

The Dialectics of the Abstract and the Concrete in Marx's Capital: Chapter 2 - The Unity of the Abstract & the Concrete as a Law of Thought

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This chapter is about how to begin and then how to proceed with the investigation of the fact or thing.

Ilyenkov's aim is an abstraction that is an expression of the concrete, "an objective, concrete abstraction".

Rather than an abstract that is "a meagre thought" because it "fails to grasp its internal structure and internally necessary links with with other such facts".

In other words, it is not a dialectical concept that is both abstract and concrete.

The formal concreteness is presented as 'seriously tangible knowledge', whereas Marx's definition requires "further analysis of the facts".

How to begin?

By considering a "quite particular recurring fact with respect to its own immanent (internal, inherent) content".

For Marx, it was the simple fact that England in the mid-19th century was full of commodities, of useful things for sale.

So the starting point for the analysis of capitalism was not capital but the commodity and the forms of commodity exchange.

This had to be considered by "ignoring everything that this fact owes to the totality of the external influences of the broader sphere of reality in which it exists".

It had to be considered as a thing in itself, with its own internal aspects, sides, contradictions and history.

This is, of course, abstraction as it separates the fact from other facts and the system that the fact is part of. But as we shall see, it is an abstraction as a process of that leads to the concrete.

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So while the thing is not approached from how it is influenced by other things, it is regarded "with respect to its place and role in the whole, in the concrete system within which and through which it acquires its specific definiteness".

An apparent contradiction: The universal is established through its opposite: the consideration of the phenomenon from the standpoint of "the immanent laws" of the given particular phenomenon.

But it presupposes its role and place in the whole, "within the universal interconnection, within the ensemble of mutually conditioning phenomena.

The point is that the commodity-form of interconnections proves to exist only within the developed system of capitalism and no other system.

A significant point An abstract theoretical consideration of the commodity "reveals at the same time the universal theoretical definition of the system as a whole".

In other words, the universal is revealed through the particular (and not the other way round).

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Thus the right to abstract consideration of a phenomenon is determined by the concrete role of this phenomenon in the whole under study, in a concrete system of interacting phenomena.

If abstract analysis deals with some phenomenon other than that which objectively constitutes the universal, simplest, elementary form of the being of the object as a whole, its real 'cell', then abstract consideration remains abstract in the bad sense of the word and does not coincide with the path of concrete cognition.

So we are looking for the "cell" as a starting point.

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In this approach, a dialectical unity of the concrete and abstract is established, a "real coincidence of the abstract and the concrete"

Ilyenkov once again contrasts what he calls "concrete consideration" with "concrete understanding" of the phenomena of the commodity-money sphere.

Skipped most of section two The Dialectical & the Eclectic-Empirical Conception of Comprehensive Consideration which is a slightly obscure example used to attack Trotsky and probably insisted upon by the censors who we know were ill disposed towards Ilyenkov. In my view, there is little in this section that can help us.

Moving on to page 12.

Spiral-Like Character of Development of Reality & its Theoretical Reflection

An important section dealing with development of the thing and its relationship to other things.

Thus materialist dialectics interprets concreteness of theory as a reflection of *all the necessary aspects* of the object in their mutual conditionality and *internal interaction*.

In this section, Ilyenkov deals with reciprocal relation, with cause becoming effect and vice versa, with development taking a spiral-like form.

The form of the existence of an object is "at the same time a universal necessary condition of all the others".

Each part "mutually conditions" the other, providing the foundations for development. The relationship is a "prerequisite" but is also a consequence, in fact a continuing consequence.

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Ilyenkov gives the example of

This dialectics of all real development, in which the universal necessary condition of the emergence of an object becomes its own universal and necessary consequence, this dialectical inversion in which the condition becomes the conditioned, the cause becomes the effect, the universal becomes the particular, is a characteristic feature of internal interaction through which actual development assumes the form of a circle or, to be more precise, of a spiral which extends the scope of its motion all the time, with each new turn.

The next paragraph on page 13 is very important.

"At the same time there is a kind of 'locking in itself' here which transforms an aggregate of individual phenomena into a relatively closed system, a concrete integral organism historically developing according to its immanent laws."

Which is elaborated in the next paragraph: the spiral nature of development is a universal law of dialectical development.

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The challenge is to overcome the tendency to look at the results of a process rather than the process itself.

Assuming indeed both money and value *as premises* for its emergence, capital at its birth immediately transforms them into universal forms of its own movement, into abstract moments of its specific being. As a result, it emerges before the observer contemplating a historically established relation as the creator of value.

The difficulty here lies in that it is only the emergence of capital that transforms value into a *real universal* economic form of all production, of the entire system of economic relations. Before that, before the emergence of capital, value is anything but the *universal* economic relation if only because it does not comprise such a significant 'particular' factor of production as labour force. (this should be labour power).

Ilyenkov says it is impossible to break up what he calls the logical circularity by sophisticated logical procedures or semantics because the problem arises from "the failure to implement a genuinely historical approach to the study of

this interreaction" which enables one to find a way into it (the vicious circle).

In this way, we can get beyond just studying the results.

Marx's analysis singles out, as the concrete theoretical characteristics, only those universal and necessary conditions of the being of capital which are reproduced by the movement of capital itself. Capitalism does not reproduce labour force (power) as such or natural resources and other material components but rather labour force (power) as commodity, that is, as that social form in which labour force (power) functions within the developed system of capitalist relations.

Gold, for example, taken by itself is not money. It becomes 'money' in the circulation of money and commodities in which it is involved.

That's why Marx's approach had "enormous significance" in the political as well as the economic sense.

He was able to overcome "fetishist illusions" veiling the nature of value as well as its derivate forms.

Marx was able to show in Capital (my words) how the commodity viewed as commodity masked the essential nature of capitalism itself. The fetishism (given the commodity supernatural powers which suggested) was broken down by Marx's approach.

To the producers, Marx wrote, "their own (the producers) social action takes the form of the action of objects, which rule the producers instead of being ruled by them".

Marx adds in Capital that the "ultimate money form of the world of commodities actually conceals, instead of disclosing, the social character of private labour, and the social relations between the individual producers

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Ilyenkov makes the point that while capitalism has to be viewed as a 'closed system' the actual motive forces of the evolution of a system of production relations are contained in the development of the productive forces.

Marx shows this in a dialectical way. Page 17

"The development of productive forces is here taken not by itself, not only as a cause, but also as a consequence, result, and product of the reverse action of the system of production relations on the productive forces."

For example, relative surplus value is an active form exerting a strong reverse effect on the use of machinery or fixed capital.

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An important thought in the third para on this page.

"Any new accretion of the productive forces does not automatically create an economic relation or socioeconomic form directly conforming to it, but rather determines the *direction* in which the already existing historically formed system of economic, relations evolves.

This is beginning to explain the contradiction between the productive forces and the form of production, which is at the heart of the capitalist system. The rest of this section deals with historical materialism, the theoretical relationship between the economic relations and other spheres.

Interestingly on page 19, Ilyenkov says (third para) each concrete case it should be understood why the given shift in the economy was reflected in politics or art in the given rather than some other way.

And

Each of the superstructural spheres or the activity of social man must be understood and explained as a system of historically established concrete forms, specific for this sphere, of reflecting economy, man's social being.

Against what Ilyenkov calls the "reduction" approach (much favoured by Stalinists, where everything is reduced to its more or less direct connection with economy.