

# Evald Ilyenkov and Hegel

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**Abstract:** Among Evald Ilyenkov's most important contributions to Hegel exegesis was his notion of 'concrete historicism'. In this concept, Ilyenkov appropriated the work of Soviet Psychologists in the context of an immanent critique of the Western canon of Philosophy and a study of Marx's *Capital*, to outline a new approach to the logical and historical analysis of social formations, which has yet to receive due attention.

Evald Ilyenkov is distinguished as the only Soviet writer to be widely respected as a Hegel scholar by Hegel scholars in the West, and it is abundantly evident from his *Theses* (1954) that this distinction was won at considerable personal risk. Nonetheless, as a Soviet philosopher, Ilyenkov was able to appropriate the insights of Soviet Cultural Psychology and Activity Theory originating from Lev Vygotsky and brought these insights to a rigorous study of the history of philosophy. Breaking down the artificial barriers between the disciplines of Psychology, Social Theory and Philosophy, and between History and Logic, Ilyenkov made a profound contribution to Marxism. Whereas other Hegelian-Marxists seemed only capable of *describing* the Marx-Hegel relation, Ilyenkov gained new insights and approaches for the solution of scientific problems. It is the aim of this short article to demonstrate how Ilyenkov's ideas can be used in the analysis of problems of human development.

Ilyenkov's essay on *The Ideal*, the series of essays on *Dialectical Logic* and his staunch defence of Lenin in *Metaphysics of Positivism*, were ground-breaking, but we shall highlight here just two insights from his early book *The dialectics of the Abstract and Concrete in Marx's Capital* (1960), specifically the concepts of 'concrete historicism' and 'germ cell'. While framed by Marx's analysis of capitalist political economy, these chapters demonstrate a method which can be applied to the analysis of any social formation.

## Concrete Historicism

While Hegel claimed that the historical development of the science, art and religion of the past are the basis of that of the present and the Logical Idea expresses the pure essentialities of their development, the same does not apply to diversity of the constitutions of states (See *Philosophy of History* §§48-49).

In the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel points out that although the various organs of the state pre-existed the state and were preconditions for its formation, the state *transforms* them and makes them into organs of its own body (*PR*, §269). "The historical origin of the judge and his court may have had the form of a patriarch's gift to his people or of force or free choice; but this makes no difference to the concept of the thing." (*PR* §219 n.) and "if we ask what is or has been the historical origin of the state ... all these questions are no concern of the Idea of the State." (*PR* §258n.) The essential nature of the State and its various organs are to be determined from the *concept* of the state, *not* from their history. This belies Hegel's reputation as an *historical thinker*. Nonetheless, we need to understand social formations as entities which are *in motion* and to be able to identify

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the contradictions at work in them which point to the future. It is in this light that we must appreciate how Ilyenkov derived from his critical study of Marx's *Capital* an exceptionally fruitful insight into the relation between Logic and History, which he captured in the concept of *concrete historicism*, using dialectical logic in a unique combination of both structural and historical investigation.

Hegel's *Encyclopaedia* is made up of a "circle of circles":

*"Each of the parts of philosophy is a philosophical whole, a circle rounded and complete in itself. In each of these parts, however, the philosophical Idea is found in a particular specificity or medium. The single circle, because it is a real totality, bursts through the limits imposed by its special medium, and gives rise to a wider circle. The whole of philosophy in this way resembles a circle of circles. The Idea appears in each single circle, but, at the same time, the whole Idea is constituted by the system of these peculiar phases, and each is a necessary member of the organisation."* (*Enc. Logic* §15)

This means that the *systematic dialectic* discovered by Hegel can be used within each 'circle'. Once the abstract starting point is determined, the relevant principle can be expected to unfold to maturity in a manner reflecting logical critique, even though this will not be the case for an entire concrete historical formation. This insight was key to Ilyenkov's idea of 'concrete historicism', totally different from Hegel's now-outmoded schema of history, and can be brought to bear in the analysis of concrete social and historical problems.

Although the logical and historical may coincide in the unfolding of a single relation, in the shaping of a complex whole, such as a political, cultural, psychological or economic formation, the sequence of the logical and historical are *opposite*. Features of a social formation which are *produced* by the social formation, may also be *preconditions* of the same social formation, but are transformed by it. Despite the fact that historians have shown that the State originated in violence, the essence of the State is Freedom (*Phil. Hist* §43). Marx summed this idea up in the maxim: "The hand of man is the key to the anatomy of the ape" (1858, v. 28, p. 42). Ilyenkov was the first to systematically study this relation which Hegel left unsolved, and central to this problem is that of the 'germ cell' which marks the beginning of a concrete historical process.

### The Germ Cell

Hegel made the method of identifying the 'germ cell' as the beginning point (*das Erste*) for the dialectical reconstruction of the whole in a little-known passage in the *Science of Logic* which is nonetheless central to Soviet Activity Theory:

*"... the beginning [must] be made with the subject matter in the form of a universal (Allgemeinen). ... it is the concrete individuality (die konkrete Einzelheit) that is given to subjective, natural cognition as the prius (das Erste); but in cognition that is a comprehension, at least to the extent that it has the form of the Concept for basis, the prius must be on the contrary something simple (das Einfache), something abstracted from the concrete, because in this form alone has the subject-matter the form of the self-related universal or of an immediate based on the Concept."* (Hegel 1816/1969, p. 801, S 779)

Hegel illustrated this method throughout the *Encyclopaedia*, but offers little clue about how the prius is to be identified other than it arises outside the specific science of which

it is the beginning. The *Encyclopaedia* gives the *impression* of a logical derivation of what “is given to subjective, natural cognition.” It was left to Ilyenkov to study in detail how this beginning is made for the synthetic reconstruction of the object which Hegel demonstrated in outline, in the *Encyclopaedia*. According to Ilyenkov:

“The difficulty lies in singling out from the empirically given picture of the total historical process the cardinal points of the development of this particular concrete object, of the given, concrete system of interaction. Logical development coinciding with the historical process of the formation of a concrete whole should rigorously establish its historical beginning, its birth, and later trace its evolution as a sequence of necessary and law-governed moments. That is the whole difficulty.” (1960, p. 216)

The historical and logical coincides only if the theorist able to single out that ‘germ cell’ which contains the essential features of the whole, which only later develops to maturity. But when we go looking for the ‘germ cell’, we begin from the *present*: “Marx studied first of all the *existing state* of this formation” (1960, p. 222) which is known in detail, moving back in search of the first emergence of this essential relation, and forwards again tracing its maturation, and disregarding what is inessential and transitory. According to Marx:

“... it is not necessary to write the *real history of the relations of production*. But the correct observation and deduction of these laws, as having themselves become in history, always ... point towards a past lying behind this system.” (*Grundrisse* p. 389)

Marx had referred to the idea as the “economic germ-cell” of bourgeois society in the Preface to the first edition of *Capital* and Vygotsky most famously used the idea in the form of “unit of analysis,” elaborated in Chapter One of *Thinking and Speech* (1934). But again, it was left to Ilyenkov to systematically elaborate the importance and means of identifying the germ cell.

The ‘germ cell’ is not the historically first. In his analysis of the intellect, which Vygotsky (1934, p. 43) took to be internalized intelligent speech, Vygotsky showed that there was pre-verbal intelligence and pre-intellectual speech, it was only with the intersection of these two lines of development in the first meaningful word, that the intellect arises (*ibid.*, p. 112), and Vygotsky thereby identified the meaningful word, a unity of sound and meaning, as the germ cell, or unit of analysis of the intellect (*ibid.*, p. 47). Both speech and thinking pre-exist the meaningful word, but are transformed in the formation of the unit, just as Hegel had shown that Right and Morality had pre-existed Civil Society but were transformed by its emergence.

Taken together, these two insights make it clear that the *logical* beginning, the *prius*, differs from the *historical* beginning. The researcher must move back and forth seeking for the first and most primitive appearance of the universal characteristic which is recognized in the most developed manifestation, and tracing its development from the abstract to the concrete in the entire existing social formation.

## Conclusion

In his concept of ‘concrete historicism’, Ilyenkov appropriated fundamental ideas of Hegel which had not been fully worked out by Hegel, but thanks to the contributions of Marx’s political economic studies and the Soviet traditions of Cultural Psychology and

Activity Theory, Ilyenkov was able to outline a logical-historical approach to the critique of social formations.

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