RESEARCHES

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THE ORIGINS OF CONSCIOUSNESS IN LATER SOVIET NEOMARXISM

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Abstract

The article deals with a group of Soviet philosophers (active primarily in the 1960s and 1970s) who sought a non-dogmatic, innovative interpretation of Marxism. The key figures were Evald Ilyenkov (1924-1979), Felix Mikhailov (1930-2006) and Genrikh Batishchev (1932-1990). Drawing on the recently published writings of "early" Marx that dealt with subjects going beyond the official tenets of dialectical and historical materialism, they (1) attempted to reconsider the concept of the ideal, seeking to amend its status within the doctrine, (2) stressed the fundamental difference between the natural and the social and hence the irreducibility of the latter to the former, (3) emphasised activism as man's essential quality; (4) and, first and foremost, came with an ingenious hypothesis of the origins of consciousness.

Consciousness was to them the product of communication mediated by the use of tools (collective work) that served as a kind of material (stone) "protoconcepts" symbolising both the relevant extrinsic properties of the objects of work and the relevant common practices, i. e. socialised properties, of workers. Insofar as they were instrumental in presenting the self in an objective form, tools, or rather the socialised use of them, proved crucial to the development of self-consciousness, differentiation between self and non-self, overcoming of the natural solipsist attitude and acquirement of objective knowledge, the latter allowing to transcend the limits of natural life and engage in free activity and creativity.

Key words: alienation; consciousness; ideal; praxis; Marxism.

ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯ

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ПРОБЛЕМА СОЗНАНИЯ В ПОЗДНЕМ СОВЕТСКОМ МАРКСИЗМЕ

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Аннотация

Статья посвящена группе советских философов, выступивших в 1960–1970-е годы с новаторской, недогматической интерпретаций марксизма. Ключевыми фигурами этой школы советской марксистской мысли были Эвальд Ильенков (1924-1979), Феликс Трофимов (1930-2006) и Генрих Батищев (1932-1990). Отталкиваясь от сочинений «раннего» Маркса, посвященных проблемам, выходившим за рамки официозного марксизма, они 1) подвергли переосмыслению категорию идеального с целью изменения ее статуса в философии марксизма; 2) подчеркивали сущностное отличие социального от природного, несводимость первого ко второму и 3) деятельностную сущность человека; 4) выдвинули оригинальную гипотезу происхождения сознания.

Сознание понималось ими как продукт коллективного действия, опосредованного орудиями труда, которые выступают как своего рода материальные (каменные) «протопонятия», «отражающие», с одной стороны, объективные свойства предметов, на которые направлены коллективные трудовые усилия, с другой стороны, формы взаимодействия трудящихся, т. е. общественной практики. Представляя субъект действия (еще не осознанное «Я») в объективной форме, орудия труда, вернее, их коллективное использование, сыграли решающую роль в развитии самосознания, различении Я и не-Я, преодолении естественной солипсистской установки и обретении объективного знания, что, в свою очередь, сделало возможным выход за границы природного бытия в сфере свободного действия и творчества.

Ключевые слова: идеальное; марксизм; отчуждение; практика; сознание.

Introduction. The name used to identify the group of philosophers I am concerned with in this paper is, of course, controversial. Not only has it been applied earlier to various Western thinkers, such as Adorno and Marcuse or Djilas and even Sartre, with whom my men have little in common. Even more important is the fact that they would have strongly objected to being called Neomarxists themselves. For they doubtless considered themselves true though, by no means, dogmatic Marxists. However, they were not recognised as such by the Soviet philosophical establishment. To call them "Late Soviet Marxists" would be more adequate, perhaps, but for the risk of "dissolving" them in a multitude too amorphous to be meaningful.

Discovering "Early" Marx. Among other benefits of Khrushchev thaw of the late 1950s – early 1960s, less conspicuous, perhaps, but of lasting consequences, was reviviscence of creative philosophical thought. The privileged status of Marxism as the only true, and still the one officially permitted, ideology was preserved, to be sure, but this unrivalled and unchallenged *Weltanschauung* acquired new energetic followers – eager to exercise what they sincerely believed to be its creative potential and ready for its non-dogmatic, innovative interpretation. Their recognised leader was Evald Ilyenkov (1924-1979) whose *Dialectics of the Abstract and the Concrete in Marx's Capital* (1960) [4] was seen as a major breakthrough, followed by *On Idols and Ideals* (1968) [2] and *The Dialectical Logic* (1974, reprinted 1984) [3]. Other key figures were Felix Mikhailov (1930-2006), author of *The Riddle of the Self* (1964) [10] and Genrikh Batishchev (1932-1990, the principal publication: *The Activistic Essence of Man as a Philosophical Principle*, 1969 [1]).

The ideological justification for their effort was the recently discovered "early" Marx of *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* [5] and *The German Ideology* [7] (1845-46), to which were added *Economic Manuscripts of 1857-61*[8] (the so called original version of *Das Kapital*). These writings, first published in the 1930s or even as late as 1959 and hence unknown not only to the patriarchs of Russian Marxism Plekhanov and Lenin but even to the hitherto principal Soviet Marxist authority Stalin, dealt with subjects that appeared unconventional and even alien to the official tenets of dialectical and historical materialism, moreover – or worse still – already invoked by "bourgeois" or "revisionist" philosophers, such as Existentialists and the Frankfurt school. Soviet Neomarxists welcomed them, nevertheless, as a singular insight into the origins of Marxism and an opportunity for its deeper understanding and better substantiation as well as its incorporation into the European humanist tradition.

Rehabilitation of the Ideal. The departure point of the new school was re-interpretation of the ideal. According to Ilyenkov, the ideal should not be (as "militant materialism" was inclined to do) belittled as an inferior "secondary" element. It is, essentially, the rational form of human activity and, as such, the principal concern and the fundamental problem of philosophy. The essential characteristic of human activity is man's ability to adapt its behaviour to ("to act in accord" with) any "extraneous form", moreover, "in accord" with this extraneous form's potential changes. This ability is due to a unique human capacity that Ilyenkov called productive imagination. The latter is a capacity to operate not only with external objects (a faculty we share with animals), but also with their ideal models.

Insofar as such activity to be effective (successful) is to be "subdued" to the specific qualities of external objects, the ontological priority of being (matter) as the principal tenet of philosophical materialism remains unchallenged (not a minor point under Soviet circumstances), but consciousness is no longer seen as primarily a passive "reflection" of the external reality, but rather as a prerequisite and an instrument of reality's transformation into forms it lacks in its initial (spontaneous, natural) state.

The Natural and the Social. In this way a new type of reality (being) emerges, which, although resting on a natural foundation, cannot be described in natural terms nor accounted for by natural laws alone. It were repeated attempts to reduce this transnatural reality to the purely natural that rendered pre-Marxist materialism easy prey to criticism by idealist philosophers. (Soviet Neomarxists were fond of citing Lenin on this point who once observed that "clever materialism", by which he presumably meant his own version thereof, was closer to "clever idealism" than it was to "silly materialism"). The genius of Marx, they held, consisted in demonstrating in a comprehensive and convincing way that the newness of social novelties (both with regard to the natural and with regard to their own previous forms), i.e. their irreducibility to the already existing (the

"given"), was in principle compatible with them being objectively conditioned, i.e., in Marxist jargon, "material". The key to this dialectical enigma was the concept of material production, which was broadly interpreted by Soviet Neomarxists as the objective material activity transforming the world, alias "practice".

Activism as Man's Essential Quality. Practice is another category of "early" Marx, central in his *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845, published 1888) [7] and critical for his understanding of man as a transnatural, historic being. With Neomarxists practice, in fact, replaces matter as the central philosophical category; it serves as a kind of substantia of the social, like pre-Marxist materialism saw matter as the substantia of the natural (though, strictly speaking, of course, substantia is a foreign term in Marxist vocabulary). Neomarxists treat practice as the materialist equivalent ("the rational kernel" as they style it) of Hegelian "identity of being and consciousness". Though mediated by thought ("the ideal"), practice as the world-transforming activity is essentially material because it is, on the one hand, subject to objective laws of external reality and is, on the other hand, exercised in socially determined forms.

The Nature and Genesis of Consciousness. The capacity to be guided by the laws of some other nature and not just by the intrinsic laws of one's own nature is the *differentia specifica* of human beings that distinguishes them from animals. For this to be possible, however, this extrinsic law must be *known* (whereas intrinsic laws require no mediation of knowledge to be effective). Knowledge and, more generally, consciousness are thus central to distinguishing between the social and the natural. This sounded suspiciously "idealistic", but Neomarxists held (justly, it seems) that materialism would never be truly substantiated until it came with a convincing hypothesis of the origins of consciousness, considering Marxists' uncompromising refusal to include the latter among the world's "primary" elements that might be safely "taken for granted".

Consciousness is, somewhat circularly (or should we rather say – dialectically), explained by Neomarxists in social or, to be more specific, in communicational terms, viz. as a product of communication mediated by specific external objects – *tools* (undeniably, a "legitimate" Marxist topic). For tools are essentially things molded to fit external reality: they would be useless unless they "reflected" the relevant objective characteristics of the would-be "targets" (as would be futile, for example, to attempt to draw water in a sieve). In this they are a kind of "material (tangible) ideal", "protoconcepts" in stone, or "words of the real-life language", as Mikhailov puts it[1].

But tools, of course, are possessed of no consciousness of their own, no more so than printed words in a book. In human communication mediated by the use of tools, however (i.e. in collective work), the latter operate as double-faced signs: on the one hand, tools "represent" ("stand for", "symbolise") the objects they are used to modify, on the other hand, they "represent" the social practices, and with them the newly acquired socialised properties, of those who use them, including "the self".

For the riddle of self is the riddle of reflection, of this peculiar capacity to view oneself as if from the outside, as if one were a different being. This is only possible if one can truly encounter oneself as something (or somebody) different from self, encounter something or somebody that is both self and non-self. This "dialectical" requirement is met by only one instance, viz. some other person (some other self) provided *his/her* activities are at the same time *my* activities. No one's *natural* activities can, however, be also *my* activities, just like *my* natural activities can never be also someone else's activities, even if the two are identical, for we cannot "represent" ("stand for") each other in our natural functions: I would not get rid of *my* hunger and *my* thirst if somebody ate or drank in my stead, nor would anyone be able to beget (or carry) *my* children for me. And only *our mutual* activities mediated and "conditioned" by the use of an external thing different from but common to both my counterpart and myself result in a situation in which reflection and self-consciousness are possible.

The importance of self-consciousness lies in the fact that only insofar as I am conscious of myself, i.e. capable of distinguishing between self and non-self, can I also be cognisant of non-self, can apprehend the outer world as something that exists and is possessed of properties *in* and *for itself* and not just as a part or aspect of *my* subjective world. Self-consciousness is thus a necessary prerequisite for overcoming what might be called a natural solipsist attitude. Insofar as they

[1] See https://www.marxists.org/archive/mikhailov/works_riddle/riddle3b.htm

"reflect" objective properties of other things, "represent" them in forms different from the original ones ("idealised"), tools prove instrumental in the understanding of the objective world, too. And objective knowledge ("cognised necessity") produces an entirely new situation: it allows to transcend the limits of natural life and makes free activity and creativity possible.

Alienation. For the majority of human beings, however, this freedom remains a remote or, worse still, a denied possibility. In class society the "transparency" of social relations is lost and people are subject to irrational external forces, only in this case social rather than natural. This enslavement of man by forces and circumstances created by himself is what Marx called "alienation". Alienation deprives man of his superior capacities and his creative potential, reduces him to the state of a mere appliance of that grand surplus-value producing machine society becomes under capitalism. It obliterates his unique talents in favour of standardised skills – very much like in market economy goods' intrinsic qualities disappear in the abstract category of "value".

Overcoming alienation is the primary goal at the present stage of human development. To become truly and fully free man must subdue social elements as he has subdued (to some extent) natural ones. This is to be achieved through understanding the laws of social reality (here Marx's contribution was, presumably, decisive) and using this knowledge to establish a social order that would henceforth be under man's conscious control (implying, to be sure, a Communist society). In this Ilyenkov and his collaborators remained quite orthodox, indeed.

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