

*From the History of Soviet Philosophy: Lukács – Vygotsky – Ilyenkov*, Sergey Mareev, Moscow: Kul'turnaia revoliutsiia, 2008

### Abstract

This review-essay explores the subterranean tradition of ‘creative Soviet Marxism’<sup>1</sup> through a recent book by the Russian philosopher Sergey Mareev, *From the History of Soviet Philosophy: Lukács – Vygotsky – Ilyenkov* (2008). It provides a brief overview of the history of Soviet philosophy so as to orient the reader to a set of debates that continue to be largely unexplored in the Western-Marxist tradition. Mareev offers a new account of the development of Soviet philosophy that not only explodes the myth that Soviet philosophy was simply state-sanctioned dogma, but also reinterprets the relationship between the key creative theorists so as to offer a new way of understanding its development that challenges several key-aspects of the dominant Western scholarship on this subject. He argues that alongside official Marxist philosophy in the Soviet Union – the crude materialism of *Diamat* and *Istmat* – there existed another line, which counterposed the central rôle of social activity in the development of human consciousness. He traces this line of anti-positivist theory from V.I. Lenin through Georg Lukács and Lev Vygotsky to Evald Ilyenkov – a pivotal figure in the ‘Marxian renaissance’<sup>2</sup> of the 1960s, but who ‘has to this day remained a Soviet phenomenon without much international influence’.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, Mareev disputes the rôle of A.M. Deborin as a precursor of the Ilyenkov school, and instead introduces Georg Lukács – a figure primarily recognised in the West as one of the founders of Western Marxism – into the line of development of creative Soviet Marxism. Furthermore, he reconsiders the rôle of V.I. Lenin and G.V. Plekhanov – the so-called father of Russian social democracy – in the development of Soviet philosophy. In the process, the author provides a detailed history of the emergence of *Diamat* and *Istmat*, and shines a spotlight on a figure widely recognised as the most important Soviet philosopher in the post-Stalin period – E.V. Ilyenkov.

### Keywords

Soviet Marxism, Russian philosophy, S. Mareev, E.V. Ilyenkov, G. Lukács, A.M. Deborin

### Towards a history of ‘creative’ Soviet theory

In a recent article on the history of Russian philosophy, Evert van der Zweerde recalls the joke that ‘in Russia nothing is more difficult to predict than the past’.<sup>4</sup> This bit of popular wisdom reflects an understanding that the past is more than something that happened before us, but a relationship that is always informed by present concerns.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the history of philosophy in the Soviet Union, as a constellation, continues to be reconfigured. I have sought to explore elsewhere the subterranean tradition of ‘creative Soviet Marxism’ – a body of thought that existed on the margins of official state-sanctioned Marxism in the

1. ‘Creative Soviet Marxism’ is a body of thought that developed side-by-side with official state-sanctioned Marxism, which was suppressed in the Soviet Union and not sufficiently studied in the ‘West’.

2. Oittinen 2005, p. 224.

3. Oittinen 2005, p. 228.

4. Van der Zweerde 2009, p. 178.

5. Benjamin 2003, p. 397. ‘The historian who proceeds from this consideration ceases to tell the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. He [sic] grasps the constellation into which his own era has entered, along with a very specific earlier one’.

Soviet Union and that has not been sufficiently studied in the ‘West’.<sup>6</sup> This ‘creative’ Soviet Marxism could be found in various academic disciplines, most notably in the 1920s and 1960s. What principally distinguished these currents from official Soviet thought was their departure from positivist conceptions of subjectivity. However, a history that draws out the historical and theoretical connections between these currents, which articulates creative Soviet Marxism as a coherent tradition, has yet to be written.

There is, however, an emerging body of work that illuminates various aspects of creative Marxist thought in the Soviet Union. For instance, in his recent book, *From the History of Soviet Philosophy: Lukács – Vygotsky – Ilyenkov* (2008), Russian philosopher Sergey Mareev offers a new account of the development of Soviet philosophy that not only explodes the myth that Soviet philosophy was nothing more than state-sanctioned dogma, but also reinterprets the relationship between the key creative theorists so as to offer a new way of understanding its development that challenges several key-aspects of the dominant Western scholarship on this subject. He argues that alongside official Marxist philosophy in the Soviet Union – the crude materialism of *Diamat* and *Istmat* – there existed another line, which counterposed the central rôle of social activity in the development of human consciousness. He traces this line of anti-positivist theory from V.I. Lenin through Georg Lukács and Lev Vygotsky to Evald Ilyenkov – a pivotal figure in the ‘Marxian renaissance’<sup>7</sup> of the 1960s, but who ‘has to this day remained a Soviet phenomenon without much international influence’.<sup>8</sup>

Mareev’s book is an interesting contribution to a growing body of work<sup>9</sup> on the legacy of the Ilyenkov school of Soviet philosophy. By reconsidering Ilyenkov’s rôle in the history of Soviet philosophy, Mareev reconsiders that history itself, challenging several key-features of its dominant understanding in Western scholarship. Specifically, he disputes the rôle of A.M. Deborin as a precursor of the Ilyenkov school, and instead introduces Georg Lukács – a figure primarily recognised in the West as one of the founders of Western Marxism – into the line of development of creative Soviet Marxism. Furthermore, he reconsiders the rôle of V.I. Lenin and G.V. Plekhanov – the so-called father of Russian social democracy – in the development of Soviet philosophy. In the process, the author provides a detailed history of the emergence of *Diamat* and *Istmat*, and shines a spotlight on a figure widely recognised as the most important Soviet philosopher in the post-Stalin period – E.V. Ilyenkov.

#### *A short course on Soviet philosophy*

English-language accounts of Soviet philosophy often begin with a justification for their object of inquiry. For example, David Bakhurst’s *Consciousness and Revolution in Soviet Philosophy* (1991), the main English-language work on the Ilyenkov school, begins with an

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6. The term ‘creative [Творческий]’ Soviet Marxism is used by some contemporary Russian theorists to distinguish certain currents in Marxist theory from ‘official’ Soviet Marxism (Maidansky 2009, pp. 201, 202; Tolstykh (ed.) 2008, p. 10; Levant 2008; Mezhuiev 1997). David Bakhurst uses the term ‘genuine’ (Bakhurst 1991, p. 3).

7. Oittinen 2005, p. 224.

8. Oittinen 2005, p. 228.

9. Such as is to be found here, for instance: <<http://www.caute.net.ru/ilyenkov/lib.html>>.

acknowledgement that ‘Soviet philosophy’ is sometimes seen as a contradiction in terms, and then proceeds to answer the question ‘Why study Soviet philosophy?’<sup>10</sup> Soviet philosophy has not received adequate attention in Marxist thought outside of the Soviet Union.<sup>11</sup> In fact, the term ‘Western Marxism’<sup>12</sup> often serves to distinguish certain currents in Marxist thought from theory developed in the Soviet Union, with Soviet Marxism appearing as its ‘other’ in various ways.

This near-dismissal of Soviet theory is, in part, a product of the view that Soviet-Marxist philosophy had largely been reduced to rehearsing a set of principles that were sanctioned by the state. As Vadim Mezhuev, a contemporary Russian philosopher from the Ilyenkov school recalls,

To be a creative, thinking Marxist, in a state at the head of which were Marxists, was the most dangerous thing of all. This is where the state had its monopoly. It preferred to recognize its opponents, rather than rivals within the sphere of its own ideology. You could be a positivist, study the Vienna School. . . . But to write a book about Marxism, that was dangerous. . . . This is the paradox, you see? That is why all the talent began to leave. It was impossible to work here. One had to rehearse dogma, and nothing else.<sup>13</sup>

This dogma had been codified in a famous text called *Dialectical Materialism and Historical Materialism*, which was first published as part of the *Short History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (1938), and is believed to have been written by Stalin. This text became ‘the Bible of Soviet philosophy’,<sup>14</sup> as philosophy in the Soviet Union changed from argument to simply referencing Stalin’s writings and speeches. According to Bakhurst, this text became ‘the definitive work on the subject [and] came to define the parameters of all Soviet philosophical discussion’.<sup>15</sup> Hence, Marxist philosophy in the Soviet Union became synonymous with *Diamat* and *Istmat*.

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10. Bakhurst 1991, p. 1.

11. Oittinen 2005, p. 228.

12. The term ‘Western Marxism’ is broadly associated with Perry Anderson’s influential work *Considerations on Western Marxism* (1976) where it is understood as a body of theory that emerged in the wake of the defeat of ‘Classical Marxism’, associated with names such as Lukács, Korsch, Gramsci, Benjamin, Della Volpe, Marcuse, Lefebvre, Adorno, Sartre, Goldmann, Althusser, and Colletti. According to Anderson, what principally distinguished this body of thought from Classical Marxism was its divorce from revolutionary-political practice (i.e. that its main contributions were produced in a context of isolation from mass-movements and mass-political organisations). However, this body of thought is also defined by its shift in emphasis from political economy to problems of culture and subjectivity. As Russell Jacoby argues, these theorists are distinguished, not only from Classical Marxism, but also from Soviet Marxism in their concern ‘to rescue Marxism from positivism and crude materialism’ (Jacoby 1983, p. 524). In my view, the theoretical focus of Western Marxism has much in common with ‘creative Soviet Marxism’; however, the latter is often overshadowed and obscured by official Soviet Marxism.

13. Mezhuev quoted in Levant 2008, p. 31.

14. Guseinov and Lektorsky 2009, p. 12.

15. Bakhurst 1991, p. 96.

The above account, while certainly true, does not contain the whole truth. In a recent article, Russian theorists A.A. Guseinov and V.A. Lektorsky write: 'In general, when consideration is given to the way the national culture evolved after October 1917, weight is generally placed on the fact that the declared official ideology, which imposed a dogmatically interpreted Marxism, prevented any free philosophical thought. This viewpoint... is not without some justification; [it] does not however reflect the full complexity of the facts'.<sup>16</sup> This complexity presents itself when we take a closer look at how philosophy actually developed in the Soviet Union. For example, as Mareev reminds us, 'prior to 1931 in the Soviet Union, Bolshevism was not the dominant current in philosophy' (pp. 4–5). At this time, Soviet philosophy was the site of vigorous debates on various problems, including efforts to overcome reductionism in Marxist thought.<sup>17</sup> These debates coalesced into two schools, the mechanists and the Deborinites, whose rivalry dominated Soviet philosophy for much of the 1920s and constitutes the 'prehistory' of what we know as Soviet philosophy in the form of *Diamat* and *Istmat*.

We can also go further back, prior to 1922, before the prerevolutionary philosophical establishment was expelled from the Soviet Union. In the autumn of 1922, on Lenin's orders, about two-hundred representatives of the intelligentsia, including Russian philosophers such as Berdayev, Bulgakov and Frank, were sent from Petrograd to Hamburg on what came to be known as 'The Philosophers' Ship'.<sup>18</sup> Their expulsion brought to an end the development of prerevolutionary schools of philosophy, which were collectively known as the 'silver age' and which competed with Marxism within Russian philosophy. This forms the 'pre-prehistory' of the context in which *Diamat* and *Istmat* developed.

After 1931, a new philosophical establishment – the *Diamatchiki* – took control of the philosophy-departments and academic journals. This group was endorsed by the Central Committee of the Communist Party, which on 25 January 1931 demanded a 'working out [*razrabotka*] of the Leninist stage in the development of dialectical materialism'.<sup>19</sup> This appeal to Lenin's name, however, was politically motivated, and had little to do with Lenin's own philosophical work. In fact (as we shall see below), one of Mareev's principal arguments is that Lenin's philosophy has nothing in common with *Diamat* and the Leninist stage of philosophy. As Bakhurst writes, 'the true focus of the Leninist stage was not Lenin, but Stalin'.<sup>20</sup>

Mezhuev's description of Soviet philosophy above describes well the period of the next 20–30 years. In fact, direct state-control over the development of Marxist theory extended beyond the discipline of philosophy. For example, the famous Marxist developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky – who produced an original theory of consciousness, anchored in intersubjectivity, language and activity – was blacklisted in the Soviet Union for 20 years (1936–56) following the Central Committee's resolution of 4 June 1936 against pædology

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16. Guseinov and Lektorsky 2009, p. 9.

17. Similar efforts continue in contemporary 'Western Marxism'. For example, consider the ongoing debates around issues raised in John Holloway's *Change the World Without Taking Power*, including the 2005 symposium in *Historical Materialism*, Volume 13, Issue 4.

18. Guseinov and Lektorsky 2009, p. 23; Van der Zweerde 2009, p. 175.

19. Bakhurst 1991, pp. 92–4.

20. Bakhurst 1991, p. 94.

(the study of children's behaviour and development).<sup>21</sup> During this period, Soviet Marxism took the form of *Diamat* and *Istmat*, and effectively erased its own prehistory, which had produced multiple schools of Marxist theory.

The *Diamatchiki* dominated Soviet philosophy over most of Soviet history after 1931; however, their dominance remained virtually unchallenged only for about a 20-year period. After Stalin's death in 1953, during Khrushchev's thaw, a new group of theorists, who were part of the 'Shestidesiatniki' (of the 60s-generation), began to question some of the basic tenets of official Soviet Marxism. As V.I. Tolstykh writes in a recently published edited volume entitled *Evald Vasilyevich Ilyenkov* (2008), 'At the end of the 1950s begins the crisis of official Soviet ideology, and [Ilyenkov] is among other young philosophers ... together with Aleksandr Zinoviev, Gregory Shchedrovitsky, Merab Mamardashvili and others [who] enter into polemics with philosophers of the type of Molodtsov and Mitin'.<sup>22</sup> Then a junior lecturer, in 1954 Ilyenkov declared to the Chair of Dialectical Materialism at Moscow State University that in Marxism there is no such thing as dialectical materialism or historical materialism, but only a materialist conception of history (p. 8).<sup>23</sup> Over the next 25 years, his original development of Marxist thought, which directly challenged the positivism that dominated official Soviet Marxism, inspired and guided a critical current of Soviet philosophy that continues to this day.

#### *The significance of Evald Ilyenkov*

Ilyenkov has a special place in the history of Soviet philosophy. There is no consensus about his status in the discipline; however, much of our understanding of its history turns on how we see his rôle. He is widely recognised as the leader of the group of philosophers who challenged official Soviet Marxism during the period of the thaw. He was a Marxist and a Leninist, but he was not a model Marxist-Leninist.<sup>24</sup> His conception of ideal (non-material) phenomena, as forms of human activity, conflicted with the official view of materialism, placing him on a collision-course with the *Diamatchiki*.<sup>25</sup> He was denounced as a 'revisionist', censored, and eventually prevented from teaching. He committed suicide in 1979. Nevertheless, his work was widely published inside the Soviet Union, and had a considerable influence on a whole generation of Soviet theorists.

His entry on 'The Ideal' in the Soviet *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1962) challenged official Soviet Marxism, which tended to view human consciousness as a machine, a product of the matter that constitutes the human brain. He argued that such a view rested on a crude materialism. In contrast, he revived the Marxist notion that consciousness is a social

21. Bakhurst 1991, p. 60.

22. Tolstykh (ed.) 2008, p. 6.

23. See also Bakhurst 1991, p. 6.

24. For example, in 1965 he was unable to accept an invitation from the University of Notre Dame to present his paper, 'Marxism and the Western World', in which he 'writes not as a Soviet delegate presenting an official line, but as an autonomous scholar addressing the specific concerns of the symposium in his own voice' (Bakhurst 1991, p. 8). Subsequently, he spoke out against the Soviet invasion of Prague in 1968 (Tolstykh (ed.) 2008, p. 8).

25. Guseinov and Lektorsky 2009, p. 15.

phenomenon, something that does not develop automatically in each individual, but which rather is a capacity acquired through socialisation.<sup>26</sup>

This perspective not only posed a challenge to the vulgar materialism of Soviet *Diamat*, but also offers an original approach to the problem of the ideal that should be of interest to Western Marxism. Although there is a considerable literature in the West that focuses on the rôle of language in the social production of consciousness, what sets Ilyenkov apart is his distinction between language and the ideal. For Ilyenkov, language is not the ideal, but its ‘objectified being’,<sup>27</sup> its material form. The ideal does not exist in language for Ilyenkov, or in other material phenomena, but in forms of human activity. His entry on the ideal in the 1962 encyclopædia-article defines it as ‘the subjective image of objective reality, i.e. a reflection of the external world in forms of human activity, in forms of its consciousness and will’.<sup>28</sup> One can think of the ideal as the significance that matter assumes in the process of its transformation by human activity. In other words, *it is only in-and-through human activity that matter takes on the character of an object with significance.*

To be clear, Ilyenkov was not referring only to parts of the material world that individuals directly transform, but to all matter that society comes ‘in contact’ with. *Idealisation* is, for him, a social phenomenon. In the same encyclopædia-entry, he wrote:

An ideal image, say of bread, may arise in the imagination of a hungry man or of a baker. In the head of a satiated man occupied with building a house, ideal bread does not arise. But if we take society as a whole, ideal bread and ideal houses are always in existence, as well as any ideal object with which humanity is concerned in the process of production and reproduction of its real, material life. This includes the ideal sky, as an object of astronomy, as a ‘natural calendar’, a clock, and compass. In consequence of that, all of nature is idealised in humanity and not just that part which it immediately produces or reproduces or consumes in a practical way.<sup>29</sup>

From this perspective, all matter appears in individual consciousness already transformed and idealised by the activity of previous generations, and this ideal informs the individual’s activity in the present.

Perhaps the most striking feature of Ilyenkov’s concept of the ideal is its articulation as part of a larger process, as a *phase* in the transformation of matter. This move allows him to avoid both forms of reductionism: the reduction of the ideal to the physical brain (characteristic of vulgar materialism) and the reduction of the ideal to some extra-human phenomenon such as ‘nature’ (characteristic of idealism). By understanding it as a phase of a process, Ilyenkov is able to grasp the ideal without severing it from human activity. In the 1962 article, he wrote: ‘The ideal is the outward being of a thing in the phase of its becoming in the action of a subject in the form of his wants, needs and aims’.<sup>30</sup> Conceiving of it as a phase enables him to capture several moments of its existence – matter invested with

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26. Marx and Engels 1991, p. 51.

27. Ilyenkov 1962, p. 221.

28. Ilyenkov 1962, p. 222.

29. Ilyenkov 1962, p. 225.

30. Ilyenkov 1962, p. 223.

meaning in the process of human activity, which comes to inform the subsequent transformation of the material world. In the recently published *Dialectics of the Ideal* (his most complete, authoritative articulation of the concept of the ideal, written in the mid-1970s, but published only in 2009), he describes it as follows:

The process by which the *material* life-activity of social man [sic] 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 [sic], and then begins the opposite process – the process of the *materialisation* (objectification, reification, ‘embodiment’) of the ideal.<sup>31</sup>

As individuals, we enter an already-*idealised material world*, which we continue to transform as we materialise the ideal we inhabit in our own activity.

This approach recalls similar readings of Marx that were developed before the *Diamatchiki* seized control of Soviet philosophy in 1931. It is widely acknowledged that Ilyenkov’s work revives and develops certain themes from the prehistory of official Soviet Marxism.<sup>32</sup> For example, in the Preface to Ilyenkov’s posthumously published book, *Art and the Communist Ideal* (1984), Mikhail Lifshits – a close associate of Lukács who helped publish Marx’s early works in 1932 – writes: ‘By some miracle the seeds that were then sown on a favourable ground began to grow – although in a different, not immediately recognisable form. Evald Ilyenkov with his living interest in Hegel and the young Marx (who was discovered in the 20s and 30s here at home, not abroad, as is often claimed) . . . stood out as an heir of our thoughts’.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Guseinov and Lektorsky describe this period as a ‘philosophical renaissance in the Soviet Union’<sup>34</sup> and Ilyenkov as one of its leading figures. Mezhuiev writes: ‘It is to him that my generation owes the conscious break with dogmatic and scholastic official philosophy’.<sup>35</sup> The 1950s and 60s mark a revival of certain lines of inquiry that had been displaced by official Soviet theory, with Ilyenkov as a principal figure. The specific lines of continuity, however, remain a subject of debate.

#### *Mareev’s reconstruction of Soviet philosophy*

Mareev traces the roots of *Diamat* and *Istmat* further back than Stalin’s *Dialectical Materialism and Historical Materialism* (1938) or even the takeover of Soviet philosophy by the Bolsheviks in 1931. According to Mareev, the positivism and reductionism that define *Diamat* were already present in the main currents of the 1920s.

The period in Soviet philosophy during the years 1924–9 was marked by a vigorous debate between two competing schools of thought – the mechanists and the Deborinites. The mechanists comprised a broad range of thinkers, including Bolshevik Party activist

31. Ilyenkov 2009, p. 18.

32. Bakhurst 1991, pp. 26–7; Oittinen (ed.) 2000, p. 10; Dillon 2005, p. 285.

33. Lifshits quoted in Oittinen (ed.) 2000, p. 10. Ilyenkov became a friend of Lifshits after a correspondence with Lukács who directed Ilyenkov to contact Lifshits.

34. Guseinov and Lektorsky 2009, p. 13.

35. Mezhuiev 1997, p. 47.

I.I. Skvortsov-Stepanov, former-Menshevik Lyubov Akselrod and the early-Bolshevik philosopher Alexander Bogdanov, and received support from the famous Bolshevik leader, Nikolai Bukharin. What united this diverse group was ‘the view that the explanatory resources of science are able to provide a complete account of objective reality’.<sup>36</sup> In response, the Deborinites – a more cohesive group of philosophers, most of whom were involved in A.M. Deborin’s seminar at the Institute of Red Professors – ‘dismissed the Mechanists’ optimism about the global explanatory potential of natural science’ and ‘held that the Mechanists were committed to blatant reductionism’.<sup>37</sup> ‘In our opinion,’ Deborin argued, ‘thought is a particular quality of matter, the subjective side of the objective, material, i.e., physiological processes, with which it is not identical and to which it cannot be reduced’.<sup>38</sup> During this period, theorists in both schools developed a considerable amount of work, much of it aimed at overcoming reductionism in Marxist philosophy.

The debate was muted in 1929 when, at the Second All-Union Conference of Marxist-Leninist Institutions of Scientific Research, the mechanists were officially condemned. According to Bakhurst, ‘Mechanism was defeated not by new philosophical arguments, but by the charge that it was a revisionist trend and, as such, a political danger’.<sup>39</sup> Deborin and his followers accused the mechanists of ‘gradualist’ politics, a charge that resonated at a time when the party was in the midst of a campaign against ‘right-deviationism’, which was associated with Bukharin.<sup>40</sup>

In Bakhurst’s account, this debate was not properly resolved; rather, it was prevented from being expressed within the confines of the institutions of Soviet philosophy. From this perspective, it reappeared in some ways during the thaw of the 1950s with Ilyenkov expressing the anti-positivism of Deborin’s school. ‘Although contemporary Soviet philosophers may not see themselves as re-creating the early controversy,’ writes Bakhurst, ‘the continuity is undeniable. This is particularly so in the case of Ilyenkov, who can be seen as heir to the Deborinites’ project’.<sup>41</sup> The Deborinites’ effort to develop a theory of the relationship between thought and matter, but without reducing thought to the physiological properties of matter, appears to be echoed in Ilyenkov’s own conception of the ideal. Bakhurst sees Ilyenkov as an heir of the Deborin school from the prehistory of official Soviet Marxism.

One of the principal distinguishing features of Mareev’s account is that he challenges this reading of the development of Soviet philosophy, which has become dominant in Western scholarship.<sup>42</sup> In contrast, he locates the roots of *Diamat* not only among the mechanists, but also in the work of the Deborinites (p. 18). In fact, he traces its development back to Deborin himself, and even further back to his teacher G.V. Plekhanov.

Mareev argues that the thread that runs through this long line from Plekhanov to Deborin to the *Diamatchiki* is itself characterised by a crude materialism, which reduces consciousness to a reflection of material production. In Deborin, thought is not reduced to

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36. Bakhurst 1991, p. 31.

37. Bakhurst 1991, p. 37.

38. Bakhurst 1991, p. 38.

39. Bakhurst 1991, pp. 45–6.

40. Bakhurst 1991, p. 47.

41. Bakhurst 1991, pp. 26–7.

42. Maidansky 2009, p. 202.

matter, as with some mechanists and *Diamatchiki*; rather, it is properly understood as a reflection of activity. However, this activity is grasped as production, which, according to John Rees, ‘in fact returns us to the old Second International insistence on the inevitable onward march of the productive process as the guarantor of social change’.<sup>43</sup> Deborin’s understanding of dialectical materialism, which, according to Mareev, derives from Plekhanov and Engels, reduces the problem of consciousness to essentially an economic problem.

In addition to challenging Western scholarship, which treats Ilyenkov as an heir of the Deborin school, another distinguishing feature of Mareev’s book is his inclusion of the early Lukács as a pivotal theorist in the development of creative Soviet Marxism, and specifically as a precursor of the Ilyenkov school. In fact, Deborin’s reductionism comes into sharp relief when examined against Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness* (1923). Taking aim at the determinism inherited from the Marxism of the Second International, Lukács posited a theory of subjectivity that afforded a much greater rôle to human agency in the development of class-consciousness. Lukács’s central argument was that activity is organised in bourgeois society in a way that not only facilitates the development of class-consciousness, but also blocks its development primarily through the effects of the transformation of activity into the commodity, labour-power. He argued that the rôle of the Communist Party is to intervene in this dynamic in various ways, including counter-organising the activity of its members, by creating what he called a ‘world of activity’.<sup>44</sup> By broadening the notion of activity from the labour-process to political practice and organisation,<sup>45</sup> he went beyond Deborin’s reduction of the ideal to a reflection of the material, thus prefiguring Ilyenkov’s work by several decades.

In 1924, Deborin published a scathing dismissal of Lukács’s book, calling it ‘idealist’.<sup>46</sup> Deborin’s critique was part of a broad attack on Lukács, Korsch and other ‘professors’<sup>47</sup> who were denounced by Zinoviev at the Fifth Congress of the Comintern:

This theoretical revisionism cannot be allowed to pass with impunity. Neither will we tolerate our Hungarian Comrade Lukács doing the same thing in the domain of philosophy and sociology. ... We cannot tolerate such theoretical revisionism in our Communist International.<sup>48</sup>

43. Rees 2000, pp. 20–1.

44. Lukács 1971, p. 337. He writes: ‘Freedom ... is something practical, it is an activity. And only by becoming a *world of activity* [italics mine] for every one of its members can the Communist Party really hope to overcome the passive rôle assumed by bourgeois man when he is confronted by the inevitable course of events that he cannot understand’.

45. Rees 2000, pp. 20–1. ‘All this is beyond Deborin, who can see only the labour process as the site of practice: “the one-sidedness of subject and object is overcome ... *through praxis*. What is the praxis of social being? The labour process ... *production* is the concrete unity of the whole social and historical process.” Again, this is formally correct but in fact returns us to the old Second International insistence on the inevitable onward march of the productive process as the guarantor of social change, whereas Lukács, without ignoring this dimension, is concerned with political practice and organisation as well’.

46. Deborin 1924, p. 4.

47. Rees 2000, p. 25.

48. G. Zinoviev quoted in Rees 2000, p. 25.

While Lukács recanted, it is well known that his book, *A Defence of History and Class Consciousness: Tailism and the Dialectic* (1925), was written in response to these charges. He tried to demonstrate that he was, in fact, championing Lenin's organisational approach over the determinism of the Second International and the Mensheviks. In fact, Lukács's polemics with Deborin in philosophy bear a certain resemblance to the polemics between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks on organisation 20 years earlier, where Lenin's pamphlet *What Is to Be Done?* and his intervention at the Second Congress of the RSDLP in 1903 had been understood by Lukács and others as the beginning of his shift from the fatalism of Second-International Marxism to what we now know as the Leninist conception of the party.<sup>49</sup>

In contrast to dominant Western readings of the history of Soviet philosophy, Mareev argues that the debate between Lukács and Deborin reveals two distinct lines in Soviet philosophy: one that runs from Plekhanov through Deborin (themselves Mensheviks) to the *Diamatchiki*, and a counter-current that runs from Lenin through Lukács and Vygotsky and then to Ilyenkov in the 1950s (p. 42).<sup>50</sup> 'Paradoxically,' writes Mareev, 'Lenin's line won in politics, but Plekhanov's line won in philosophy' (p. 17.) Lenin's victory over Plekhanov in the political sphere is well known, but it was Plekhanov's views on Marxist theory that shaped Soviet philosophy. Plekhanov committed suicide on 5 May 1918, only a few months following the October Revolution. Nevertheless, as Mareev notes, his followers, who now divided into mechanists and Deborinites,

occupied practically all key-positions in the newly created Soviet ideological apparatus and the system of higher Marxist education. D.B. Ryazanov headed the Marx-Engels Institute [and] A.M. Deborin became in 1921 the editor-in-chief of the journal *Under the Banner of Marxism*. They determined the character of 'Marxist' philosophy in the 20s and 30s. (p. 17.)

From Mareev's perspective, these students of Plekhanov, many of whom would soon lose their positions in Soviet academe, inherited a mechanistic reading of Marx which continued to dominate Soviet philosophy during the reign of the *Diamatchiki*.

In contrast to this line, Mareev posits a current of anti-positivist Marxist theory that, in agreement with Bakhurst, re-emerges during the thaw of the 1950s in the work of Ilyenkov. However, unlike Bakhurst, who sees Ilyenkov as an heir of the Deborin school, Mareev roots this line in Lenin's critique of positivism in his *Philosophical Notebooks* (1914–15). Mareev argues that Lenin and Plekhanov read Marx very differently, and that Plekhanov's reading, as we saw above, became institutionalised in Soviet academe.

Mareev locates Lenin in the line that runs through Lukács-Vygotsky-Ilyenkov in light of Lenin's criticism of Plekhanov in the *Philosophical Notebooks*. Although Lenin considered himself a student of Plekhanov, he criticises his former mentor's 'vulgar materialism' (p. 36). For instance, Lenin writes: 'Plekhanov criticises Kantianism (and agnosticism in

49. Lukács 1970; Molyneux 1978.

50. Vygotsky is widely recognised as a precursor to the Ilyenkov school. What is novel here is locating Lenin and Lukács in a line that, in contrast to the Plekhanov and Deborin line, leads to Ilyenkov.

general) more from a vulgar-materialist than a dialectical-materialist perspective'.<sup>51</sup> Mareev notes that Lenin's critique of Plekhanov's vulgar materialism was echoed in the polemics between Lukács and Deborin in the 1920s, and which again resurfaced in the challenge posed by Ilyenkov and others to the *Diamatchiki* in the 1950s and 60s.

The 'diamatovskaia'-tradition in Soviet philosophy was indeed dominant. Indeed, it successfully continues in the post-Soviet period. But there was a tradition of Soviet philosophy which was counterposed to 'diamatskoi'. This tradition is related to names such as G. Lukács, L.S. Vygotsky and E.V. Ilyenkov. (p. 12.)

Mareev roots this anti-positivist Soviet Marxism in Lenin's philosophy, and official Soviet Marxism in that of Plekhanov. He writes: 'The entire so-called Soviet Diamat, despite becoming rooted during Stalin's epoch, by its own genealogical history, and even terminology, originates from Plekhanov's branch of the development of Marxism, and not from Lenin's' (p. 30).

Mareev also notes that Ilyenkov's reception has not changed since the collapse of the USSR. According to Mareev, Ilyenkov's anti-positivist philosophy was marginalised during the Soviet era, and remains so today. 'The Soviet Union is long gone. But the treatment of Ilyenkov on the side of philosophical officialdom, as has been stated, remains the same, as it was during the Soviet era'. (p. 9.) This is the case, Mareev argues, because contemporary Russian philosophy-texts are, in essence, *Diamat* under a different name (p. 11). As we can see from this brief sketch, Mareev's reading of Ilyenkov produces a very different understanding of the history of Soviet philosophy from the dominant reading in the West.

### Critical and concluding remarks on Mareev's book

This provocative reconstruction of Soviet philosophy offers a window onto a field that has been studied by barely a handful of serious scholars in the West. A student of Ilyenkov himself, Mareev aligns his own views with those of this influential, yet paradoxically understudied philosopher. As a result, Ilyenkov is presented not only uncritically, but also in a somewhat-hagiographic fashion. While this perspective 'from within' has many advantages, as it offers a forceful articulation of Ilyenkov's strengths, it also has some limits as it tends to overstate Ilyenkov's status as a dissident, which results in a particular reading of his relationship to Soviet philosophy and to the rôle of Lenin in its development.

Mareev's book presents a one-sided view of Ilyenkov's relationship to official Soviet philosophy, casting him as an outsider whose Marxism had a different origin than *Diamat* and *Istmat's*. In contrast, the Finnish philosopher Vesa Oittinen (editor of *Evald Ilyenkov's Philosophy Revisited* (2000) – the proceedings from the international conference on Ilyenkov, which was held in Helsinki in 1999) challenges the view that Ilyenkov was a dissident Soviet philosopher.<sup>52</sup> Oittinen acknowledges that Ilyenkov suffered from 'ideological mobbing'; however, he also notes that he had influential friends who ensured

51. Lenin quoted in Mareev 2008, p. 36.

52. Oittinen (ed.) 2000, p. 16.

the publication and wide circulation of his work. Unlike many scholars from within the Ilyenkov school, Oittinen does not side unequivocally with Ilyenkov against his critics, noting that not all criticism of Ilyenkov was politically motivated. Instead, he argues that Ilyenkov's anti-positivism exemplifies one of two currents within official Soviet Marxism, both of which can be traced back to two lines of thought in Lenin's philosophy. Challenging Ilyenkov's status as a dissident calls into question Lenin's rôle in Soviet philosophy and hence Mareev's two-line approach to its development.

Unlike Mareev, who argues that positivist Soviet philosophy followed the line from Plekhanov to the *Diamatshiki*, and that anti-positivist Soviet philosophy can be traced back to Lenin, Oittinen argues that both currents are rooted in an ambiguity in Lenin's own philosophy. According to Oittinen, there was a shift in Lenin's philosophy, which can be seen in the differences between his *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (1909) and the *Philosophical Notebooks* (1914–15). He writes: 'It is rather obvious that there are many points of divergence between Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, written in 1909 against the Machist subjective idealist current which at this time was widespread among the Bolshevik intellectuals, on the one hand, and the *Philosophical Notebooks*, which is essentially a conspect of Hegel's *Logic* with Lenin's own commentaries which Lenin wrote down in the library of the canton of Bern (Switzerland) in 1914–1915, on the other'.<sup>53</sup> Lenin's attempt to break with the Marxism of the Second International on the question of organisation during his Switzerland years appears to also have a counterpart in the sphere of philosophy. Oittinen writes, 'Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks* can be seen as an attempt to find an adequate formulation for a Marxist philosophy that would avoid the deterministic and objectivistic world-view of the Second International'.<sup>54</sup> According to Oittinen, Lenin was ultimately unsuccessful in this effort, and this tension between positivist and anti-positivist readings of Marx continued unresolved throughout Soviet philosophy. From this perspective, Ilyenkov is not seen as challenging official Soviet theory, but as expressing one side of an ongoing debate that characterised Soviet theory.

Ilyenkov considered himself a Leninist, but he had a particular reading of Lenin. Unlike Oittinen, he did not recognise a 'break' between Lenin's philosophy in 1909 and 1914–15.<sup>55</sup> Rather than championing a positivist reading of Marx, Ilyenkov understood Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* 'as the philosophical counterpart of *What Is to Be Done?*'.<sup>56</sup> According to Bakhurst, 'For Ilyenkov, Lenin's great contribution lay in his rejection of empiricism and positivism'.<sup>57</sup> Mareev acknowledges that the *Diamatshiki* tried to use Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* to claim him as a vulgar materialist, but he insists that Lenin distinguished between Marx's materialism and materialism per se (p. 37). However, and similar in this respect to Oittinen, Bakhurst acknowledges that 'the ambiguity in Lenin's materialism has given rise to two opposing schools of thought within contemporary Soviet philosophy'.<sup>58</sup> He continues, 'While the germ of radical realism in Lenin's philosophy exercised a formative influence on Ilyenkov's philosophical concerns, Lenin also inspired

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53. Oittinen (ed.) 2000, p. 13.

54. Oittinen (ed.) 2000, p. 15.

55. Bakhurst 1991, p. 100.

56. Bakhurst 1991, p. 130.

57. Bakhurst 1991, p. 122.

58. Bakhurst 1991, p. 123.

the very school of scientific empiricism that Ilyenkov came to see as his principal opponent'.<sup>59</sup> The rôle of Lenin's philosophy in the development of both creative and official Soviet Marxism continues to be a subject of debate; however, this debate does not find expression in Mareev's book, in part due to the limits of his own perspective from within the Ilyenkov school.

Mareev's book, *From the History of Soviet Philosophy: Lukács – Vygotsky – Ilyenkov*, is a very important contribution to the study of a vast body of thought that remains largely unexamined in the West. He illuminates a history of creative Marxist thought in the Soviet Union that should be of interest to Marxist theorists in the West. Far from state-sanctioned dogma, this book presents us with a rich tradition with various schools of thought that competed not only with each other, but also with official Soviet Marxism.

Although controversial and provocative both in Russia and in the West, this book forcefully challenges several widely held views on the history of creative Soviet Marxism. It convincingly problematises the rôle of A.M. Deborin, and locates the roots of *Diamat* and *Istmat* not only in the mechanists, but also in the Deborin school. Furthermore, it traces both of these competing schools of the 1920s to their common root in the work of G.V. Plekhanov, and contrasts his thought with that of V.I. Lenin. Another original feature is the inclusion of Georg Lukács in this history as a precursor to the main protagonist of the book, E.V. Ilyenkov.

The Ilyenkov school is perhaps the most interesting and under-studied feature of creative Soviet Marxism for the Western reader. This book offers a reconsideration of the genesis of this school of thought from one of its contemporaries. It is a highly original and important piece of work that merits serious consideration, and constitutes an invaluable contribution to the study of the tradition of creative Soviet Marxism.

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59. Ibid.

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