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Returning to Hegel in order to go forward: actuality of Hegelian dialectics in Evald Ilyenkov's creative Marxism

This paper will try to situate the importance of Hegelian dialectics in the work of the Soviet philosopher Evald Vasilyevich Ilyenkov. The paper will principally focus on two of his fundamental texts: «The Ideal» and «Hegel and Alienation». Through a close reading of these texts, we will articulate firstly what it means when Ilyenkov writes that Hegel is alive and secondly, we will try to analyze the theoretical and political implications of the disregard or misinterpretation of Hegel in western Marxism.

For Evald Ilyenkov, the key figure of soviet «creative Marxism», actualizing Hegel came at a high cost. Accusations ofgnoseologism, revisionism, idealism and continuous professional persecution made his life and career unbearable to the point of suicide in 1979. One of the harshest controversies surrounding Ilyenkov took place in 1962, with the publication, in the soviet philosophical encyclopedia, of his article «The Ideal», where Ilyenkov employs several Hegelian notions to affirm the *objective* existence of non-material phenomena such as value, price, etc. He articulates this objective existence as the being out of itself (Hegelian *Anderssein*) of the object of human activity which exists through the other. According to Ilyenkov, the ideal acquires objective existence where the sublation of externality (*Dußerlichkeit aufheben*) meaning here the transformation of the body of nature into an object of human activity, takes place. It is precisely through the Hegelian dialectic that Ilyenkov describes the mechanisms behind the domination of abstractions in capitalism.

Such a thesis certainly proved to be provocative for the representatives of the official, state sanctioned philosophy of diamat. The soviet philosopher David Dubrovsky, in his reply to Ilyenkov objected to the possibility of the real existence of immaterial things and posited that anything ideal existing outside consciousness could only be the Hegelian absolute Spirit. Ilyenkov was up against philosophers who thought that dialectics itself was completed and the task was to simply apply it to nature and thought. Moreover, what was being applied was not dialectics but what Ilyenkov termed the «dialectics of the boiling tea-pot»: isolated postulates about quality and

quantity (quantitative rise in temperature of the water in the tea-pot transforms into a qualitative change – evaporation) that were devoid of any dialectical movement. In his article «Hegel today», for the 200th anniversary of Hegel, Ilyenkov wrote:

«Both a boiling teapot and the French Revolution are transformed in such an approach into simple ‘examples’ that illustrate the relationship between the categories of quality and quantity. But this way any empirical reality that catches our eye – no matter how bad and accidental it is – is transformed here into an ‘external embodiment of absolute reason’, into one of the necessary dialectical steps of its self-discernment ...»

Contrary to this, Ilyenkov sought to develop dialectics as a method of scientific thinking. Following Lenin, he believed that materialism had more in common with «intelligent idealism» than vulgar materialism. His article «Hegel and Alienation» is an attempt at returning to Hegel in order to clarify misunderstandings and tackle conscious misrepresentations of idealist notions that had political effects. Such was the case of the Hegelian concept of alienation and its uses in western Marxism.

In the article, Ilyenkov reminds the reader of the distinctions that Hegel makes between different moments of alienation: *Verдужерung*, *Entдужерung*, *Entfremdung*. Far from being an issue of terminological accuracy, this distinction, for Ilyenkov determines the ultimate task of philosophy expressed by Marx – changing the world – since it is precisely the sublation (*Aufhebung*) of alienation that conditions the possibility of free development of every human being.