

Marx on the Concept of the Proletariat: An Ilyenkovian Interpretation

The notion of “concept” and the concept of “class” plays a central role in Marx’s and Marxist analysis of society and human activity. There is a large body of study about concepts, their formation and development, which has been made, in great extent, by Soviet psychologists from cultural-historical tradition that have been inspired by works of Lev Vygotsky. Yet, the achievements of the scientific works of these scholars have not been fully incorporated toward developing an epistemological-philosophical theory that aims at a proper understanding of concepts. Evald Ilyenkov is one of the major figures that has undertaken this task and has made great contribution to a Marxist philosophical theory of concepts and conceptual systems. Yet, his early tragic death has left his task unfulfilled. This paper is an attempt toward a first step of furthering and deepening Ilyenkov’s philosophical analysis of concepts. To this end, Marx’s concept of class will be analyzed with the use of Ilyenkovian approach to concepts. The paper attempts to show that contradiction is an essential aspect of conceptual and real development. It also aims at showing that the contradictory nature of concepts, on the other hand, reveals the normative aspect of conceptual activity: concepts and thus conceptual systems are not only contradictory but also normative. Normativity is a necessary aspect of conceptual development in that it put concepts into work, that is, it facilitates the resolution of contradictions that are inherent in reality and thus causes development of both the real and the conceptual realms; this development will reveal itself in form of a new, higher form of contradiction.

Criticizing formal logic Ilyenkov (1960/1982) states, “Conceiving a thing means forming a conception about the entire totality of its properties and relations” (12). According to formal logical understanding a concept is concrete when is devoid of content – “free from all thoughts or properties of this thing”—thus, formal logic considers concepts as impoverishing reality. Following Spinoza and Vygotsky, Ilyenkov elaborates further on the idea that true concepts reveal the essence of things. They are not abstractions made from sense-experience (sense-data). They appear in human consciousness at spiritual-theoretical culture level. Such concepts mature and crystallized in human intellect gradually. They are not self-obvious and if intellect does not develop within cultural-theoretical context, they will be absent. “It is only reasonable knowledge taken as a whole that, as it develops, works out such concepts.

Concrete ‘is the unity of diverse aspects’ (Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, p. 206, quoted in Ilyenkov 1960/1982, 32). Ilyenkov articulates this idea as follows: “the concrete, concreteness, are first of all synonyms of the real links between phenomena, of concatenation and interaction of real aspects and moments of the object given to man in contemplation and in a notion” (1960/1982, 32-3).

Concepts, revealing the essence of the real and of the object and as tools of cognitive activity thus facilitate accessing the essence of the real and acting upon that essence and reveal the necessary connections among aspect of diverse objectivity. “The concrete in thinking also appears, according to Marx’s definition, in the form of combination (synthesis) of numerous definitions. A logically coherent system of definitions is precisely that ‘natural’ form in which concrete truth is realized in thought. Each of definitions forming part of the system naturally reflects only a part, a fragment, an element, an aspect of the concrete reality—and that is why it is abstract if it is taken by itself, separately from other definitions” (1960/1982, 37). A definition,

a concept has meaning and is possible only within a system of definitions and concepts. An isolated concept is just a mere abstraction devoid of life and meaning.

The traditional view of concepts, when compares concept to contemplative/sensual image of a thing, conceives the former as a lesser, impoverished, one-sided—and in this sense “abstract”—image. As Hegel puts, in this view “the abstract is counted of less worth than the concrete, because from the former so much of that kind of material has been omitted. To those who hold this view, the process of abstraction means that *for our subjective needs* one or another characteristic is taken out of concrete... and it is only the *incapacity* of understanding to absorb such riches that forces it to rest content with meager abstraction” (1960/1982, 46-7).

Concept bestows “meaning” onto, or better to say “extracts” and “expresses” the meaning of a specific element of the entirety of reality. To have meaning, as Vygotsky puts it, is to be made into a tool, that is, to become a concrete universal, which not only is applicable within the system this particular meaningfulness is a part of, but is also applicable within other systems and engulfs newer areas of reality and newer significances. Concept is concrete because it is the non-sine-qua tool of a specific form of action; it is universal because it is a tool that has application beyond the immediate context within which it has been produced.

The universal or the concept has an objective reality, but not in Platonic or Hegelian sense—as mere idea—but “in the sense of law-governed connections of material phenomena, in the sense of the law of their being joined together in composition of the same whole, in the context of a self-developing totality or aggregate, all the components of which were related as a matter of fact not by virtue of their possessing one and the same identical attribute, but by virtue of their having one and the same common ancestor, or to put it more exactly, by virtue of their arising as divers modifications of one and the same substance of a *quite material character* (i.e. independent of thought and word)” (Ilyenkov 2009, 204).

Every philosophical and logical system, inevitably, faces contradictions and intends to resolve it. Metaphysical thought considers contradiction a mere subjective phantom; whereas dialectical thought considers it “the necessary logical form of the development of thought” (Ilyenkov 1960/1982, 234).

We should note that what is presented here as “contradiction” is not contradiction in the narrow, formal logical sense of the term; such contradictions (e.g., p and $\neg p$) are to be barred by rule of formal logic. Contradiction, here, means “the unity and coincidence of mutually exclusive theoretical definitions” (1960/1982, 233). Contradiction appears when the phenomena that form the subject matter of a science is to be systematized conceptually (1960/1982, 235).

Contradictions are not exclusive to political economy as a science; they are inherent in any modern science. Ilyenkov provides the example of Michelson experiments that was conducted in terms of categories of classical mechanics that amounted to insoluble paradoxes and contradictions within classical mechanics conceptual system, and which was resolved through Einstein’s hypothesis (1960/1982, 236).

Metaphysical thought, according to Ilyenkov, reduces theory to a piling up and removal of empirically observed antinomies. It explains these “antinomies” in terms of deficiencies of cognitive apparatus and theoretical systems. Thus, it looks for empirically universal laws that dissipate such contradictions: contradiction, in this view, is a purely epistemological-cognitive anomaly. Whereas, dialectics aims at resolution of contradiction by deducing it from the very movement of the world: “The only way of attaining a rational resolution of contradictions in theoretical definition is through tracing the mode in which they are resolved in the movement of the objective reality, the movement and development of the world of things ‘in themselves’” (1960/1982, 244). Natural sciences and well as social sciences, to the extent they are genuine theoretical-conceptual systems aim at explaining the motion in terms of such contradictions. If this view is true, then explanations regarding scientific progress or change of theories with respect to piling up of anomalies, such as that of Kuhn’s, fail to grasp the true essence of scientific activity.

According to Ilyenkov, The core of Marx’s methodology with regard to contradiction is not to eliminate contradiction from theory, as metaphysicians do, but, “this method is based on the assumption that contradiction in the object itself cannot be and is never resolved in any other way than by the development of the reality fraught with this contradiction into another, higher and, more advanced reality” (1960/1982, 267).

This process of acquisition of independence of value in form of capital circulation, which is manifest in the transition from $C—M—C$ circulation to $M—C—M$ form of circulation is the consequence of the inner contradiction of value (contradiction between use-value and value). So be the case, capital assumes a life of its own as an independent substance. In a sense, it is an independent substance; but it is the historically formed substance that now, apparently, turns money and commodities to modes of itself. So will be the case with the labor-force; that is, it will turn into a mode of capital.

According to Ilyenkov, Marx, in contrast to classical political economy, which is also the object of Marx’s criticism, discloses the contradictory essence of value: this essential contradiction is the contrast between use and exchange values. There are two capitalist “solutions” to this contradiction: money and economic crisis. Yet, neither money nor crisis is able to resolve this contradiction. Money makes the contradiction invisible but crisis makes it visible once again. However, both are far from dissipating this contradiction. Ricardo introduces the labor-force as the basis of value, that is, human labor is the source and the substance of value. However, Marx takes this further by disclosing that labor is not only the substance but also the subject of value. Ilyenkov states,

In trying to express (value) theoretically, i.e., through the law of value, a clear logical contradiction was obtained. The point was that profit was new, newly created value, or rather part of it. That was an indisputably true analytical determination. But only new labour produced new value. How, however, did that tie up with the quite obvious empirical fact that the quantity of profit was not determined at all by the quantity of living labour expended on its production? It depended exclusively on the quantity of capital as a whole, and in no case on the size of that part that went on wages. And it was

even more paradoxical that the higher profit the less living labour was consumed during its production.

Pertaining to Hegelian terminology and formulating Marx's materialist dialectics in opposition to that, Ilyenkov states, "The essence of the Marxian upheaval in political economy may be expressed in philosophical terms in the following manner: In Marx's theory, not only the substance of value, labour, was understood (Ricardo also attained this understanding), but, for the first time, value was simultaneously understood as the subject of the entire development, that is, as a reality developing through its inner contradictions into a whole system of economic forms. Ricardo failed to understand this latter point" (1960/1982, 278). Capitalist crises and the revolution, as the resolution of the capitalist contradiction—overproduction, which means accumulation of riches in the hands of the few in contrast to poverty of the masses—"emerges as the inevitable result of the development of the very contradiction which is contained in simple commodity exchange, in the 'cell' of the whole system—value, as an embryo or kernel" (1960/1982, 281).

Ilyenkov introduces "the abstract as an expression of the concrete". He defends the idea that a true concept is the one that is the theoretical expression/reconstruction of "the cell" or "the unit" of the phenomenon at hand. The question is how do we identify this so-called "true cell"? How in contrast to, say, social constructionism or relativism, a historical materialist won't end up defending "everything goes"? Basically, it can be said that the only criterion at hand is practice, e.g., scientific practice that we are engaged with. In other words, there are no ready-made criteria but practice itself; it is the very work that we do that may eventually bring us the coining of proper theoretical tool we need.

In this respect, Ilyenkov contrasts true concepts to mere empirical generalizations. He criticizes empiricism for reducing concept to generalization of similarities between different objects. In contrast, dialectical concepts reveal the internal bonds between phenomena and depict them as parts of a whole; a totality. The element of normativity comes into the scene at this stage: knowledge via concept is not contemplation (acquisition of data); rather, it is a form of practice and as practice it really determines the truth. Due to this practicality (in Marxian sense and not in pragmatic sense) normativity becomes an inseparable aspect of concept being a true one: it is not an instrument of interpretation but a tool for acting and changing the world. This change is real; it is not only a matter of looking into the world with the use of different conceptual glasses. The core of the matter is to see that concepts are tools of action that are continuously produced, corrected, sharpened and sometimes even rejected within activity. Applying this to the concept of proletariat Ilyenkov states, "the truth of the concept of proletariat ... could not be proved by comparing it with the feature empirically common to all proletarians ... The truth of this concept was shown, as is well known, by the real transformation of the proletariat from a 'class in itself' into a 'class for itself'. The proletariat developed, in the full sense of the term, towards a correspondence with 'its own concept'" (1960/1982, 131).

The substance of labor, for Marx, is not only labor, but also abstract labor. On the other hand, according to Ricardo, the substance of the value is the labor realized in a product. What is the determination that differentiates between abstract labor and labor? (Concrete) labor is human activity actualized in the production of any goods. Abstract labor appears in the process of

exchange through money as these concrete, particular labors are abstracted from their corresponding human activities. Value is not the substance; abstract labor is the substance of value. Value becomes a subject through abstract labor. It is then possible to say that value, on the one hand, is determined by its substance, while, on the other hand, there is a subjective element into it. The substance and the subject, in this case, are contradictory but they come together to form the so-called value.

This corresponds to the contradiction between use-value and exchange-value. Value, to the extent that it is the expression of capitalist exchange, is a subject. Moreover, labor forms the basis of use-value; abstract labor is the base of exchange-value. These exclusive contradictories inevitably are united in commodity. Ricardo cannot explain how a product of labor is defined in terms of value because he understands production as concrete human activity, independent of history and relations of production. He includes the finished product in exchange only mechanically. On the contrary, Marx explains how a particular product becomes both the expression of use value and a commodity that expresses the exchange value in the process of production. This is to say that, there is no production per se, independent of relations of production and socio-historical conditions for Marx. Therefore, contradiction is inherent to the produced entity; it is not attributed to it from without.

Formal logic, in this sense, according to Ilyenkov, aims at dissipating the contradiction with reference to the relations between propositions; whereas, dialectics reveals the objectivity and reality of the very contradiction.

Historical and conceptual analyses are parallels. We should note that concept, according to this, is a historical phenomenon/product. Dialectics identifies the historical laws of development of thought; that is, development of concept. This is to say that logic becomes possible only through an analysis of the process of thinking and through analysis of concept, which is the clearest expression of this development. This conceptual development is the product of human practice and material human activity. Ilyenkov states,

Logical categories are stages (steps) in cognition developing the object in its necessity, in the natural sequence of the phases of its own formation, and not at all man's technical devices imposed on the subject like a child's bucket on sand-pies. Not only do determinations of each of the logical categories therefore have an objective character, i.e., determine the object and not simply the form of subjective activity, but the sequence in which the categories appear in the theory of thought also has the same necessary character.

Consequently, necessity and intention (telos), as logical categories, cannot be analyzed "objective-scientifically" in the sense that positivism conceives of it. To the contrary, we cannot conceive of these independent from scientific categories such as identity, quantity, and quality; just as we cannot conceive of capital and profit scientifically unless we analyze and conceive of their constituting units –commodity and money. It is in this sense that as a unit that is conceptualized by dialectical logic that concept and the history of its genesis fits within the history of human productive activity. This is to say that thinking is not the activity of the brain and that it does not realized *in* the brain; thinking is to apply concepts, which, first and foremost, is a bodily activity/behavior/praxis.

A concept is always “in process”; it is truly historical. Transformation of proletariat from “in itself” to “for itself” class signifies that proletariat is possible as a class only in a revolution. The possibility of proletariat as a class paradoxically depends on its annihilation. The concept should contain the possibility of annihilating itself; this annihilation is not a simple “falsification” in philosophy of science sense of the term, nor is it a formal logical negation. The objectivity and truth –the “this-sided-ness”– of the concept of proletariat lies in this transformation that depends on and necessitates the abolishment of the conditions of the objective existence of proletariat as a class. The so-called “importing consciousness” to class from without is but the manifestation of this transformation: it is not importing an external, alien element that is lacking in class but is to make the class for itself; to make it self-conscious.

“A formal abstraction which could be made in the mid-19th century by comparing all individual representatives of the proletariat, by the kind of abstracting recommended by non-dialectical logic, would have characterised the proletariat as the most oppressed passively suffering poverty-ridden class capable, at best, only of a desperate hungry rebellion.

This concept of the proletariat was current in the innumerable studies of that time... This abstraction was a precise reflection of the empirically general. But it was only Marx and Engels who obtained a theoretical expression of these empirical facts, a conception of what the proletariat was a ‘class in itself’ (an sich), in its internal nature expressed in the concept, what it was not yet ‘for itself’ (für sich), that is, in empirical reality directly reflected in a notion or simple empirical abstraction” (1960/1982, 130-1).

Proletariat’s revolution is a historical necessity, which stems from “what proletariat is;” the “consciousness” of the proletariat, that is, proletariat becoming a class-for-itself (in contrast to being a class-in-itself), abstractly-logically speaking, is a moment where the realization of class and its abolition coincides. Criticizing Bauer brothers in the *Holy Family* Marx states,

When socialist writers ascribe this world-historic role to the proletariat, it is not at all, as Critical Criticism pretends to believe, because they regard the proletarians as *gods*. Rather the contrary. Since in the fully-formed proletariat the abstraction of all humanity, even of the *semblance* of humanity, is practically complete; since the conditions of life of the proletariat sum up all the conditions of life of society today in their most inhuman form; since man has lost himself in the proletariat, yet at the same time has not only gained theoretical consciousness of that loss, but through urgent, no longer removable, no longer disguisable, absolutely imperative *need* -- the practical expression of *necessity* -- is driven directly to revolt against this inhumanity, it follows that the proletariat can and must emancipate itself. But it cannot emancipate itself without abolishing the conditions of its own life. It cannot abolish the conditions of its own life without abolishing all the inhuman conditions of life of society today which are summed up in its own situation. Not in vain does it go through the stern but steeling school of *labour*. It is not a question of what this or that proletarian, or even the whole proletariat, at the moment *regards* as its aim. It is a question of *what the proletariat is*, and what, in accordance with this *being*, it will historically be compelled to do. Its aim and historical action is visibly and irrevocably foreshadowed in its own life situation as well as in the whole organization of

bourgeois society today. There is no need to explain here that a large part of the English and French proletariat is already *conscious* of its historic task and is constantly working to develop that consciousness into complete clarity. (1956)

It is in this sense that a scientific concept—a “true concept” as Vygotsky puts—always includes a normative aspect. In other words, normativity is the indispensable aspect of the truth of a concept. This is closely related to what Marx defines as the “this-sided-ness” of thought and to his idea of “changing the world”. The measure of truth of concept is its ability and success in changing the reality. In epistemological terms, one can speak of the truth of the concept to the extent that it changes the existing rationality, to the extent that it shows the irrationality of the present situation, and to the extent that it can propose a new rationality instead of the former. Normativity is a necessary aspect of human activity. Since concept is the tool or the organ of human cognitive activity it determines the truth of the real; because it determines the practical production and the practical alteration of reality (just as means of production determine the relations of production and in turn being determined by these relations).

Back to the notion of proletariat; what does it mean to speak of proletariat as becoming a class for-itself? It means proletariat’s becoming a revolutionary class. On the one hand, the proletariat is constituted and determined by the necessity of historical conditions and social relations. On the other hand, despite being developed within the relations of production, i.e., despite being the result of the relations of production, it changes into the cause of change of these relations. This, according to Ilyenkov, is the dialectics of reality: a result changing into a cause; as an in-itself class, proletariat is the mere result of the relations of production; it is an element of capital. As a for-itself class, it becomes the subject of history; the power that revolutionizes the relations of production. So be the case, proletariat “ceases to be a mass of oppressed and downtrodden labourers scattered throughout the country and divided by competition, it becomes a monolithic class realising its world-historical mission--revolutionary abolition of private ownership and of the class form of the division of labour in general” (Ilyenkov 1960/1982, 131)

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