

A contribution to the IFI discussion on the dialectics of the logical and historical

Corinna Lotz

Ilyenkov's book *The Dialectics of the Abstract and Concrete in Marx's Capital* is about developing a "method of inquiry" – i.e. a theory of knowledge.

In Chapter 4 *Logical Development and Concrete Historicism*¹ Ilyenkov tries to unravel the complex way in which we develop scientific concepts. Albeit in a rather disguised form, he champions the need to start from the *present* – the most developed form of a thing or process. He says this is best done with a logical method. The search is on to discover the "elementary essence" of the object or process being examined. He critiques prevailing forms of positivism both in the USSR and the West, emphasising the need to deploy opposite forms of inquiry – both logical and historical.

In preferring the "logical mode of considering reality", Ilyenkov is in tune with Marx's approach in the *Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859)² where Marx coined the famous aphorism that "human anatomy contains the key to the anatomy of the ape". In other words, it was only by examining the most historically advanced form of society that Marx could truly understand earlier forms of economic development. For Ilyenkov, the historical plays a subordinate, but still vital, "auxiliary" role (p.5). This approach was also developed in psychology by the Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky during the 1920s and is today being explored by Newton Duarte in Brazil.³

Marx was elaborating new categories to express the relations of capitalism: the commodity, value, surplus value, etc. A century later, Ilyenkov struggled for a theoretical approach to the problems of his own time (post-war USSR). He drew on Marx to justify his own critique of prevailing positivist methodologies.

The development of concepts to understand the present – which is the unfolding movement of history – is indeed "the problem of the creative continuity in the development of theory" and it is our living connection with both Marx and all those who developed his theories and concepts.

Perhaps amazingly, given that Ilyenkov published his controversial and heavily edited *The Dialectics of the Abstract and the Concrete* in 1960, he stole a march on US philosopher Thomas Kuhn's groundbreaking *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, which appeared two years later. Both philosophers opposed prevailing positivist, and a-historical doctrines. Ilyenkov's assertion that "the history of science itself serves as a kind of mirror for the history of the object" (p.3) is surely a foreshadowing of the Kuhnian approach which ushered in a new approach to understanding the history of science.

¹ Page references are to the [pdf on the IFI website](#)

² <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch01.htm>

³ ["Human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape"](#) –

The Dialectics in Vygotskian and Marxian Theory and the Historical-Critical Pedagogy in Brazil. Newton Duarte. 2004

[Vygotsky and the Dialectical Appropriation of Reality by Scientific Knowledge](#) by Newton Duarte. (presented at ISCAR 2011)

Ilyenkov critiqued what he termed “abstract historicism” – “devoid of concreteness” which actually led, he said, to a “crude anti-historicism” that turned into a “shameless apology for the existing state of things”, presenting capital as an “eternal” and “natural” relation. (pp.10-11)

Drawing on Ilyenkov’s work, the challenge remains to develop new categories and concepts that can advance our understanding of the PRESENT that can inform and guide our actions in the world.

As mortal, cognising human beings we are simultaneously logical and historical within ourselves and in relation to the biological- social world around us. The dialectical, law-governed movement of the world exists independently of us but also within ourselves as natural human beings. We exist as biological creatures in time – that is our inescapable *historicity*.

“Logic” and “history” are processes and practices that shape us and through the interaction of which we *make ourselves* as social, thinking human beings. We are the living embodiment of the historical and logical as individuals who are parts of a social world.

There are, of course, both unconscious and conscious forms of the dialectic. The “logic” of the information on our DNA shapes our *historical* development as biological organisms, the interaction between phylogeny and ontogeny, as Vygotsky explained, some years before DNA was discovered. By means of thought and language that social world is internalised, negated and reflected back outwards again.

The challenge is to grasp and extend our distinctly human capacity to develop knowledge through categories and concepts. Doing this is a NOT a “natural”, evolutionary process. It doesn’t just happen. It is a deliberate and complex *social practice*, involving the interaction of the logical with the historical, the part with the whole, the abstract with the concrete. That is what Ilyenkov fought for and what we are trying to do as the IFI.

The new arises as an incomplete moment of “semblance” that requires further “negations” that break with the old. To begin to make an assessment involves a negation of the *logical* (the new) into the *historical* (existing concepts and categories). The word “negation” is vital here. In assessing the new, we must simultaneously **not** “delete” but rather “preserve” the old, whilst not denying the new. It means examining the relationships between pre-existing concepts and the new as it bursts out of the present. Is there simply a continuation or an overturning of previous knowledge? This can be described as the “logicising of the historical and vice versa”.

“Logic” enters the historical in discovering how, as Ilyenkov says (p.6) the historically preceding is, paradoxically, inverted into the subsequent – i.e. the cause becomes an effect and the effect becomes a new cause. The “effect” “does not remain merely a passive result, merely a consequence,” he goes on to say, “but each newly arisen (higher) form of interaction becomes a new universal principle dominating all historically preceding forms”... which “begin to move according to laws characteristic of the new system of interaction in which they now function.” (p.7)

Developing a theoretical idea consists of the unity of the logical with the historical and “is an objective process of practice itself”. ⁴ In other words, we engage in this practice consciously as human beings engaged in activity. We seek to discover the

⁴ G Healy, Theory of Knowledge part 6. Nov-Dec 1986

logical within the historical, for example, in the UK's constitutional crisis over Brexit. The development of the British constitution is a *historical* process that reflects the economic and social development of British capitalism. The “logic” of today’s globalised, neoliberal form of capitalism has led to a situation where the existing constitution can no longer regulate or resolve the issues that have arisen – i.e. departure from the European Union, as well as the relationship of Scotland and Northern Ireland to England. Thus the “logical parts” of the state (judiciary, parliament, executive, inner-secret-security state) are in opposition to one another and cannot find a solution within the old form (the constitution).

In other words, through the “logical mode of critique of previous theories” (p4) the need to assert new categories and concepts becomes clear.