

Emancipation and Revolution from an Ilyenkovian perspective

Four abstracts for 23 September Panel discussion



Riley Lazarou, an (aspiring) independent scholar of materialist dialectics, logic, and cognition

Among Ilyenkov's many academic foes were the phenomenon of verbalism and its human thralls. Verbalism has many concrete forms -- dogmatism, scholasticism, neo-positivism, empiricism, scepticism, Bogdanovism, cramming... The universal among this set of diverse concrete phenomena is the division between mental and practical labour that is identical to class society, which results in the tendency for mental labor to engage not with material reality itself with and through words but merely with words themselves. This may result in an imagination that is less tethered to reality, less identical to the real external world in ideal form, and thus less able to identify its own defects and correct them. From Ilyenkov's writings, I get the impression that those afflicted by verbalism are often so unwittingly -- that the nature of verbalism is such that its agents may earnestly believe that they are furthering the cause of theoretical thought, materialist dialectics, communism, or whatever other idea's corpus they engage with. And I find that terrifying. The idea of becoming an "Ilyenkovian" who engages with Ilyenkov as dead thought rather than as living philosophy is anathema to me, a thing I intend not to let happen to myself, and as such I am exploring ways to diagnose and cure verbalism in myself, as a practice of intellectual hygiene. To that end, in this panel, I intend to speak briefly on the nature of verbalism, tools for its self-diagnosis, and tools for its self-negation. The main thrust of the method I am investigating revolves around facilitating the cognitive development of others, and ensuring that the things one's students are learning directly meet the resistance of objects, are put to the test, in practice. My focus, in keeping with the premise that mind develops dialectically and not mechanically, is on its self-development, rather than on recognizing and ameliorating verbalism in others -- but that is not to say that I don't welcome thoughts and feedback. These thoughts are still very much in embryo, and I welcome the collaboration of my comrades in the IFI.

Dr. Georgios Daremas, B.A., M.A. Sociology, PhD Social and political theory, Political Philosophy (former Sn. Lecturer University of Indianapolis – Athens campus).

The Dialectic of Emancipation in Marx and Ilyenkov

In my brief talk I will present the dialectical character of the concept of "emancipation" in distinction from freedom (negative and positive freedom) as 'negation of the negation'. I draw from Marxian thought the three social relationships (alienation, domination, exploitation) humanity needs to emancipate itself from as they are constituted in the class opposition of social labour to capital. I explore the function of 'the negation of negation' and its emancipatory potential in Ilyenkov's dialectical philosophy. In particular, I focus on his critique of the neopositivist programme of knowledge (in 'Activity and knowledge', Ilyenkov 1974) which 'negates' real knowledge of the object by reducing any object to its linguistic descriptiveness and the rules of language, severing the verbal

Emancipation and Revolution from an Ilyenkovian perspective

abstractions from the real object, conceived as a chaotic set of data, and then trying to solve the problem of the correlation of verbal knowledge to the self-standing independent of consciousness, object, by providing visualisations of the object (as in schooling and educational contexts) that, in effect, conform with the already established verbal formulae, thus incapacitating the capacity of imagination to produce on its own the image-making effect of its activity. Ilyenkov proceeds to negate this passive method of 'education' that negates true knowledge access to the objects (taught) by introducing the 'direct engagement with the object', a hands-on approach of the self-activity of the subject in handling and transforming the real, material object such that it provides a fuller knowledge of its actual constitution as it is in-itself.

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This talk looks at emancipation not only as freedom from oppression, exploitation, or inequality, but also as the process through which people develop the capacities needed to shape and govern social life together. Drawing on Marx and the Soviet philosopher Evald Ilyenkov, I argue that abilities such as thinking, creating, caring, organizing, and making decisions are not simply natural traits. They are developed through education, work, and social relationships.

From this perspective, the division of labour becomes an important question. Why are some people given more opportunities to learn, lead, and make decisions, while others are mainly expected to care, serve, or perform repetitive work? This is especially relevant to care work, gendered labour, education, and newer forms of digital and data labour.

I also use this approach to question two common ideas: first, that emancipation can be carried out for people by a small political vanguard; and second, that technology will automatically make society more free. Instead, I suggest that emancipation should be understood as a social process that expands everyone's ability to think, decide, and act collectively.

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Ilyenkov and the End of Soviet Philosophy

One article about Evald V. Ilyenkov asserts that his death signalled the end of Soviet philosophy as a whole. The author limited himself to this assertion, without addressing the content and meaning of this conclusion, or explaining what it meant and means today. However, while acknowledging this

Emancipation and Revolution from an Ilyenkovian perspective

conclusion as correct and relevant, it is necessary to clarify its meaning and significance precisely because it is not only correct but also extremely relevant today. In particular, because some authors believe that post-Soviet Russian philosophy is in the midst of a profound, extensive, and multifaceted crisis. To this conclusion, or, to put it more mildly, assumption, it should be added that the beginning of this crisis coincides with the end of Ilyenkov's philosophy and, therefore, the end of Soviet philosophy. Why?

Firstly, because the philosophy of Ilyenkov was the antithesis of official Soviet philosophy, i.e. the so-called Marxism-Leninism, and was such precisely because it was the Soviet rediscovery of the authentic, genuine philosophy of Karl Marx, and its development. Secondly, because Ilyenkov's philosophy was not only an expression of the essential contradiction of Soviet philosophy as a whole, i.e., in terms of classical Marxism and Marxism-Leninism, the superstructure of Soviet society, Soviet socialism (=the first phase of communism), but, thereby, also an essential contradiction of the formation and development of Soviet society, Soviet socialism (=the first phase of communism), i.e., in terms of classical Marxism and Marxism-Leninism, the basis. Thirdly, Ilyenkov's philosophy was a philosophical (theoretical) fixation of both the essential contradiction of Soviet philosophy as a whole, and a philosophical (theoretical) fixation of the essential contradiction of Soviet society, Soviet socialism (=the first phase of communism), but it was not a resolution, neither theoretical nor, especially, practical, of this essential contradiction. It is precisely this failure to resolve the essential contradiction, as well as this contradiction itself, that was inherited by both post-Soviet Russian philosophy and post-Soviet Russian reality, i.e. the superstructure and basis of Russian peripheral nomenklatura capitalism, being transformed in a distorted form into a contradiction of this capitalism. A contradiction that hasn't gone away, that is only deepening and intensifying, that is the de facto crisis of this capitalism, the crisis of Russian society, and the crisis of its "ruling elite," and which must be resolved sooner or later, otherwise its bearer will face destruction. This is evidenced, in particular, by the progress and preliminary results of the so-called "special military operation" (SMO).