulated not only by Lev Naumenko but also by other prominent Soviet philosophers, such as Merab Mamardashvili. Mamardashvili noted (2004: 347) that it takes constant effort over time for one to *become* human. Becoming human is a struggle, from within and from without; it is our fundamental condition, though Mamardashvili and Naumenko both imply that there are no "guarantees" that one will indeed become human. Much can be said of this position, one that clearly

resonates with similar thoughts from Nietzsche, and also with Bernard Stiegler's discussion of proletarianization: once forced into a condition of proletarianization, one has been forced into a situation of losing one's humanity, or of being actively prevented from *becoming* human (Stiegler 2010). Similar to Marx's discussion of the effects of alienated labor, the interruption of the process of becoming human can never negate the *possibility* of a movement towards freedom (towards human becoming), but it can certainly prevent it from actualizing (very possibly forever in a particular person's life) (Marx 1988).

Vygotsky struggled with all his energy to undo the immense inertia of bourgeois (and monarchist) theoretical practice on the question of what is human (of what is freedom), but also against the lazy, easy answers provided by rigidly thinking Marxists. This is why he repeatedly emphasized that the struggle toward freedom presupposed the practice of *thought* understood as the synthesis of abstract concepts, affect, and activity (Zavershneva 2015: 97–99). In explicitly political terms, his was really a struggle against the bourgeois-defined Being (subject), and for imagining and establishing the "new," revolutionary *subjectivity* (the process of becoming human) of the present moment. But here one must be careful not to read Vygotsky's enthusiasm for the future as a simple, one-dimensional linear movement from the rejected past, through the temporary present, and into the socialist future. Such simplistic readings of the "transitionary" nature of the Soviet state, for instance, obfuscate not only the complexity of what actually transpired in Soviet politics, but also the ideas of figures like Vygotsky.

The radical "new" that was so yearned for by the revolutionaries introduced a deep and devastating social transformation. As an immediate response to such problematization of the revolution as a radical (and negative) rupture of the past, Vygotsky's framework on the question of freedom was indeed aiming to precipitate, to break down the stupor which defined existence in the old reactionary world, marked by the radical absence of freedom, or in other words, the radical absence of meaningful human development (a development that was already foreclosed within the internal logic of both the aristocratic feudal Russian regime, and its bourgeois-liberal iteration in the Provisional Government).

But there is a much better way of looking at the problematic of time and space in this context. Lyudmila Bulavka-Buzgalina has written extensively on this question using Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the *chronotope* to show that there were at least three space-time dynamics shaping Soviet politics simultaneously. The *socialist chronotope*, for

instance, understood the struggle for socialism as a movement-transformation from the *past*, through the present, and to the *future*. The radical break from the past marked by October, then, was one that was dialectically related to that which preceded it. Bulavka-Buzgalina (2014) reminds us that the Bolsheviks were “ideally and practically opposed in principle, to the nihilistic dismantling of the *past*, clearly understanding that the past is one of the fundamental resources in the creation of the *future*.” She quotes Lenin as follows:

It is necessary to take all culture, which capitalism has left us, and out of it to build socialism. It is necessary to take all of science, machinery, all knowledge, and art. Without all of this, we cannot build communist society. (2014: 44)

This dialectic in thinking about the chronotope of socialism was also present in Vygotsky’s thought. Hence the constant connection and dialogue with past philosophical currents – not just Marx, but also Spinoza, Hegel, Nietzsche, and the entire Enlightenment tradition. Human development cannot begin as a *tabula rasa*, it takes place on the continuum of time–space, infused in history and memory, in collective and individuated experiences, shaped by the will to engage, but also by confronting the recurrence of the same.

Together with the chronotope of socialism, Soviet everyday life also contained the chronotope of *communism*. Bulavka-Buzgalina describes it as a vector of social development from the *future* into the *present* which “preceded the development of Soviet reality” (2014: 51). The struggles which somehow brought echoes of the possible future into the present were a fundamental part of the process of becoming, with its radical breaks from the learned “truths” and internalized practices of the present (and by extension, of the past). This is where, to borrow from Nietzsche, the necessity of forgetting, of “un-learning” internalized practices is necessary for the opening toward a future (Nietzsche 1968).

In this context, Vygotsky’s articulation of *freedom of action* and its three constitutive elements (speech/verbal thought, affective systems, and practical action) mark what is *necessary* for the radical break *in toto*. The constitution of the revolutionary subjectivity, the radical break from the past and its becoming the future-in-the-present requires the mobilization of all these registers of human becoming. Any of the three by itself is insufficient.

Vygotsky’s conceptualization of *freedom of action* clarifies the always-difficult task of imagining, and thus preparing for, the revolutionary struggle. Here, such struggle begins (and demands absolutely)

the task of transforming oneself from a Subject, a Being well-formed and reproduced by the combined forces of hegemony and ideology (in other words, through a specific ideological space in which Being is in a condition of domination and servitude), into a being-in-movement, a subjectivity that is in the process of *becoming*.

There were powerful examples of such transformations of human subjectivity in Vygotsky's time. He himself was one. Having started as a precociously talented literary critic (among other pursuits), Vygotsky transformed his thought continuously, articulating within a few years at least three different approaches to human consciousness (Zavershneva 2014). One of his biographers, Igor Reyf (2010), describes his incredibly taxing work schedule. He held simultaneous positions at three different research institutes, located in three different cities, Moscow, Leningrad and Kharkov. The travel schedule alone, going to meetings, lectures, conferences at those venues must have been absolutely exhausting. In addition to his academic positions, he participated in various commissions on education and children's literature, as well as having been elected as a deputy to the Frunze region Soviet in Moscow (2010: 92–94). By all accounts, Vygotsky met these challenges with profound energy and excitement.

Vladimir Mayakovsky underwent similar transformations. As Bulavka-Buzgalina notes (2014: 367), the young poet abandoned his explicitly political work in the party ("direct politics," in her words), and moved into the sphere of poetics, "to begin the revolution immediately, without waiting for October 1917." Mayakovsky understood that the act of revolutionary becoming emerges out of the energies released in the creative act, which is another way of formulating Vygotsky's freedom-as-action, energies anticipating and preceding the actual revolutionary rupture. Anatoly Lunacharsky, the first Soviet commissar of education, noted how Mayakovsky's poetry invented words that no one *knew* how to say, but before long they became words spoken by everyone (2014: 364). His futurism, this prodigious effort to literally bring the *future* into the present, initiating a process of human becoming was, in Bulavka-Buzgalina's elegant formulation, the "gestation and formation of the *poetic algorithms of the new (socially-creative, non-conformist) cultural paradigm of the future Revolution*" (2014: 364–365).

The same *modality of becoming*, of affect-in-concepts was also present in the praxis of Lenin before the revolution, so the examples of Mayakovsky and Vygotsky clearly extend to the domain of "explicit" revolutionary politics as well. But it is important to note the *type*, the mode of struggle which Vygotsky explained through his concepts in thinking through the problematic of human development.

Vygotsky's approach is about creativity, and the inventive engagement with concepts (including the production of new ones), as necessitated by the trajectory of his studies. The goal was to find a way to understand the process of becoming, and specifically of becoming in the context of the ongoing political struggles in Soviet everyday life. Struggling against the weight of the "past in the present," against the inertia of servitude that defined the condition of life across the Russian Empire, required these initial moves in re-imagining core foundational concepts of daily life (new structures of social reproduction, a new state, a new approach to the dissemination of knowledge, and the formation of a radically different culture), if the static, seemingly eternal recurrence of what-is, of the established patterns of everyday life were to be overcome.

The "Ego is a Being not affected by Becoming and development" wrote Nietzsche (Nietzsche 1968: #517). It is difficult to avoid quoting Nietzsche in this discussion of Vygotsky's problematic of human freedom-as becoming. *Being* limits and posits the limits on *becoming*. Boundaries in the struggle emerge only if one believes in a static, "well-formed," well-ordered, foreclosed thing. The appeal to the return of the immediate past, and the preservation of that which "always was" *this way* is an essential feature of political reaction. Nietzsche's profound insight is that one is not in such an epistemological moment if one is in the process of becoming. When we become *Being*, we become fixed and can know what has happened in the past, in other words, we develop knowledge and grasp causality. The will, this root of revolutionary energy, on the other hand, is found in *becoming*, for the chains of political causality are in the process of formation precisely in the moment of the revolutionary rupture.

The explosion of creativity that marked Vygotsky's mature years – the 1920s and 1930s – were the result of such "lack" of epistemological certitude about the nature of the emerging Soviet society. Causality chains which had formed social relations for centuries were being broken, joined by an intense (and often desperate) search for the formation and invention of a new basis for knowledge.

Vygotsky was much like Mayakovsky and Lenin in their different but related ways, thus against teleology and everything such an approach brings with it: limits, concrete ends, closures, and chains of simplistic causality. Note how in his unfinished *Historical Crisis of Psychology* (1927) he rejected attempts at articulating a "Marxist psychology," for such "word games" would institutionalize, objectify, limit the creative energies of human becoming (active creativity) so

present in Marx's (and Vygotsky's) approach to thought. The search for the becoming of the New Soviet Person would not be served by the appearance of a New Soviet Subject (Being), underpinned by the edifice of a closed-off "perfectly logical" system of "Marxist thought." Sadly, this is exactly what began to happen at the end of his life, as the dynamism in the processes of becoming, became replaced increasingly by the notions of "Soviet citizen" and "Soviet democracy," all underpinned by historical and dialectical materialism as "the" correct expressions of revolutionary thought. By Vygotsky's death in 1934, the foreclosure in Soviet thought was mostly accomplished, even if subject to significant future attempts at resuscitating the process of becoming by figures like Evald Ilyenkov.

### **Hegemony: Lenin's post-1917 formulation**

Writing on the Soviet apparatus and its culture, Lenin noted that although the bourgeois state had been overthrown, the cultural relics of the past had "not yet been *overcome*" (Lenin 1965: 487). The logic of the state's functioning still retained the inertia inherited from previous ideological space in which these state structures were immersed. For Lenin, "culture" meant "social life" or "habit," in other words, everyday life; in Gramsci's framework, civil and political society fused into the *integral state* (Thomas 2011). This was a struggle where education, and especially philosophy and its systematic efforts at shaping thinking, become fundamentally important *political struggles*:

I say culture deliberately, because in these matters we can only regard as achieved what has become part and parcel of our culture, of our social life, our habits. (Lenin 1965: 487–488)

By the end of the Civil war, the question that emerged for Lenin and first-generation Soviet thinkers like Vygotsky was, what to do next? To build the new type of state apparatus, it was not enough to populate it with communist cadres committed to the revolution. What confronted the young Soviet state was the crucial obstacle presented by *generalized knowledge* of systems of *thought* and *doing* that are the result of centuries of learning. Lenin's focus on "learning" and its connection to culture and building the integral state (the state apparatus) was prompted by the pre-revolutionary conditions of everyday life for the proletariat and the peasantry (those from whose ranks the new state apparatus and cultural spaces will be formed), which were characterized by *lack of learning*.

This lack was itself the default proletarian condition, which in the words of Bernard Stiegler (2010) is a condition marked by sense of *total loss*. The proletariat, by being subject to capitalist hegemony in everyday life, loses its ability to *think* and to *do*. The process of human formation becomes re-directed toward human functioning as simple machine, a state of servitude devoid of autonomous thought and activity; it becomes a machinic appendage of the will of the capitalist. This total loss of the energies of becoming – the radical foreclosing of human subjectivity into a mode of *servitude* – marks the negation of what Vygotsky imagined as *human development*, the complex movement toward human freedom-in-action. Lenin understood this dynamic clearly, and the need to build toward a new society devoid of proletarianization:

In order to renovate our state apparatus we must at all costs set out, first, to learn, secondly, to learn, and thirdly, to learn, and then see to it that learning shall not remain a dead letter, or a fashionable catch-phrase (and we should admit in all frankness that this happens very often with us), that learning shall really become part of our very being, that it shall actually and fully become a constituent element of our social life. (Lenin 1965: 488–489)

In Gramsci's terms, Lenin, but also politically astute philosophers like Vygotsky and Ilyenkov, saw the need to engage in a "war of position," a protracted struggle waged over the entire "terrain" of Soviet society, aiming for hegemony in all its domains. This opened a new difficult chapter in the struggle, since the war of position was to be waged to a large extent – as became apparent in the aftermath of the New Economic Policy, and especially during collectivization – against or *within* the new Soviet political space.

Contrary to claims that Gramsci applied the war of maneuver only to Russia (due to its lack of developed civil society), while reserving wars of position to describe struggles in the politically "developed" West, we find that Gramsci directly saw the need for a war of position as *the next stage* of the revolution's development in the Soviet Union itself. Furthermore, Gramsci held that Lenin understood this necessity as well, leading to a new concept of hegemony articulated by Lenin (albeit without using the word hegemony) in his final years. This hegemony, in unity with the dictatorship of the proletariat, was to be accomplished via the formation of what Gramsci called the "integral state." Such a war of position – a struggle that could last decades or even centuries – would require more than the hegemony of what Gramsci called "civil and political society." In the Soviet context, it would *presuppose* communist hegemony within the process of

subjectivity formation, a requirement that pointed toward philosophy itself as the central arena of struggle. This would not just include Marxist thought, but would draw broadly from all resources of critical thought and action underpinning the political project. Ideological superiority, in turn presupposes a *method* of systematized reflection on the question of the Ideal, understood to mean, in Evald Ilyenkov's words, "the objectifying and disobjectifying of collective human activity" (2016: 242).

### On ideology: Ilyenkov's ideal

The formation of subjectivities is a complex process overdetermined by ideas, by a struggle over ideas across social relations. Here, Evald Ilyenkov makes an intervention of fundamental importance within Soviet thought. His study of the *ideal* and *ideality* can be read as a very necessary deepening of Marxist philosophical thought on fundamental questions underpinning the explicitly political functioning of ideology.<sup>8</sup>

Ilyenkov understands the *ideal* in "in its universal form, rather than through reference to its particular varieties" (Ilyenkov 2014: 26). Here, as Alex Levant, author of the superb new English translation of *Dialectics of the Ideal*, reminds us, "universal" in Russian is also understood as "common to all," a point emphasized by Ilyenkov as well.<sup>9</sup> This is an important entry point into the study of this concept, differentiating Ilyenkov's approach. For what he terms the "anti-materialist camp" understands the ideal as that which is "partial ... [of] already-particular specifications" (25). Such a formulation is the direct negation of Ilyenkov's understanding of the ideal as a fundamental totality "common to all," a permanent aspect of the presence of thought in everyday life:

The 'ideal' here is understood in its entirety, as a complete totality of possible interpretations – those already known, and those yet to be invented.<sup>10</sup> (26)

The ideal is the substrate of thought;<sup>11</sup> it is presupposed by knowledge and consciousness. The ideal does not refer to conscious states in our

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8. In ways that are broadly similar to the reading on ideology offered in the same years by Louis Althusser – the specifics of which would require separate treatment.
  9. See footnote no. 2 by Levant for the references to Ilyenkov (Ilyenkov 2014: 25).
  10. Note the use of the word "invented," suggesting an emphasis on the social, political aspect, for who else will invent new ideas other than people, in the process of subjectification, of becoming, in struggle?
  11. For Ilyenkov, thought is a "special objectivity, differing from the objectivity of natural processes" (Ilyenkov 2016: 242).

brain; it is not a synonym for consciousness (understood as that “thing” in our minds which give us “self-awareness”). It is a core, unavoidable, ever-present, and constant artifact (component) of the social, for who else will invent new ideas other than people, through the struggles for becoming (through activation and formation of the self)? Because of this immanence, the ideal is a fundamental battleground (or object) of political struggle. The ideal is the complete totality of possible interpretations, the system of ideas that one has always-already internalized. But it is always possible, with exposure to the social, for other systems of thought to emerge and displace that which has been internalized.

Louis Althusser (2006) has written that it is the social that enters the individual, and one can read in Ilyenkov an amplification of this sentiment: the problematic of the ideal emerged in human thought in order to make sense of:

... [the] distinction and even an opposition between the  *fleeting mental states of an individual* – completely personal, possessing no universal meaning for another individual – and the *universal*, necessary and, because of this, objective forms of knowledge and cognition independent of one’s existence reality. (Ilyenkov 2014: 29)

Knowledge is an objectively present, a necessary and fundamental part of everyday life, and not the whims of individual mental psychology, but something much more serious, something standing above the individual mind and entirely independent of it. Here, Ilyenkov harks back to Plato’s views about *ideas* being “universal, commonly-held image-patterns, clearly opposed to the individual [mind]” (2014: 30), to make the very Marxist point that it is in social relations that the universal ideal – that which is necessary for the functioning of society – is grounded. The ideal is:

... the universal form and law of *existence* and *change* in diverse, empirically perceptible phenomena given to a person. [It] becomes apparent and established in its “pure form” only in historical forms of intellectual culture, in the socially significant forms of its expression (its “*existence*”). And not in the form of “*fleeting mental states of an individual*” ... (32)

What conditions the processes of subjectification and socialization are what Ilyenkov calls the “*universal norms of that culture* within which an individual awakens to conscious life, as well as requirements that he must internalize as a necessary law of his own life-activity” (30). By “universal,” Ilyenkov does not mean some eternal, unchanging “human nature” which is located in *any* culture in general, but rather *that which has become normalized* as a universal (widely disseminated

and expected, internalized), in other words, that which is *hegemonic*, through the specific effects of a political struggle.

### Describing the war of position: Ilyenkov on formal vs real socialization

The prominent contemporary Soviet-Russian philosopher Sergey Mareev (a student of Ilyenkov) notes that after translating George Orwell's *1984* in the mid-1970s, Ilyenkov concluded that Orwell's "communist anti-utopia wonderfully demonstrated the evolutionary tendencies of a society of private property holders, even though Orwell himself ascribed it to 'communism'" (Mareev 2015: 281). These words are Mareev's summary of what Ilyenkov said to him after showing him the typewritten pages of his Orwell translation. To the extent that the pervasive alienation painted by Orwell was present in Soviet everyday life, Ilyenkov took it to indicate the continued presence of specific remnants of bourgeois society – rejected by the socialist revolution, but as yet not fully overcome in everyday life. In fact, such thoughts were already on his mind long before translating Orwell. For instance, Ilyenkov writes in his 1966 essay *Marx and the Western World*:<sup>12</sup>

The nightmares of Aldous Huxley and George Orwell are in fact – independent of the illusions of the authors of these anti-utopias – painting not at all the evolutionary perspectives of socialist societies, but rather the terrifying perspective of development of the private-capitalist forms of property holding. By painting "contemporary communism" through external signs and symptoms, these authors are in fact drawing out the actual line of drift of the commodity-capitalist formation/order of life. This is precisely why these nightmares are so scary to the humanist-intellectual of the "western world." Us they don't scare. We understand these tendencies as our previous and not yet completely lived-through yesterday. (Mareev 2015: 283–284)

It is easy to accuse Ilyenkov of excessive optimism about Soviet intellectuals being deeply aware of the risks and political dangers posed by lingering ideological and economic structures from the capitalist past. But one can easily detect in his other writings, written for a different context, a deep worry about the seemingly persistent Soviet inability (especially in political thought) to overcome these vestiges of the pre-revolutionary society. In a gloomy entry written in January 1968 to his close friend Yuri Zhdanov, Ilyenkov is repeatedly

12. An essay written to be delivered at an international symposium in April 1966, held in the US. Ilyenkov, however, was unable to attend.

apprehensive about the emergence of a “rotten timelessness” in everyday life:

... [when] everyone who can do something interesting retreats in their burrows, and all kinds of uncouth evil crawls out, not having forgotten anything, nor having for that matter learned anything; it crawls out hungrier, angrier and more bastardly than ever before. (Mareev 2015: 280)

Ilyenkov never ceased to ponder the political dynamic of Soviet society, a dynamic inseparable from the question of the movement towards socialism, but also explicitly connected to questions of hegemony and ideology, even if expressed (as in these passages) through the lens of Marxist political economy. Though not a frequent user of the word “alienation,” Ilyenkov understood the movement towards socialism as emerging out of the need to transcend the problematic of “alienation” rooted in capitalist property relations. As Mareev explains (2014: 281–282), “in the first stage of this process, by rejecting private property, in its ‘private form’, it gives birth to private property in its *universal* (general state property) form, intensifying alienation.”

To clarify the complexities of such dialectical transformations following from the Soviet state’s initial political actions against capitalist property relations, Ilyenkov makes a distinction between *formal* and *real* socialization. In that same 1968 letter to Yuri Zhdanov, he agrees with his friend’s description of current Soviet reality as:

... a phase on the road from formal “socialization” to a *real* one – a point which is, unfortunately, still far away. It is sad, however, that in all of this movement there is little clear theoretical understanding, and too much in the way of phrases, lots of demagoguery, from which the process flows in such a tortured way, and with such delays [as to] almost overcome the gains from the formal socialization process itself, if they don’t outright reduce those gains to zero. (Mareev 2015: 282)

Such complex contradictions could only be resolved through the establishment of hegemony (though Ilyenkov does not use this concept), together with associated hegemonic apparatuses, but that itself required (as Ilyenkov clearly understood and noted repeatedly) *theoretical clarity* and creativity. It is easy to note the clear connecting line between what Lenin was worried about in the 1920s evolution of Soviet power and its political apparatuses, and that same problematic, still unresolved, in the late sixties.

The way out of this situation, Ilyenkov argued, was through a better *theoretical understanding* of the *formal-real* relation, a process he

called *concrete historicism*. This meant asking “which concrete social-economic measures can assure maximum advantages, created by the fact of formal-juridical socialization of property?” (Mareev 2015: 282). Formal facts, such as the total nationalization of all capitalist private property and its juridical outlawing, should not be declared as an arrived-at *reality*. For one, the nationalization of capitalist factories resulted in their transformation into *universal*, state property, a relation that was still qualitatively closer to the capitalist private form (as far as working people in those factories were concerned) than to a qualitatively new stage as a property relation *away* from capitalism. Similarly, juridical or bureaucratic proclamations that “advanced socialism had arrived in Soviet society” did nothing to impose such a reality, *in the absence* of such social formation in everyday life.

Ilyenkov understood that the movement toward socialism was vastly more complex than the accomplishment of what he called “rough communism” (the initial acts of forced appropriation of capitalist wealth and the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat). The attention focused on this act of appropriation of private property also contained a dangerous illusion. The movement toward real socialization, then, would require a Gramscian war of position, a slow and deliberate struggle. *Real* socialization can only emerge when the transformation of the material substrate that underpins human activity leads to another transformation of this human-shaped materiality into *thought*, into an “idealization” of the material transformation into one of systematized ideas about such transformations. Ilyenkov termed this systematization of ideas the *materialisation of the ideal*. His view of the ideal was distinct from orthodox Soviet Marxist and liberal notions, according to which the “ideal” arose from perceptions grounded within individual minds.

After “solidifying” into internalized ideas *about* specific ways of living daily life, the process reverts to exerting material effects once again, completing and continuing the dialectical spiral of its internal logic. The writing (brilliantly translated by Alex Levant) is sublime in its elegance describing this spiral:

The process by which the material life-activity of social man begins to produce not only a material, but also an ideal product, begins to produce the act of idealisation of reality (the process of transforming the “material” into the “ideal”), and then, having arisen, the “ideal” becomes a critical component of the material life-activity of social man, and then begins the opposite process – the process of the materialisation (objectification, reification, “incarnation”) of the ideal. (Ilyenkov 2014: 197)

The *ideal* for Ilyenkov, as Levant notes here, is thus the moment which defines *both* the activity of human thought, *and* the material (objective) world. Nothing is accessible to humans outside this moment of the ideal, understood as this transformation continuum: material life-activity → materialization of this activity into ideas (ideality) → a new instance of material life-activity shaped directly by the previous systematization (solidification) of ideas. It is a process of human *becoming*, or subjectification.

Understanding the ideal and the material as two objectively separate categories of phenomena, means seeing the *dynamics* of the constant transformation of the ideal into the material and vice versa, through the medium of social relations and social activity. It makes the common Marxist insight of how social relations condition our consciousness much more explicit. This dynamic describes actual human life, socially grounded, but occurring through this specific constant transformation. The ideal here is a *universal*:

... having arisen, the “ideal” becomes a critical component of the material self-activity of social man, and then begins the opposite process – the process of the *materialisation* (objectification, reification, “incarnation”) of the ideal. (Ilyenkov 2014: 37)

Ilyenkov’s materialization of the ideal is another way of saying the establishment of a particular *culture*, the formation of new patterns of everyday life – or, if not new in the absolute discrete sense, then at least *new* as a general tendency within daily life. This of course also presupposes a degree of hegemony, for otherwise the inertia of the *old* would persist. It is a mark of continuity within the radical currents of Soviet thought from Vygotsky to Ilyenkov, that this concern over questions of reshaping everyday life, of establishing a *persistent* culture of the movement towards socialism, remains central. Ilyenkov describes culture (building on Plato and Hegel) as:

... the whole general ensemble of social institutions that regulate the life-activity of the individual – as well as its household, moral, intellectual and aesthetic manifestations ... everything that constitutes a distinctive culture of a “certain polis,” a state, everything that is present called the culture of a people or its “intellectual culture” in particular, the laws of living the current polis in general ... (2014: 34)

This is another articulation of Lenin’s calls for emphasis upon building a new Soviet culture, as well as Vygotsky’s emphasis on a movement toward freedom through human development, through a specific materialization of the ideal, and the establishment of what Ilyenkov called a

new *Ideality* which shape a new, different cultural space. Or, to complete this line of thought and bring it to our contemporary situation, we have within Soviet Marxism a strong drive to overcome *proletarianization* as the first prerequisite toward fuller human actualization.

### **Theoretical poverty of Soviet thought in everyday life: Ilyenkov's letter to the Communist Party Central Committee**

Sometime in the late 1960s, Ilyenkov wrote a letter to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.<sup>13</sup> It is not known whether the letter was read by any of the Central Committee members. *On the Situation with Philosophy* is an extraordinary document, for it illustrates how the struggle for hegemony was being lost in the Soviet Union long before Gorbachev's perestroika announced the hegemony of liberalism.

Ilyenkov begins by noting that Marxist-Leninist philosophy must play a key role in the communist transformation of the world. Yet, "practically everywhere, its influence on events, and on the development of the social and natural sciences is approaching zero." Note, this is being written in the late 1960s. Corresponding with this disappeared influence, the void left by the absence of Marxist-Leninist theory and philosophy is promptly filled by the influence of other schools of thought, namely liberalism and positivism. Specifically, Ilyenkov notes the increasingly dominant position of *neo-positivism*, which through mathematical logic, cybernetics, is shaping the social sciences with its concepts ("information," "backchannels," "effectiveness," "optimization," all from cybernetics). In the humanities, there is the influence of "anthropological-existential constructions," partly as a reaction to this "cybernetic-mathematical aggression," but ultimately this response goes overboard and is expressed "in opposition to 'rationality' itself," leading to sympathies with religiosity, theology (Berdiaev, Soloviev) – in other words, a preference for the most explicitly reactionary and anti-communist ideological currents of Russian thought.

In political economy, while it is true that "everywhere" one encounters the study of Marx's *Capital*, the problem is that almost everyone assumes that the method described by Marx is *not* applicable to the problematics faced by the Soviet economy. Thus, Ilyenkov calls attention to an absurd paradox that has emerged in this field: Soviet

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13. All quotations below are from the Russian text: <http://caute.ru/ilyenkov/texts/epis/ckp.html>

economists have a much more in-depth and sophisticated knowledge of capitalist economies than of the Soviet economy itself! Marx's method ensures that a critique of the West German economy would be sound, but his dialectical method is not applied to the study of the Soviet Union, where pure *empiricism* reigns instead!

Thus, there is a systemic crisis in thought, expressed in the lack of elementary understanding of Marx's method. But the crisis is most severe in philosophy itself. In Ilyenkov's words, "there is the total and absolute lack of understanding of philosophy's subject of study as a special science." The fact that philosophy is the meta-science that enfolds and shapes the thinking of all other realms of knowledge is, with few exceptions, lost. As a result, there is a lack of clarity on what philosophy is supposed to be doing in the "common task of building communism," which means that philosophy has become "detached, separated from other sciences and the party." The end result of this "poverty of Marxist philosophy and theory" is the "mutual alienation of political economy and philosophy," manifested as "the absence of philosophy's influence on political economy, on the method of its thought."

Ilyenkov then outlines how Soviet Marxism entered this crisis, whereby dialectical logic was replaced in practice by mathematical (formal) logic. An interesting example here is offered by his friend Alexander Zinoviev's dissertation titled *The Ascent from the Abstract to the Concrete (based on K. Marx's "Capital")*, a work identical in title and topic to Ilyenkov's own dissertation, but focused on expressing this dialectical movement through methods of formal logic. This shift away from dialectical logic and into positivist formalism, Ilyenkov reads as the movement from Lenin's observation of dialectics as a logic and a theory of knowledge, to an understanding of philosophy as "diluted in the endless sea of the methodological problems of specific sciences." This leads to a dilettante use of philosophy, with the appearance of "Marxist physics," "dialectics in biology," etc. with scientists ultimately dismissing philosophy in general, as superficial pseudo-science that offers amateurish answers to what they, the physicists, engage with on a professional level. Thus:

... the Marxist-Leninist understanding of philosophy (and the special objects of its work) quietly have been replaced by PURELY POSITIVIST INTERPRETATIONS (Tolstykh 2009: 381; emphasis in original)

The education of new cadres in Soviet philosophy, dedicated to the revolutionary transformation of society was stalled. In 10 to 15 years,

Ilyenkov warned, “there won’t be a single person left in the country who would be working with philosophy in its Marxist-Leninist understanding.” The timeframe he outlined corresponded roughly to 1985, the midst of perestroika with the almost-complete hegemony of liberal ideology in full swing across Soviet society.

Before returning to Vygotsky in the last section of this article, I want to emphasize this problematic of human freedom, hegemony, culture, philosophy, and revolutionary politics as the foreground of creative Soviet Marxism, because in a number of registers, the hegemonic interpretation of Soviet Marxism today (but also of the very meaning of the Soviet revolutionary project) bogs down in the *details* of political events, rather than the *strategic* depth of the ideas that were partially implemented by its most powerful thinkers and intellectual traditions. In other words, some of the effects of collectivization and industrialization on everyday life are over-studied with great statistical detail, along with volumes replicating the most dour and stale strands within Soviet Marxist thought (Diamat and Istmat, for instance). Similarly, as previously noted, Vygotsky is over-studied as a “psychologist,” and Ilyenkov as a “Hegelian.” As a result, the actual radicalism of Vygotsky’s and Ilyenkov’s thought (though mostly unrealized on the level of ideological space) becomes muddled and buried.

### From hegemony and ideality to *Perezhivanie*

Beyond noting the crucial importance of hegemony for preparing a specific configuration of the *ideal* as a *logic of everyday life*, we need to think about the *actual* state of everyday life, a way to capture the *effects* of the political struggle, of hegemony and ideology across Soviet society (and equally so, of our own society today). Or put differently, how does one detect the materialization of the ideal into the solidification, concretization of the ephemeral as actual practices of lived life under the political hegemony of the new Soviet state (or the state we are currently facing)?

Vygotsky must have understood this insight, that while thoughts and language are shaped by social relations, this condition is insufficient as a formulation of the functioning of ideology. What is necessary here is a movement *beyond* ideology and hegemony as separate (even if related) concepts, a movement which *synthesizes*, fuses both into a new overarching concept. We need to *generalize* the effects of ideological structures and hegemony in a political space, to better understand how they are shaping the general trajectory of society.

Hegemonic and ideological effects are *dynamic*; they fluctuate constantly in the fields of political struggle. Furthermore, and ultimately – once the ideal has become materialized – they infuse “consciousness,” and thus “disappear” into the vast field that marks everyday life (with its innumerable practices, lives, utterances, desires, etc.). To understand the functioning of hegemony and ideology, then, requires a conceptual framework which captures this dynamic *on all levels of abstraction*, and can analyze the entire process of the materialization of the ideal, and its inverse movement. Or, to paraphrase Vygotsky, we need to study human consciousness, but without the conceptual baggage and limitations brought by previous conceptualizations of consciousness, either from liberal philosophy in all its modes (i.e. positivism), or from its Marxist articulations (which would serve as a starting point of a necessary transvaluation of consciousness, rather than as a completed theoretical edifice). I would like to propose that Vygotsky’s concept of *perezhivanie* contains this synthesis of hegemony, ideology, freedom, struggle, and ideality.

### **Vygotsky’s *perezhivanie*: the unity of hegemony and ideology in everyday life**

In his 1932–33 lectures on child psychology, Vygotsky writes that *perezhivanie* is the most complete “dynamic unit of analysis … in which all main features of consciousness are given as such” (Zavershneva 2014: 91). This is a very general statement, but it makes an important point: consciousness, in all its complexity, can now be approached much more *concretely*, through a materialist “metaphysics” (in which a materialist ontology is approached through a phenomenological lens).

What he previously described only through very general language (consciousness as a dynamic semantic system, or a reflex of reflexes) was now much more specific and explicit. Here it should be noted that Ekaterina Zavershneva renders *perezhivanie*<sup>14</sup> as “intellectual and emotional life experience” (2014: 78). The Russian word has multiple simultaneous connotations beyond experience, including: desire, yearning, worry, a certain emotional predisposition, a mood, but also overcoming or making it through. An alternative rendering into English would be “lived-through experience” as the fusion of the “here and now,” a condition which includes the distilled and internalized past (socialization effects, ideological effects).

14. Derived by Vygotsky from the German word *Erlebnis*, often used by German psychologists between the two world wars (Zavershneva 2014: 90).

Perezhivanie, Vygotsky writes, denotes the “indivisible unity of personality and situation.” This is the unity of a “personality making sense of a situation,” as Zavershneva notes (2014: 91), but it can also be said to describe a process of *subjectification*, the articulation of human becoming as always-already-social.<sup>15</sup> The act of consciousness, itself a core aspect of the human condition, is now rephrased as *experience*, which is inseparable from a specific *situation* that one is in, at the moment, in the here-and-now (or, through the internalization/sublimation of a situation one has already experienced in the past). Vygotsky notes that perezhivanie “includes . . . the environment in its relation to me, and, on the other hand, the peculiarities of my personality . . .” (Zavershneva 2014: 91). The experience, whatever it is, is impossible without the situation, without *that* which is “external” to us, in the sense of it being an object of our activity. This is to say that consciousness (perezhivanie) forms only through, and together with, the *social*, for the social is another way of describing the Other, that which is “external” to us, but only in-forming the necessary and indivisible (inescapable) complement to our being (our personality).

In other words, in this one concept Vygotsky manages to concentrate the entire *way that* consciousness emerges through the dynamics of everyday life, shaped by the various ideological systems, state or otherwise, but also through the internalized experiences directly conditioned by hegemony and the related configurations of the ideal. Though left unfinished in its totality as a philosophical concept, it is easy to sense the internal logic of Vygotsky’s thought as it settled on perezhivanie. Remember, Vygotsky, like the other thinkers dedicated to the revolutionary Soviet project, understood the need for hegemony. The goal was the formation of a new Soviet culture. This was the main political goal of the initial revolutionary transformation, the core prerequisite for reshaping everyday life, and to this effect perezhivanie opened the door to further reflection on the *specifics* of how people lived their life under the new social conditions.

Perezhivanie was a revolutionary intervention for yet another related political reason. As a “materialist” approach to ontology, it reinforced Vygotsky’s overall focus on imagining the movement toward freedom, understood as the process of human development. In this sense, it marked an intervention in the Marxist thought of the 1930s, as an outline of a *materialist metaphysics*. Clearly, this dimension

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15. A formulation similar to how Louis Althusser characterized subjects formed under the constant and permanent effects of ideology: one is “always-already a subject” (Althusser 2006).

of philosophical thought was “in the air,” given the immense influence exerted by Heidegger and his *Being and Time* (2010), *among others*. But in Vygotsky’s outline of consciousness-as-perezhivanie, such a metaphysics addresses the problematic of the materiality of lived life, specifically, of lived life in a society undergoing a *revolutionary* transformation – even if eventually unsuccessful – away from being and subject. The focus is deeply embedded in the ongoing project of social transformation.

The materialization of the immaterial – this effort to map out the topology, but also to find a way to even talk about it on a high level of abstraction – this focus on capturing that which is ephemeral-yet-concrete in political struggle, represents the outlines of a *new political logic*. Perezhivanie is a move away from consciousness as an internal Truth (empirical truth, Cartesian reason, thing in the brain, etc.); in fact, it is a movement *against* truth in this sense, and a focus on the formation of *culture*.

With perezhivanie, consciousness becomes about the veiling, concealing and un-concealing of political phenomena, as the struggle for hegemony (or against it) produces a constant stream of social effects, reshaping the patterns of everyday life. It is this process of becoming, also known as *struggle* within revolutionary Marxism, that should be the focus as we, contemporary Marxists, continue to engage and develop this Vygotskian concept.

On the level of philosophy, the direction of Vygotsky’s thought here occupies terrain similar to that of his contemporary, Martin Heidegger (even if on a totally different political trajectory) and the German philosopher’s attempt at radical deconstruction, unlinking, undoing, unbounding (*Abbau*). This term, it should be remembered, was first used by Marx in the *Grundrisse*, followed by Heidegger’s teacher Edmund Husserl, and only then by Heidegger in the *Ground-work of Phenomenology* (1988, 2010), before culminating in the thought of Jacques Derrida, Sarah Kofman, and in Alain Badiou’s *Truth* today (understood in terms of procedure, the Event, *not* as some absolute Truth).

## Conclusion

Placing Vygotsky in this intellectual constellation transforms readings of Soviet Marxism. Though unfinished, and articulated only through various *traces* and utterances that Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari would later-on call “lines of flight,” we can now propose that the most radical currents of Soviet philosophical thought approached philosophy (a few decades before Louis Althusser’s

explicit assertion that philosophy is class struggle in theory) as a core part of the political struggle against the enemies of the revolution. Secondly, in figures like Vygotsky and Ilyenkov (as well as others yet to be excavated and brought to the English-reading audience), the struggle in philosophy was waged precisely through attempted *deconstructions* on a vast scale guided by a clear understanding of the need to engage with the connected problematics of hegemony, ideology, the processes of becoming, and the logic of a will to power. In other words, were we to continue to read Soviet Marxism as a dogmatic and dour condensation of the most obvious points from Marx and Lenin, we would miss the *entirety* – no matter how incompletely articulated – of its radical transformative dimension.

The struggle for political power (perhaps better rendered from Russian into English as political *force or strength*), especially in the context of a society in the midst of revolutionary convulsions, demanded new ideas, outlining the emerging horizon of the possible. This is a reminder for us today, that revolutionary politics is *impossible* without the constant production of ideas, without the constant functioning of the abstract-concrete-abstract spiral (or to use Ilyenkov's words, without the process of the materialization of the ideal). The moment creativity in the fields of knowledge-formation ceases, the revolutionary horizon narrows down; it shrinks before disappearing altogether. The greatest enemy for revolutionary politics under conditions of capitalism is the ever-present "default" condition of proletarianized logic (understood in the sense articulated by Stiegler). Widespread across all parts of daily life, it systematically discourages philosophical thought.

This was viscerally understood by both Vygotsky and Ilyenkov, and goes a long way to explain the extreme intensity and drive they brought to their efforts. Ilyenkov, for instance, essentially destroyed his career in the Soviet academy, early on in 1953, when together with his close friend Vladimir Korovikov he declared that "there is no dialectical materialism, but simply materialist dialectics" (Ilyenkov 2016). This seemingly subtle inversion was interpreted by many as an act of suicide, given its interpretation as a radical heretical act. It was not suicidal in the least bit; for Ilyenkov it was a profoundly necessary *political step*, to launch a broadside against the increasing stultification of Soviet Marxism, as an attempt to introduce a radical course correction in the field of ideas. His suicide came much later, in the 1970s, by which point he had clearly decided that the battle for hegemony in ideas was lost.

The road to human freedom in the Soviet Union *required* both mastery over others, such as reactionary forces along with the ideological frameworks of the past, and the formation of new hierarchies (even if they were understood to be temporary, to be overturned yet again in the future). Soviet thought had to maintain its commitment to *deconstruction*, transvaluation, and undoing/redoing of everything the materialization of the ideal produced through the political struggle unleashed by the revolution. In a sense this is the most concise way to summarize Vygotsky's drive towards a new science of psychology, or Ilyenkov's efforts to lay the foundations of a dialectical logic (noting repeatedly that Marx left us with a worked-out *example* of such logic in *Capital*, but without the philosophical framework to generalize it).

Perhaps this is one of the enduring lessons we can learn from these Soviet thinkers, that in our current situation there is a need to re-learn to be comfortable with such approaches to questions of the will to power, hegemony and ideology. The struggle for human freedom – articulated no doubt through a deep commitment to egalitarianism in everyday life – cannot sustain itself otherwise.

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