Notes on Chapter 4 of DAC

Empiricism and Nominalism

In Chapter 4 of *The Dialectics of the Abstract & Concrete in Marx's Capital* (DAC), Ilyenkov describes and champions the logical method of inquiry over the historical (chronological) method. As comes out clearly at the end of the chapter, Ilyenkov is specifically attacking the neo-Kantian (NK) emphasis on nominalist and empiricist approaches to inquiry and analysis prevalent in the official *Diamat*. While NKs can, in principle, identify a chronological sequence of events, they are hamstrung when it comes to making substantive generalisations about such a sequence, synchronic or diachronic, since these are, for NKs, necessarily acts of subjective categorization. While a subjective categorization may be used to draw similarities between 1 or more things or events (e.g., using sets defined by 1 or more common properties—"the set of objects on Dom’s desk"), it cannot be used to substantively relate things or events genetically, developmentally, or immanently (i.e., dialectically). For example, in Chapter 3 of DAC, Ilyenkov identifies Ricardo's nominalism and empiricism as the source of his inability to identify the actual concept of value:

"According to Ricardo, value as such can only exist post rem, only as a mental abstraction from the particular kinds of value (profit, rent, wages, etc.), by no means ante rem, as an independent reality chronologically preceding its particular species (capital, profit, rent, wages, etc.). All these particular species of value eternally exist side by side with one another and by no means originate in value, just as the horse does not actually derive from the animal in general.

The trouble was, however, that the nominalist conception of the general concept, justifiably attacking the principal proposition of medieval realism, in general eliminated from the real world of individual things, along with that proposition, the idea of their real development."

In Ch. 4, Ilyenkov describes this approach to generalization in the context of historical investigation as "abstract historicism," which further emphasizes the nominalist/empiricist character of the historical method he is critiquing (p.10). In essence, Ilyenkov argues, abstract historicism is a disguised ahistoricism that passes as scientific. For example, using the method of abstract historicism, "[b]ourgeois economists" may easily come to see the birth of capital "to be the hour in which the primitive man picked up a club" (p.10). Bourgeois economists are led to these types of ahistorical or transhistorical arguments because, to them, "the comprehension of the past is closely linked with the comprehension of the present" (p.10). Again, nominalism and empiricism are key to the abstract character of this type of ahistorical historicism.

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1 [https://www.marxists.org/archive/ilyenkov/works/abstract/abstra3f.htm](https://www.marxists.org/archive/ilyenkov/works/abstract/abstra3f.htm)
Given the denial of substantive categorizations, the bourgeois economist must primarily rely on the notion of categorization based on subjective notions of similarity and association. This approach is exemplified by Hume's principles of association (i.e., resemblance, contiguity, and causation), which are merely features of the mind as opposed to relations that exist in the world. Relying on a subjective notion of association guided by "experience" means that essential aspects of events or things (e.g., relational and/or dynamic) will by definition be excluded from or at least misinterpreted by the given analysis. This further implies that subjective categorizations will necessarily abstract a given thing or event from the complex unity of relations upon which it is grounded in actuality (i.e., the concrete), thereby constraining its existence within the limited locus of atomised subjectivity. Relying on abstraction, bourgeois economists can easily draw upon surface similarities between two disparate events, such as current capitalism and the origins of the money form, and bring them under a jury-rigged categorization, such as "money bringing money from circulation" (p. 10), that bears little substantive relation to the objects of investigation in their actual concreteness.

In addition to the nominalist character of abstract historicism, it is necessary to draw attention to its related empiricist tendencies. For example, in looking at the historical development of phenomena, bourgeois economists primarily asses phenomena as they are 'immediately' given to their senses (i.e., as a chronologically ordered sequence of events). Ilyenkov argues that, while this approach is seemingly "the most natural one," it hinges on only assessing phenomena as if what their superficial appearance is all they are in actuality (p.14). For the empiricist, what is given to the senses is all that "shows up" for inquirer regarding the object of inquiry. As Ilyenkov notes in Chapter 5, the focus on appearance alone leads the empiricist to deny the possibility of inner contradiction in an object and affirm that contradiction can only exist be between separate objects (sec. 4). Ilyenkov states that "[d]ialectics consists exactly in the ability to discern the inner contradiction of a thing, the stimulus of its self-development, where, the metaphysician [i.e., the empiricist] sees only an external contradiction resulting from a more or less accidental collision of two internally noncontradictory things" (Chapter 5, sec. 4). While Ilyenkov's method of inquiry dialectically moves from appearance to essence -- the historical to the logical--abstract historicism remains caught in the historical, at the level of appearance—a method that Marx, Ilyenkov, and Hegel, characterized as "one-sided."2

Ilyenkov outlines how Abstract Historicism's commitments (discussed above) leads to a view of development "that is the reverse of the real and objective one" (p.14). As Ilyenkov illustrates, bourgeois economists are led to interpret what are objectively causes (e.g., general crisis in overproduction) as effects and objective effects (e.g., disturbance in spheres of bank credits and

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2 see: Marx Grundrisse. Introduction, s. 3, p.34: https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/grundrisse.pdf ; Ilyenkov, DAC, Chapter 4; Hegel, Philosophy of Right, s. 1, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/pr/printrod.htm. It should also be noted that Ilyenkov's critique of nominalism and empiricism often refers to Hegelian arguments against empiricism and Critical Philosophy. For a summary of some of Hegel's critiques, see sections 39 to 41 of Hegel's Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences: https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/sl/slconten.htm.
commerce) as original causes (p.14). To this end Ilyenkov observes that the logical method of
inquiry correctly identifies that "historically preceding elements may long pre-exist the logically
prior ones, they may even constitute the condition of origin of this logically anterior, concrete
universal phenomenon, later becoming its manifestation or product (p.16). Once nominalism
and empiricism is rejected, it is possible to treat concepts as more than subjective
categorizations, objects as more than appearances, and objects as embodying internal
contradictions rather than only external ones between objects. Once appearance is seen as
necessarily containing "depth" or substance, the internal contradictions of substance imply a
logic that supersedes abstract historicism's adherence to the chronological development of
objects' surface. This is the value of the logical mode of inquiry.

Value, Activity, and Essence

Marx's analysis of the commodity in Chapter 1 of Capital still provides one of the most rigorous
and captivating examples of the logical mode in action. Using commodity exchange, a main
focal point in classical political economy, Marx moves beneath the surface to reveal the internal
contradictions of use and exchange value within commodities and their parallel causes:
concrete and abstract labour. From here, Marx is able to demonstrate that beneath the surface
of commodity exchange it is abstract labour, "creates and forms the value of commodities."

Detailing the logical method underpinning Marx's analysis, in Ch. 3 Sec. 6 of DAC, Ilyenkov
explains that, for Marx:

"Value is a real, objective condition without which neither capital nor money nor anything else is
possible. Theoretical definitions of value as such can only be obtained by considering a certain
objective economic reality capable of existing before, outside, and independently of all those
phenomena that later developed on its basis.

This elementary objective economic reality existed long before the emergence of capitalism and
all the categories expressing its structure. This reality is direct exchange of one commodity for
another commodity." ³

In Dialectics of the Ideal, Ilyenkov explains how the "value-form is ideal, that is to say, it is
something quite different from the palpable-corporeal form of the thing in which it is presented"
(p. 57). Without a conception of the ideal, or of the difference between appearance and
essence, getting to the actual nature of value or any other phenomenon is unlikely, if not,
impossible. As Marx lays out in Chapter one of Capital and Ilyenkov in DAC and elsewhere, this
was a major failure of classical political economy.

⁴ https://www.marxists.org/archive/ilyenkov/works/abstract/abstra3f.htm
It is also important to note that Ilyenkov details Marx’s insight that “social-human life-activity” is the key to how the “stamp” of the Ideal is “impressed on the substance of nature” (p.58). Without this understanding, value could only be interpreted through the fantastical heuristic of commodity fetishism, leaving the “definite social relationships between people” hidden from view (p.58). All of this to say that it is no coincidence that abstract labour, idealized activity, is the actual source value, inaccessible from empiricist or nominalist forms of analysis.

The Neoliberal Perfection of the Fetishism of the Commodity