

Who failed? Failed who?

By Kyrill Potapov

I'm going to mainly focus my comments on the intro and first chapter of Žižek's *Sex & the Failed Absolute* (2019), in which he introduces the central question motivating his later thesis and reviews how it has been approached in prior work in contemporary philosophy. I go through this section chronologically, briefly picking out sections that I think may be of interest to Ilyenkovians, then directly address his critique of Ilyenkov and "Western Marxism". Taking inspiration from Žižek here, I have sometimes raised provocations in place of resolutions. Apologies for this style, I hope it raises productive questions!

Žižek's own thesis

Žižek's book is broadly motivated by this question: "If objective reality is in some sense *all there is*, the cosmos, how should it be structured so that subjectivity could have emerged in it and out of it?"

This is the familiar transcendental problem introduced by Kant. Žižek implies that the full terrain of this problem was laid out in the period between Kant and Hegel and all subsequent attempts to solve it just rehash those arguments and their limitations.

Žižek offers an impressively wide-ranging and concise survey of how different contemporary schools of philosophy have approached the question, with incisive rebuttals of each position. To massively simplify and reframe his multi-level review into three categories: people like Dennett, Metzinger and Ryle say everything is **object** and the subject is an illusion, while another group: New Materialists, poststructuralists... say everything is **subject or language**. (Ilyenkov might say: crude materialism vs. idealism). A third strand, including Sellars and McDowell, claim to have solved the problem whilst actually ignoring it and repeating Kant: with realms of objects) and subjects still split (*realm of laws: space of reasons*). It would be tempting to put Žižek (with his Lacanian system of subjects and signifiers) in the second strand, but he recognizes limitations here that resist this classification:

This is not enough since it just brings the transcendental logic to the end—in order to make the crucial step further, one should turn around the standard perspective: not "what is nature for language? Can we grasp nature adequately in/through language?" but "what language is for nature? How does its emergence affect nature?" Far from belonging to logo-centrism, such a reversal is the strongest suspension of logo-centrism and teleology, in the same way that Marx's thesis on the anatomy of man as the key to the anatomy of ape subverts any teleological evolutionism. Or, in Hegel, instead of asking what is Substance for Subject, how can Subject grasp the Substance, one should ask the obverse question: what is (the rise of the) Subject for (pre- subjective) Substance?

I think these are important questions for any Marxist¹. They help to frame the central question I quoted earlier. What's more, Žižek suggests that an answer must lie in dialectics and that a dialectical method must be developed to overcome the limitations of the dominant philosophical approaches he has surveyed.

¹ Both Zizek and Ilyenkov are very fond of Marx's passage on "the anatomy of man" in the *Grundrisse*, whilst it remains a bête noir for most mainstream Marxists, at least in what I've read about it e.g. David Harvey, Andrew Chitty, Gyorgy Markus. More on this later.

As an intentional provocation/dialectical counterpoint, Žižek names his method Dialectical Materialism. His point is not just that this is a fitting name to appropriate but that in moving directly through Diamat we can reach a new synthesis by which we can “break out” of the cycle of the various problems Žižek surveys and the central transcendental question itself. Žižek summarises “Stalinist” Dialectical Materialism (DM1) in four theses, then presents his new Dialectical Materialism (DM2) with four of his own.

DM1

1. Contrary to metaphysics, dialectics does not regard nature as an accidental agglomeration of things, of phenomena, unconnected with, isolated from, and independent of each other, but as a connected and integral whole, in which things, phenomena, are organically connected with, dependent on, and determined by each other.
2. Contrary to metaphysics, dialectics holds that nature is not a state of rest and immobility, stagnation and immutability, but a state of continuous movement and change, of continuous renewal and development, where something is always arising and developing, and something always disintegrating and dying away.
3. Contrary to metaphysics, dialectics does not regard the process of development as a simple process of growth, where quantitative changes do not lead to qualitative changes, but as a development in which the qualitative changes occur not gradually, but rapidly and abruptly, taking the form of a leap from one state to another.
4. Contrary to metaphysics, dialectics holds that internal contradictions are inherent in all things and phenomena of nature, for they all have their negative and positive sides, something dying away and something developing; and that the struggle between these opposites constitutes the internal content of the process of development.

DM2

1. Contrary to DM1 which ascertains that everything is connected with everything else in a complex network of interrelations, DM2 starts with separation, cut, isolation: to get to the truth of a totality, one must first tear out, isolate, its key feature, and then view the whole from this unique partial standpoint. Truth is not balanced and objective, it is subjective, “one- sided.”
2. Contrary to DM1 which emphasizes sudden leaps and violent “revolutionary” changes, DM2 focuses on the function of delays and “dead time” in gestation: for structural reasons, leaps happen too early, as premature failed attempts, or too late, when everything is already decided. As Hegel put it, a change takes place when we notice that it has already taken place.
3. Contrary to DM1 which emphasizes overall progress from “lower” to “higher” stages, DM2 perceives the overall situation as that of an unorientable structure: progress is always localized, the overall picture is that of a circular movement of repetition, where what is today “reactionary” can appear tomorrow as the ultimate resort of radical change.
4. Contrary to DM1 which interprets antagonism as opposition, as the eternal struggle of opposites, DM2 conceives antagonism as the constitutive contradiction of an entity with itself: things come to be out of their own impossibility, the external opposite that poses a threat to their stability is always the externalization of their immanent self- blockage and inconsistency.

I will return to these theses later, to the extent that they juxtapose the views of Ilyenkov. Though both thinkers are working through and against Diamat, I do not claim that Žižek and Ilyenkov's projects are analogous. I claim they have their own productive contradictions.

Žižek's critique of Ilyenkov and "Transcendental Marxism"

Žižek's comments on Ilyenkov must be read in the context of his overall critique of "Western Marxism" as represented by Lukács. I don't think this is a controversial framing: Mareev (2008) and others have productively followed a similar lineage. Žižek labels this "Western Marxism" because it defined itself against the crude materialism of Diamat, instead positing that "although humanity emerged out of nature's self- development, our notion of and approach to nature is always mediated through the social totality." Žižek gives some examples and political implications of this view and then suggests that Lukács came to develop a more modest version of this thesis.

Lukács aims at deploying social ontology as a special sphere of general ontology. The central notion in his attempt is the notion of human labor as the elementary form of teleology: in human labor, nature overcomes itself, its determinism, since natural processes become moments of the process of material realization of human goals. Against Aristotelian or Hegelian idealism which subordinates the totality of nature to a spiritual Telos, Lukács as a materialist sees social labor as the primary domain of teleology, a domain which remains a small part of nature and arises spontaneously out of biological processes.

The shift here is with respect to what is a "totality" but I'm not sure why this later "ontology" is incompatible with the young Lukács quoted earlier.² Ilyenkov describes consciousness as a "relatively independent sphere of activity" in the same ontological realm. The Real isn't a separate ontological level, it is just that which is not the object of our activity. Žižek's description of the social activity as "arising spontaneously out of biological processes" is a rhetorical flourish which sounds a little Christian Creationist e.g. "if evolution is real how could an eye suddenly evolve from not seeing to seeing?" Indeed Žižek ultimately dismisses Lukács' whole project with the suggestion that "it remains one in the series of big evolutionary visions of the cosmos as the ontological hierarchy of levels (matter, plants, animal life, and human spirit as the highest level known to us)." An animal is "higher" than a plant not ontologically but in terms of its role in the process of biological history.

Every concrete historical process of real development begins not on an empty spot and not in the ether of pure reason, but inside and on the basis of specific preconditions created by the processes that precede it in time. Biological development (the history of life) presupposes the existence of chemical conditions that are completely independent from life, as well as the specific circumstances that exist only on a few heavenly bodies. The society begins its history on the basis of preconditions created by nature. (Ilyenkov, *The Logical and the Historical*, 2018)

This account is likely too "harmonious" for Žižek but Ilyenkov's discussion here begins with the Marx passage about the anatomy of man as the key to the anatomy of the ape earlier cited in Žižek, and seems to offer answers to the very questions Žižek raises.

The important point here is that this new, historically later and more complex form of development does not at all remain only the 'result', only the passive 'consequence' of the preceding process of development. The 'result' actively transforms the conditions within

² Adrian Johnston (2019) has argued both that his early ontology is coherent and that it does not contradict his later work.

which it originally emerged. More than that, if this newly emergent form of development (whether it appears in nature, society or in thinking) turns out to be the beginning of the new direction in this development, the beginning of the qualitatively new form of interaction, then it necessarily transforms all the forms of development that historically precede it into external forms of its own realisation, into secondary forms of its own concrete being, into the ‘organs of its own body’.

Žižek is fond of referencing T.S. Eliot’s claim that every great work of art transforms not just its present, but every work of art that came before it. I’ll talk later about why I think Žižek is more at ease talking about art and film than rocks and bodies.

This is the backdrop against which Žižek introduces Ilyenkov’s *Cosmology of the Spirit* (2017). Žižek implies that this “phantasmagoria” illustrates the ultimate implications of Western Marxism: this is what it would take for a social totality that fully mediates objective reality. I am sympathetic with some of Žižek’s concerns.

Ilyenkov’s *Cosmology* presents a world in which, through Communism, there is finally no separation between subject and object because collective labour has transformed the whole world into human body and thought. Could we head to a world with no alienation? Should we? It’s difficult to know how seriously Ilyenkov is taking Spinoza. In other works he explains his understanding of Spinoza more systematically:

A stone, as a mode of substance, does not ‘think’. But it is included in the ‘substance’ that thinks, it is its mode, its part and therefore it is capable of thought if it is included into some organisation that is fit to think, such as, for example, if it becomes the organic part of the human body. (Ilyenkov, *Understanding the Abstract and the Concrete in Dialectics*, 2018)

This seems clear, in the conventional way that for Marx the world is the “inorganic body of man”, or indeed in the way that today Andy Clark describes “The Extended Mind”. However, the preceding sentence he seems to endorse a more problematic proposition: “Only the entire nature as a whole has thinking as its attribute, as its absolutely necessary property.” I am uneasy about the words “necessary” and “whole”, for reasons I’ll explain.

Ilyenkov’s phantasmagoria is propelled through man’s “cosmic duty” of destroying the world so it can start again. Žižek is essentially asking “Duty to who?” Žižek’s point about “the second death coming before the first” is that there is already no ultimate higher purpose giving meaning to human activity. Might we not, as DM2 proposes, just focus on progress which is localised and temporary? Could we not, as Keti Chukhrov suggests, focus on small islands of de-alienation, like the Zagorsk experiment, amidst the unrelenting and unforeseeable horrors of the wider world? I guess I want to make the retreat Zizek attributes to the later Lukács and recognize “the rose in the cross of the present.” My worry is that by letting go of the particular needs of people in particular situations, Ilyenkov does indeed open himself up to a Nietzschean cosmology. This is precisely the project of the far-right philosopher Nick Land (Right Accelerationism). Land turned his reading of Marx, combined with Nietzsche and Spinoza (through Deleuze) into a phantasmagorical cosmology in which humans have been left behind for the higher intelligence and drive of inhuman totalities.

To me, the move from giving a dialectical scientific description of the world to suggesting what we ought to do in that world only makes sense at the level of local practices. Here is how Ilyenkov describes this totality and its function:

Here we find that objective universal fact that in this world there are no isolated ‘things’ that exist outside of the universal³ connection, but there are only things that exist in the system of mutual relations. And this system of things that interact with one another (that is what Marx defines as concreteness) is always something that determines, and therefore is logically prior to, any particular sensuously perceived thing. Thanks to this dialectics there constantly emerges that original situation when a ‘relation’ is taken to be a ‘thing’, and a ‘thing’ – a ‘relation’... the challenge is to understand every thing as an element, as a moment of some concrete system of interacting things, as concretely singular manifestation of the known system of ‘relations’. (Ilyenkov, *Understanding the Abstract and the Concrete in Dialectics*, 2018)

Ilyenkov’s account here seems insightful and reminds me of contemporary Spinozist materialists like Levi Bryant (2014). But I do not see the need to supplement this kind of bottom up account with a corresponding top down account of progress against a totality of material facts. In *The Problem of the Ideal⁴ in Philosophy* (2018) Ilyenkov suggests that mankind must “master” the whole of human culture, to allow “the organisation of rational planning and control over the development of production and society in general”. Though the reference here is to “culture”, it includes the mastery of nature by science.

The power and attraction of communism consist in the fact that its ideals are reduced to facts, or, in other words, that they are deduced from facts. ‘If ideals are not based on facts ... they will only remain pious wishes, with no chance of being accepted by the masses and, hence, of being realised’, emphasised Lenin. (Ibid)

But the world itself cannot offer us meaning. Is it through the signs local to us, those ephemeral remnants of our alienation, that we attribute meaning, make judgements and remain subjects. Ilyenkov suggests this more rational organisation of society will reduce the “squandering of human activity”, including the production of “cartoons and gas chambers, abstract paintings and illegal drugs”. The point here is not to laugh at Ilyenkov’s biased list but to ask whether an unbiased list is possible. Žižek’s “second death” comes back to haunt us. Who “deduces” and for who? The point is not that you cannot derive an *ought* from an *is*. Alasdair Macintyre (2013), among others, have shown why you *must*⁵. But Macintyre turned away from Marxism⁶ because he could not reconcile it with the fact that what constitutes progress for a social group is particular to the activities of that group, can only be known through enculturation in those activities, and is incommensurable with the activities (and their constituted/constituting values) of other groups: why should the proletariat want to unite? This is partly why for Žižek any embodiment of unity or progress is reliant on and undermined by an excluded other.

³ Does “universal” mean *across the system* or that everything is connected with everything else. The first definition seems consistent with something like the money-form. The second is problematic: as Levi Bryant says: the people of Flint, Michigan are not connected with clean drinking water.

⁴ “Ideal” as in “vision” or “utopia” rather than his later famous sense.

⁵ As a counterpoint to Žižek’s ridicule of separate evolutionary levels, Macintyre argues that what is “good” activity for a dolphin is determined by its nature, environment and vulnerabilities, as distinct from what is “good” activity for a wolf. The different with humans is of course that we can reshape our conditions and activities (1999).

⁶ Though he’s now turned back, recognising that Marx’s text has the answers he sought.

Concluding thoughts

Overall, we could say that the main contrast between Ilyenkov and Žižek's dialectics is that for Ilyenkov *Aufhebung* is a productive ascent, while for Žižek it is a descent exposing the negativities that make any unity doomed to fail from the start. Both Žižek and Ilyenkov agree that things in themselves are contradictory, that these contradictions are irresolvable and that they are constitutive of the world and its parts. The difference is that while the contradiction is not resolved, for Ilyenkov it leads to a "higher, and more complex form of development" (Ilyenkov, *The Problem of the Ideal in Philosophy*, 2018). Žižek is arguing that if this was the complete picture, it would need to assume something like the phantasmagoria of *Cosmology of the Spirit*. There would be a summit at which the world will finally be fully known, fully unified and fully mediated – as "mastered" by a "fully and harmoniously developed Individual" (Ilyenkov, *The Problem of the Ideal in Philosophy*, 2018).

This is why Žižek says Western Marxism needs a "cut" in the totality. I agree with Žižek that subjectivity is itself such a cut. But I don't agree that accounting for it is beyond the reach of Western Marxism. Indeed Marx already theorized such a cut in the totality:

This intermediary situation [Mitte] always appears as the economic relation in its completeness, because it comprises the opposed poles, and ultimately always appears as a one-sidedly higher power vis-à-vis the extremes themselves; because the movement, or the relation, which originally appears as mediatory between the extremes necessarily develops dialectically to where it appears as mediation with itself, as the subject [Subjekt] for whom the extremes are merely its moments, whose autonomous presupposition it suspends in order to posit itself, through their suspension, as that which alone is autonomous. (2005)

This is why Ilyenkov's method is not a closed circle of "social totality" but a spiral in which subject and object are reproduced:

This dialectics of all real development, in which the universal necessary condition of the emergence of an object becomes its own universal and necessary consequence, this dialectical inversion in which the condition becomes the conditioned, the cause becomes the effect, the universal becomes the particular, is a characteristic feature of internal interaction through which actual development assumes the form of a circle or, to be more precise, of a spiral which extends the scope of its motion all the time, with each new turn. (2008)

The point to highlight from Žižek here is that alienation is a necessary part of the human "cut". Ilyenkov often acknowledges that there will be alienation after Communism but I have argued that its characterisation in his work is sometimes problematic. To find a midpoint between Žižek's unorientable space and Ilyenkov's potentially fully orientable space, let me quote Ray Brassier:

Communism does not release social activity in order to recover an estranged essence; a transcendent potentiality reified in exchange value and subordinated to capital's self-valorization. Rather, it perceives in the autotelic finality of money the estrangement of an estranging activity (social reproduction): abstract labour is the appearance of an essence, human sociality, whose actuality it contradicts; yet this contradictoriness, and the political practice consequent upon it, provides the ground for re-founding the actuality of sociality. What we see in abstract labour is the potentiality of our reproductive activity given tangible form in its sheer determinability. Abstract labour is a form assumed by reproductive activity, but it is not until it appears as estranged in the illusory autonomy of commodified labour

power that this activity, and the possibilities generated by our perceiving its estranged form, become appropriable as our own. (Unpublished)

Žižek's own solution relies on the "death-drive". To oversimplify, our drive to repeat the pursuit of something we lack. This could be a useful concept for "Western Marxism". The death drive is one way to explain what is "behind" how we imbue the world with value, so a feather duster can become sexualized, or how we form more complex "needs" like a job promotion. It is the biological core of human subjectivity behind the ideal. This is often reduced to satisfying natural instincts in the work of Leontiev and others. Ilyenkov's parallel account here (*Psychology*, 2010) does not get beyond Fichte and resembles JJ Gibson or CS Peirce. He begins, like Lacan and Zizek, by accounting for the formation of desire from the separation of the baby from the mother's breast, indeed Lacan and Zizek would even agree that the "obstacle" in the way of the object of desire forms the "image" that constitutes consciousness and subjectivity. What will be disappointing to anyone hoping Ilyenkov would introduce culture, history or social practice here, is that these are assumed externalities while our attainment of our objects runs smoothly. I have so far dealt with *the failed absolute*, so let's now talk about sex. What would it mean for the "image" of the "object" of our love to disappear due to a lack of obstacles? Here is another option for Ilyenkov's "fully harmoniously developed individual" which *Sex & the Failed Absolute* quotes from Gérard Wajcman:

Man is a denatured animal. We are animals sick with language. And how sometimes we long for a cure. But just shutting up won't do it. You can't just wish your way into animality. So it is then, as a matter of consolation, that we watch the animal channels and marvel at a world untamed by language. The animals get us to hear a voice of pure silence. Nostalgia for the fish life. Humanity seems to have been hit by Cousteau syndrome.

For Zizek the "self-closure" of the gap is never possible. We buy fast cars and expensive food yet those pesky obstacles remain. Zizek's point is of course that the obstacle is the very form of the drive. He gives Kant's example of a man offered a night in bed with a woman he has lusted after but knows he will be faced with the gallows if he chooses to have sex with her. Kant suggests that such structurings of the world are reflected in the structurings of our morality and desires. Lacan's answer is that the threat of the gallows is precisely what would give the image of the woman all the more charged with sexual longing. Indeed some can only find enjoyment with such "gallows" hanging over them. Ilyenkov cites Marx at the end of *The Problem of the Ideal in Philosophy* (2008), acknowledging the continued necessity to work through such a "struggle" to find meaning in human life, but his account here is limited. There need not be an incompatibility here, Freud's concept of resistance seems to work just fine with the functions Ilyenkov has up and running *Psychology*. As psychoanalyst Jonathan Lear phrases it "Psychic structure can continue to develop because the world outstrips my ability to appreciate it. As I develop complexity, so does the world as it exists for me. The internalization of structure can thus continue at ever higher levels of complexity and refinement."

What Žižek seems unwilling to recognize is that whatever the death-drive may be, it is surely formed out of some coherent system of material stuff (or else how could it constitute our species-being?). Let's return to an earlier concern here. What kind of a materialist is Žižek? In this book he asks himself this question early on.

What is materialism? We should get rid of the link between materialism and any notion of matter in a substantial sense, like small chunks of dense stuff floating in the air: today, we need materialism without matter, a purely formal materialism of waves, quanta, or whatever, which move in a dematerialized space.

Why does Žižek need this slither of crude materialism at the quantum level? I think it relates to why he loves to use movies to illustrate his ideas. In a typical example, he describes a short story in which “Events occur in the limited space of the protagonist’s flat, and it is as if the narrator is sitting in a movie theatre and reports on everything he sees on a screen that could be a window on a tenement’s wall”. So we are in Plato’s cave. Žižek hopes that the quantum realm will allow him to explain how we can affect the world whilst allowing him to just plausibly maintain a view of reality as a screen where brief images arise from the darkness. Žižek derives the *ought* from this *is* throughout his politics. *Sex and the Failed Absolute* begins:

In his “About Our Revolution,” Lenin mentions Napoleon as saying “On s’engage et puis . . . on voit .” Although it was never proved that Napoleon actually said or wrote these words (which can be freely translated as “One jumps into the fray, and then one figures out what to do next”), they certainly capture his spirit. But can we still afford this stance in our era, when “jumping into the fray” may also mean pressing the button (thereby launching a nuclear attack)? Today is the time for thinking, and “on se retire pour mieux voir, et puis . . . on attaque” seems more appropriate than its Napoleonic opposite: to see, one has to withdraw and acquire a minimal distance.

As Adrian Johnston (who’s done more than anyone to explain/value Žižek’s corpus) has noted, the problem here is that human needs and concepts are not structured on the quantum level⁷. Žižek’s cosmos of self-blockage, inconsistency and negativity does not play out well in a world where doorknobs and laptops tend to hold together just fine. Žižek is forced to deny that, in Ilyenkov’s words “The constitution of the atom remains the same as it was during the time of Descartes.” (Ilyenkov, *The Logical and the Historical*, 2018) Ilyenkov surpasses Žižek’s idealism through his own materialist dialectical method, showing how the function of “the death drive” and subjectivity can be accounted for through the reproduction of our life activity. Žižek meanwhile, highlights contrasting strands in Ilyenkov’s work and raises questions about its concrete implications.

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⁷ Johnston is a hugely innovative and perceptive philosopher, and, in contrast to his teacher, a real Marxist, materialist and logician. I would particularly recommend his new book on Hegel, Engels and materialism.

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