

SPINOZA IN SOVIET THOUGHT

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Spinoza, Ilyenkov and Western Marxism – meeting the challenges of the global crisis

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Introduction

Evald Ilyenkov took Spinoza's philosophy as the starting point for his own critique of positivism and mechanical materialism. While this assumed a strictly philosophical form, its political source was Ilyenkov's profound conviction that a turn towards materialist dialectics was critical for the future of the Soviet Union.

Ilyenkov's position as an "orthodox heretic"¹ philosopher may help to explain why he identified so closely with Benedict Spinoza. Like Spinoza some 300 years earlier, he was a child of his time, but in equally deep conflict with proponents of dogma. In Spinoza's case it was religious dogma, in both its Judaic and Christian forms. With Ilyenkov it was Marxist dogma turned into a state religion through Stalinism – and dogma's ugly sister – the mechanistic positivist scientism which invaded Soviet philosophy during the 1960s.²

Ilyenkov championed those sides of the 17th century philosopher's ideas which made a decisive impact in the late 18th century on Hölderlin and Hegel, and later on Feuerbach, Marx and Engels. He drew on Lenin to establish materialist dialectics once again as the theory of knowledge of Marxism. Like Lenin, Ilyenkov found himself swimming against the tide but was not deflected from his goals.

A renewed interest in Spinoza is blossoming internationally. Historical research is shedding light on Spinoza's circles and the connection between the political-religious conflicts in the Dutch Republic and his role as "the philosopher of modernity".³ The significance of Spinoza for political practice in the present conjuncture has become a rich and contentious arena in philosophy. A number of thinkers, in particular, theorists

of contemporary globalisation such as Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, have based their ideas on aspects of Spinoza's *Ethics*, his *Theological Political Treatise* and the *Political Treatise*.

Negri's espousal of Spinoza has its critics. We will argue that Negri bases his theorising on Spinoza's mystical and static aspects as part of his rejection of the dialectical and objective implications of Spinoza's monism, which are precisely those sides which Ilyenkov championed and developed. While the post-structuralist critique of "Modernity" recognises and diagnoses the transformations of subjectivity, it idealises the possibility of contradiction-free transition. This results in an impoverished reading of Spinoza which tends to make resistance into a fixture within an eternal framework. Like the poor, resistance will always be with us.

The abjuring of the concepts of dialectical negation, transformation and the possibility of qualitative leaps leads to an eternalising, timeless "antagonism" thereby re-introducing the metaphysical duality which Spinoza resolved through his concept of substance. Spinozan-Ilyenkovian dialectics offers a path beyond the impasse of 21st century philosophy. Understanding the dialectics of contemporary globalisation and its crisis creates the ground for transforming the ideal into the real.

Why Ilyenkov turned to Spinoza

Ilyenkov not only negated Spinoza's materialist outlook but also probed and developed its dialectical essence. In doing so, he created a transition from the work of Marx, Engels and Lenin who all acknowledged Spinoza's historic contribution.⁴

The starting point for Ilyenkov was Spinoza's concept of substance. Spinoza begins *Ethics* with his definitions, starting with the "cause of itself" or *causa sui*. Definition 3 says: "By substance, I understand that which is in itself and is conceived through itself; in other words, that, the conception of which does not need the conception of another thing from which it must be formed."

In *Dialectical Logic*, Ilyenkov wrote: "By a simple turn of thought, Spinoza cut the Gordian knot of the 'psychophysical problem'."⁵

He noted further in his landmark book *The Dialectics of the Abstract and the Concrete in Marx's Capital* that "Spinoza's conception of nature and formal composition of concretely universal concepts... abounds in brilliant anticipations of dialectics. For instance, the concept of 'substance', a typical and principal example of such a concept,

is obviously viewed as a unity of two mutually exclusive and at the same time mutually assuming definitions.”

Ilyenkov took up the challenge “bequeathed to us by Lenin, of creating a Logic (with a capital ‘L’), i.e. of a systematically developed exposition of dialectics understood as the logic and theory of knowledge of modern materialism”. His concern that this “has become particularly acute today”⁶ is significant as we shall show in the following section.

In the above-mentioned books, Ilyenkov began to put philosophical flesh and bones on those ideas which Lenin had signalled in outline form in his *Conspectus of Hegel’s Logic*, while in exile from Tsarist Russia. In these notes, Lenin focused particularly on the dialectic itself, following Marx in turning Hegel’s concepts on their materialist heads.

Lenin remarks that Spinoza’s concept of substance, which starts with the “cause of itself” or *causa sui*, was “very advanced”.⁷ Hegel’s *Science of Logic* itself begins with the very Spinozan formulation: “It can only be the nature of the content which stirs in scientific cognition.”

Being is the starting point of the knowledge journey developed by Lenin in his “elements of dialectics”. Like Spinoza, Lenin envisages Being and the notion of nature as a “whole”. Lenin endorses Hegel’s unconditional support for Spinoza’s proposition that “every determination is a negation”.⁸

Unfolding the dialectical heart of Spinoza’s concept of substance, which he saw as “the main idea of Spinozism”⁹, Ilyenkov explains that the identity of Thought and Being is a contradictory whole, containing opposites in movement – transition and the possibility, and crucially, the act of transformation. The notion of identity itself has its own internal movement: “... for dialectics in general (including Hegelian dialectics) identity is definitely not some metaphysical ‘one and the same’. It is always an *identity in difference* [my italics, CL], an identity of opposites.”¹⁰

In his discussion of the “objective truth of universal concepts” in *The Dialectics of the Abstract and the Concrete in Marx’s Capital*¹¹, written some years before *Dialectical Logic*, Ilyenkov points to Spinoza’s strengths and weaknesses. But, like Engels, he sees them as shortcomings of the “entire old materialism”. Ilyenkov takes forward the dialectical notion of “whole and parts” in emphasising the importance of “thinking

concretely, expressing through abstractions the concrete and specific nature of things rather than mere similarity, merely something that different things have in common”.

Indeed, Ilyenkov again draws strength from Spinoza in his anti-empiricist/positivist account of both causality and the whole/part relationship. In his *Notes for the Spinoza Lecture*¹², he says in point 26 that

“... the logic of Spinoza’s thought is the Logic of determination (definition) of PARTS FROM THE WHOLE.”

Ilyenkov’s “whole” is not simply a “synthesis of parts, elements into some sort of system”. On the contrary, (point 29):

“the Whole is proposed as the GIVEN, and research is carried out as ANALYSIS – that is, as a procedure of revelation of those ‘parts’ which the given whole brings into being, so as to ensure its self-preservation and self-production.”

Later, (point 38), Ilyenkov goes on to stress the category of substance as “the fundamental basis of the dialectic, as the logic and theory of cognition”.

In *Leninist Dialectics and the Metaphysics of Positivism*¹³ he refers to Spinoza’s view that thinking is an “inherent capability, characteristic not of all bodies, but only of thinking material bodies”. Moreover, as with Spinoza, the world is knowable and our minds are adequate for it. And in *Dialectical Logic*, in the chapter Thought as an Attribute of Substance, Ilyenkov insists:

“It is *in man* that Nature really performs, in a self-evident way, that very activity that we are accustomed to call ‘thinking’. In man, in the form of man, in his person, *Nature itself* thinks, and not at all some special substance, source, or principle instilled into it from outside. In man, therefore, Nature thinks *of itself*, becomes aware of *itself*, senses *itself*, acts on *itself*. And the ‘reasoning’, ‘consciousness’, ‘idea’, ‘sensation’, ‘will’, and all the other special actions that Descartes described as *modi of thought*, are simply different modes of revealing a property inalienable from Nature as a whole, one of its own attributes.”

Ilyenkov turned to Spinoza for a philosophy which offered a bulwark against the mechanistic view of human and social development that characterised Soviet (as well as Western) scientism. At the same time, he brought Spinoza’s theory of substance and emancipatory political message together to create the philosophical basis for a

dialectical concept of human development within nature and society. He saw the role of the History of Dialectics (to which he was contributing) as:

“‘party-minded’ in the most precise and positive meaning of that word. So the History of Dialectics will prove to be a blow against the neo-positivistic version of ‘scientific thought’, as the main anti-dialectic force of the 20th century”.¹⁴

The political background to Ilyenkov’s turn to Spinoza

Khrushchev’s secret speech denouncing Stalin at the 20th Party Congress in 1956, and the resurgence of anti-colonial and class struggles east and west, found a reflection in the rejection of Stalinist dogma in philosophy.

As Sergei Mareyev has recounted:¹⁵

“Some time in the mid-1950s Evald Ilyenkov and another desperate front-liner, Valentin Korovikov, presented what seemed to them simple and clear ideas: there is neither ‘dialectical materialism’ nor ‘historical materialism’, but instead materialistic dialectics and a materialistic understanding of history. In those days such a speech was tantamount to suicide.”

The rise of positivism as an important philosophical trend, like the dogmatisation of dialectics, was not a purely Soviet phenomenon. Like Stalinism itself, it was the particular way that bourgeois ideologies were reflected under the conditions of a bureaucratised workers’ state that was, during the 1960s, increasingly falling behind the West.

In philosophy there was also a “gap”, as materialist dialectics developed by Lenin had been transformed into a reactionary dogma, “Diamat”. The mere word dialectics became associated with the crimes of Stalinism which after the 20th Congress became open knowledge. It was therefore viewed as an unviable philosophy or methodology for the purpose of social liberation.

The subsequent search for a “humanist” Marxism took a number of forms. Continental Europe saw the rise in popularity of philosophers like Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Simon de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Louis Althusser. Other tendencies and movements followed, which went further in their critique of what became known as “Modernism”.

In his paper submitted to the *Marx and the Western World* symposium held by the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, USA in 1966, which he was unable to attend, Ilyenkov took note of efforts to “humanise” Marxism.

“It is indisputable that in the Marxist literature of the last ten years, one can observe a heightened interest in the problems of personality and individuality, in the problem of a human being as the subject of the historical process, in the problem of ‘reification’ and ‘de-reification’, and in general in that entire gamut of questions connected in one way or another with an analysis of human activity and its conditions; this latter includes the problem of ‘alienation’ and of the reappropriation of alienated wealth and so on.”¹⁶

Ilyenkov’s article makes thinly-veiled attacks on the official orthodoxy that socialism had been achieved in the Soviet Union. He refused to identify socialism with state ownership, as Vesa Oittinen has pointed out.¹⁷ The “social property” established by revolution was only an initial step, he insisted. There was still “the gigantic task of creating a society without government, without currency and without any other external mediators for relationships among people,” Ilyenkov wrote.

Thus, at a critical point in the problem of developing the Soviet Union, encouraged by the possibilities opened up by the Khrushchev thaw, Ilyenkov sought to renew Soviet philosophy. Nonetheless, the ideological and historical burden of mechanical, determinist Diamat proved significant and carried historical consequences in and outside of the Soviet Union.

The dogmatisation of philosophy reinforced the determinist point of view that socialism was the inevitable outcome of class struggle or that “already existing socialism” had been achieved in the Soviet Union and elsewhere. The evident unreality of this approach demonstrated by the break up of the Soviet Union prevented a wider understanding of Ilyenkov and others’ creative, monist form of the dialectic.

The “Production of the Subject” and the rise of post-structuralism

The “anti-gnoseologists” who opposed Ilyenkov found their counterparts in Western Marxist circles. They attacked those who sought to develop dialectics. Theory was seen as simply emanating from “praxis” or activity per se, based on an unchanging and rigid propagandist notion of “programme”. This of course was aided and abetted by the separation of historical from dialectical materialism.

The epistemological dimension which so concerned Lenin and Ilyenkov, who developed a new side of it, was ignored or lost by most Marxists, East and West, certainly until the 1980s. Only small groups of Marxists worked on this side of philosophy. Gerry Healy pioneered work on the “path of cognition”, drawing on both Lenin and Ilyenkov’s work, within the revolutionary movement in Britain from the mid-1970s until his death in 1989, but he encountered considerable opposition.¹⁸

The theory of “praxis”¹⁹, so prevalent in Marxist and left circles, became a substitute for the study of the contradictory development of capitalism globally. The dogma of Diamat went side by side with Stalinist parties becoming subservient to establishment politics, joining in alliances and coalitions with capitalist parties.

The absence of a developed Marxism created an increasingly wide space for post-structuralist theories to become widespread and morph into post-modernist ideologies. Whilst the term post-modernism is notoriously vague and multifarious – a “condition” rather than a philosophy – the rejection of what is seen as Hegelian “historicism” or teleological determinism ended with the conflation of materialist dialectics with Stalinist dogma.

The last decades of globalisation have been characterised by an “over-production” of the subjective side of life. The material and contradictory source of images were buried under countless layers of ideological mediation and market manipulation. Hence the success of the post-structuralist viewpoint which seeks to mediate and deconstruct the complexity of the contemporary world.

The turn to Spinoza – by Antonio Negri and many other thinkers – over the last 30 years is part of the struggle to theorise – and grapple with – this new whole. Through corporate globalisation, a new international division of labour arose. as capital relocated to the Pacific Rim countries, India, South America and, eventually deep into mainland China as the new “workshop of the world”.²⁰

With the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, as Mateusz Janik has noted, the acute ideological skirmishes that arose over the “end of history” led to a search for a new logic of political action:

“The crisis of the Modernist conceptual framework,” he points out, “could be traced in different areas including world system analysis” and [there was a need for] a diagnosis of the growing insufficiency of political representation and a new mode of thinking about the global political body – its actors and forms of practice appropriate to it. This

put Spinoza's metaphysics on the philosophical agenda. The concept of immanence became important due to the fact that spatially capitalism had reached its limits in a global geo-culture."²¹

The mushrooming financial sector and the over-production of capital in the form of innumerable products and instruments structuring various kinds of debt and credit overshadowed the increasingly small economic base in commodity production. The prevailing view became that industrial capitalism in Europe and the United States was replaced by the knowledge economy, which seemed to make the labour theory of value (and the tendency of the rate of profit to decline) outdated.

Since the 1990s, the post-structuralist view, which privileges the subjective side and/or views social being and social consciousness as a non-contradictory whole, has chimed in powerfully with the 24/7, social-media transmitted, image-dominated experience of the world of corporate capital. Episodic flashes of resistance and opposition – such as the “Battle of Seattle” in 1999 – may explain the unexpected success of Hardt and Negri's book, *Empire*, when it first appeared in 2000.

The multitude – a Spinozan concept adopted and adapted by Negri and Hardt – as the real-life expression of the new whole-part relationship established by globalisation suddenly emerged in real social and political movements.

Negri and his critics

Several theorists have pointed to the limitations of post-structuralism and have taken issue with Negri's approach to Spinoza. Many of these critiques make important observations – and in some cases seek to develop a Spinozan political ontology for today. But on the whole they avoid – or do not probe deeply enough – the fundamental philosophical assumptions and premises involved in the Hardt-Negri project. It could be called – to paraphrase Marx – the hidden abode of dialectical contradiction.

Significantly, they are not aware of or have not taken account of the contribution made by Ilyenkov and other pre-Soviet and Soviet thinkers in developing the dialectical and contradictory potential within Spinoza to a transformative and political level. This defect weakens their ability to counter Negri and thus emphasises the need for a further development of materialist dialectics.

Through his work on Marx's *Capital* and dialectical logic, Ilyenkov sought to open up Spinoza's intrinsically dialectical proposal that all determination is negation, a

difference between Being and (abstract) thought. For Ilyenkov, Spinoza foreshadowed a possible dialectic of nature as well as human thought. This potential was inseparable from the analysis of the different, contradictory sides of human existence, experience and behaviour, the concept of truth and error, the acquiring of true knowledge and how an ethical life is to be achieved.

Grappling with Negri's anti-dialectics, including the way it creeps into his panoramic vision of Empire through the back door, is the key to taking forward that part of his and other post-structuralists' contribution which recognises and explores the changed and constantly shifting world of 21st century capitalism. There are a number of areas in which Negri and Hardt seem under-critiqued:

- ▶ Their equation of modernity with capitalism which are both viewed as coeval, one-dimensional, non-contradictory and monovalent²² phenomena. Negri positions Spinoza as a kind of last gasp of pre-Modernist (i.e. pre-capitalist) thinking, which only the Romantics were able to challenge. After Spinoza there was the deluge: in the three centuries that followed Spinoza, philosophical thought is “nothing but the miserable transcription of human exploitation constantly renewed, of unhappiness constantly imposed... What a feeling of disgust and boredom we feel before this unaltered framework, before this repetition of bourgeois ideology against revolutionary wisdom...”²³
- ▶ The view that Hegel's objective dialectic was nothing other than the ideology of the ascendant bourgeoisie.
- ▶ The absence of distinction between Being and Thought, both in the individual and socially (as against Ilyenkov's view of the Ideal and the transformation of the ideal into the real), and therefore no possibility of transformation of the one into the other. There is no difference, no mediation and no contradiction.²⁴
- ▶ Negri hotly contests Spinoza's proposal that all determination is negation which distinguishes between Being and (abstract) Thought.
- ▶ The absence of an outside, an external world – a dialectic of nature. There is only Empire with the multitude within it.
- ▶ The entire concept of dialectical contradiction is rejected. It is replaced by smoothed out “antagonisms” and the comforting notion of “immanence”.
- ▶ There is only Being. Becoming is entirely negative and destructive.

- ▶ The idea that there is a difference (as well as unity) between appearance and essence is rejected.

Frozen substance and frozen time

Alongside Negri's rejection of contradiction as a real and logical concept is the impossibility of dialectical negation. Empire is a seamless whole. As opposed to Marx's concept that capitalism's internal contradictions give rise to systemic crises, which potentially can generate revolutionary transformation, we have the self-evolution of multitude into a benign form of Empire.

While Spinoza clearly distinguishes between mind and body,²⁵ Negri and Hardt's ontology emphasises only a merging/conflating of human body and mind/thought as a single non-contradictory substance. In *Labour of Dionysus: A critique of the state form*, they write: "Ontology is not a theory of foundation. It is a theory about our immersion in being and about being's continual reconstruction".²⁶

Jason Read, an astute and enthusiastic advocate of post-structuralist radicalism, points to the term "biopolitical production" which underlies Negri and Hardt's "Spinozan" concept of Being.²⁷ He says the primary point of reference for their ontological speculation is Spinoza's *Ethics*. And, the concept of a unified world in which the biological is connected to the political is of course Spinozan, albeit viewed through Foucaultian spectacles.

Read notes that Hardt and Negri reject the opposition between appearance and essence. "Biopolitical production forces us to confront the multitude lurking behind every sovereign..." In other words, the spontaneous movement of the multitude will by itself expose the way in which the world can be made otherwise. There is thus no need for a conscious body or collective which can develop strategies or theorise collective action. Resistance is all. In the end, it is a passive spectator's view of the labours of the multitude which must simply get on with it.

In *The Savage Anomaly*²⁸ Negri claimed that "the dialectic has no place in Spinoza". In his more recent *Subversive Spinoza*²⁹ he appears to have a rabid fear of the notion of "becoming" (which "devours" Being) and claims that this is "the contemporaneity of Spinoza". Negri elevates Being into an absolute with cryptic statements like: "Becoming seeks to annihilate the revolution". Being is thus rendered as a metaphysical

entity, a fortress to be defended at all costs. Thus, the multitude has the unenviable task of not bringing anything into being, as that might involve the dreaded “becoming”.

The depiction of a Being that is in constant movement and re-construction seems attractive as an account of a rapidly changing reality which is the source of thought/social consciousness. But herein also lies the limitation of the Hardt-Negri view and their departure from Spinoza.

Negri’s animosity towards dialectical contradiction and with it – transition, mediation, negation and transformation – underlies his entire approach. It is not only, as Sean Grattan,³⁰ writing in the Marxist journal, *Mediations*, says, that Negri misreads or misrepresents Spinoza in a “crucial divergence from considering a materialist Spinoza in favour of an idealist Spinoza”.

Grattan notes that Negri takes the happy side of Spinoza’s affects and effaces the other half of the equation – the negative or sad affects – and this haunts the readings of Spinoza. The one-sided nature and inconsistency of Negri’s attempt to draw on Spinoza to back up *Empire*’s proposal that “indignation” is a formative moment for the revolutionary political subject position or an affective base for it. He concludes that in Negri’s recent collaborations with Hardt “‘Spinoza’s realism’ has lost ground to a Pollyanna-ism drastically at odds with the socioeconomic present.”

But while pointing to the many inconsistencies and distortions of Spinoza’s thought to be found in the “indignant multitude”, like his fellow Marxist Greg Dawes³¹, Grattan does not foreground the philosophical and political consequences of Negri and Hardt’s opposition to dialectics, in particular the concept of becoming, or draw conclusions from it.

In an ironic blast at *Empire*, John O’Neill³² takes exception to the same Foucaultian notion of biopower, which he believes is “abstracted from any revolutionary project”. O’Neill believes that Negri and Hardt’s version of post-modernism “fails to see that its critical concepts of anti-foundationalism anti-essentialism and (in)difference, are as the ghost of Marx might have told them, capital practices of a bourgeoisie devoted to shocking rather than being shocked”.

O’Neill is correct when he says that the new vision on offer is “a politics without dialectics and without totalisation of the class subject”. But in the same breath he claims it embraces a “Spinozan Marxism”. Well, only Spinozan in the sense that it postulates a “whole” but it is a Spinoza eternally frozen in a permanent moment of Being.

Marxism without teeth

Hardt and Negri are seekers after a kind of post-Marxism but, hiding behind a Spinozan cloak, they have removed the dialectical spring which is its heart and soul. And, along with the dialectic, in the economic sphere, the internal contradictions in the production of value and profit, which are the foundation of Marx's *Capital*, are tossed into the dustbin of "bourgeois ideology".

Out the window goes the dialectic of nature and the attendant notions of mediation, contradiction, transition, law and becoming. The notion of biopolitical production and biopower becomes in practice a new form of the old mechanical materialism, "the abstract deliberation of vulgar economists who reduced the entire complexity of the actual process of spiritual development to the abstract insistence on the primacy of economy and the derived nature of everything else", as Ilyenkov wrote.³³

Waiting for the multitude to overwhelm Empire thus condemns us to a state of waiting in a 21st century form of Purgatory. And in essence, this runs directly against the Spinozan intellectual project. Here is where Ilyenkov's dialectical logic, which pursues the implications of Spinoza's concept of substance in a different way, offers a deeper and transformative reading. His concept of the Ideal provides a richer, more dynamic understanding of the mind/body relationship.

The activist's perspective

John Holloway is a leading theoretician of anti-globalisation and an active supporter of the Zapatistas and other autonomous movements. His two books *Change the world without taking power* (2002) and *Crack Capitalism* (2010) are widely read and discussed, particularly amongst students and activists in the global protest movement. His perspective of eternal oppositions living in the "cracks in capitalism" is an example of post-structuralism translated into activism.

While he too is a critic of Negri/Hardt's work, Holloway's own approach suffers from defects not dissimilar to the ones he criticises. Holloway's non-historical, one-sided view of contemporary capitalism owes little to Marx and everything to bourgeois sociology.

Holloway criticises Hardt and Negri on the question of the class struggle: "Class struggle is presented by Negri/Hardt as external to the all-subsuming capitalist whole, not as capitalism's internal weakness." He continues his criticism: "It is entirely

consistent with this paradigmatic approach that Hardt/Negri are very explicitly anti-dialectical and anti-humanist in their approach. Hegel is repeatedly dismissed as the philosopher of order rather than seeing him as the philosopher who made subversive movement the centre of his thought. Dialectics is understood as the logic of synthesis rather than as the movement of negation."³⁴

Yet Holloway's own disavowal of **materialist** dialectics as a theory of knowledge leads him to theorise a model of change that puts the revolutionary subject firmly outside of and apart from the "ensemble of the social relations" of the capitalist system. This is a result of Holloway's explicit rejection of the concept of Marxism as a scientific method. He praises Hegel's dialectic but rejects the dialectics of nature, accusing Engels of "positivising Marxism" by claiming a connection with scientific thought.

The Marxism-as-science approach, says Holloway, contains a "theoretical subordination of subjectivity" and "leads to the political subordination of the subject to the objective course of history and to those who claim to have a privileged understanding of that course". It makes the working class an adjunct to a law-governed, necessary, end of capitalism. "Future society will not be law-governed," he says.

From here it is logical that Holloway should reject the Marxist view of the state as an instrument of the ruling class which, instead, should be seen "as one moment in the general fetishisation of social relations". The aim of taking power through a conquest of the state is, for Holloway, the path to reinforcing the status quo of class relations expressed in the exploitation of labour. Such a project can only lead to a replication of the power of hierarchy in a new totalising system

So his attention, which is in fact shared in another fashion by Hardt/Negri, is directed away from the dialectic of the object-subject relationship towards a one-sided reinforcing of the subject. Instead of attempting to take state power, the oppressed should carry out a consistent refusal to do so.

The emotional opening passage of *Change the world without taking power* states "the beginning is not the word but the scream". He adds: "Faced with the mutilation of human lives by capitalism a scream of sadness, a scream of horror, a scream of anger, a scream of refusal: NO."

The starting point of theoretical reflection is "opposition, negativity, struggle. It is from rage that thought is born, not from the pose of reason ... we start from negation, from dissonance." And further: "Dimly we feel that these things that anger us are not isolated

phenomena - that there is a connection between them. The connection is that they come from a world that is wrong. This is our starting point: rejection of a world that we feel to be wrong, negation of a world we feel to be negative. This is what we must cling to."

In *Crack Capitalism* written after the financial crash of 2008, Holloway makes Marx's analysis of the dual character of labour the core of his proposition: "There is a permanent antagonism between abstract labour and doing, that is, between the abstraction of doing in labour and the push of doing towards self-determination. This is what Marx refers to as the dual character of labour. There is a relation of constant tension between the two types of activity but this is concealed by the dominance of abstract labour." He adds: "To attack abstract labour is to attack this stable world, to hack at the pillars that hold the roof above our heads. To attack abstract labour is to release the (contained and not contained) world of we do."

For Marx, however, the dual character of labour was a concrete abstraction and an inseparable unity of opposites within the actual relations of capitalism. This contradiction contains within it the potential for further negations and a transformation of opposites. Holloway separates out the category of labour from the conditions of its existence, splits it into its useful (power-to) and abstract (power over) forms, hurls the abstract part back at the capitalist, without specifically challenging their right to buy it – and keeps the useful labour for himself. The two categories of useful and abstract labour confront each other without the potential for any further negation.

Holloway separates the contradictory whole of dual labour and annihilates, or ignores, one part. This is not "negation" as the new emerging from the contradictory whole as the other of itself – not some third thing, but a new contradiction in which the original parts are present in a negated form. His negation is mechanistic and a kind of annihilation of contradiction. Holloway's rejection of Marx/Engels' materialist dialectic prevents theorising of creative propositions for overcoming the dual character of labour in the ending of commodity capitalism.

The significance for today

Spinozan-Ilyenkovian dialectics can offer a way out of the logjam of 21st century philosophy by researching the dialectics of contemporary globalisation and its crisis. This involves a rejection of dogmatic Marxism on the one side and going beyond the limitations of post-structuralist critiques on the other.

The task is to facilitate the development of social consciousness that enables a new generation to grasp capitalism as an unsustainable, time-bound, limited system rather than as an eternal, all-controlling entity. The requirement is to theorise how a new subject of history is negated out of the system itself.

This will embrace the theorising of new political organisational forms that correspond to contemporary social being. Lenin's concept of the party needs to be developed in the light of the networked nature of globalised capitalism, transnational state structures and the existence of mass use of social networks.

In a period of great upheaval in the whole – nature, society and thought – the significance of a developed materialist dialectical outlook cannot be underestimated. It can guide us in theorising the new revolutionary subject beyond ideas of multitude and of “leaderless revolt”.

There is a materiality about the re-emergence of interest in Spinoza at this particular moment in history together with the renewed study of Ilyenkov. Together they constitute the ground for a development in logic that acts as a liberating force in what is an historic, simultaneous global crisis in ecology, economy and politics. Building on Ilyenkov's work on the Ideal, the challenge is to negate this into an all-sided theory of social transformation.

Materialist dialectics enables us to theorise the striving of the new contained within present phenomena and to elaborate how this is negated. The advanced, socialised technology and networked organisation of capital that is the essence of present-day global capitalism will, when freed from its present social framework, be a thing for us and the basis for a developed socialist society.

The materialist monist view offers a framework for ecological restoration. All animals continually create and recreate the eco-system in which they exist, but only humans can do so consciously. The concept of conservation is exclusively human and is a key aspect of nature performing through human beings. We cannot bring back the many hundreds of thousands of species driven to extinction as a result of unchecked exploitation, but we can become a positive factor in future evolution.

Those who reject the law-governed nature of substance, only see capitalism's ability to continually recreate itself. But a system that demands continuous profit-driven growth within a finite nature is not sustainable. The growing impoverishment of soil and

exhaustion of raw materials will force major transformations – not to mention the impact of climate change.

There is no going back, however, as Spinoza says, a thing once determined for a purpose cannot be undetermined. The holist conception – developed first by General Jan Smuts founder of apartheid – has its modern expressions in the theories of deep ecology and Gaia. The thinkers behind these cite Spinoza, but have a one-sided interpretation of the concept of substance. But his materialist monism, as developed by Ilyenkov in the idea of nature acting through humans, offers a way forward.

When it is said that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, the analogy is often used of the conductor's impact on the orchestra – but of course this whole includes the musicians, the composer – who may be long dead, the audience and the whole human development of music. The spiral of development of knowledge means that there is infinite potential for further negations. The Spinozan concept of nature acting through humans can generate confidence in understanding the law-governed world in the course of changing it.

Towards a “free, independent, conscious subject”

Ilyenkov took to heart what Hegel and Lenin said about the incompleteness of Spinoza's philosophy, in particular the lack of a “free, independent, conscious subject”.³⁵ At the same time Spinoza offered a concept of freedom with his understanding of the human as a *thinking being*. If that is so, what is *conatus*, how do human beings realise their true nature, become – or rather – *make* themselves?

In *The Dialectics of the Abstract and the Concrete in Marx's Capital* Ilyenkov was deeply concerned with “the concept of man” – what it means to be human – which he uses to illustrate the dialectics of the universal and the individual. Taking up Marx's investigation into the formation of the human through social life and social labour, he emphasises how the human being is “from beginning to end the result and product of his [or her *CL*] own labour”, predicated, of course, on mother nature: “An individual awakening to human life activity, that is, a natural biological being becoming a social one, is compelled to assimilate all forms of this activity through education.”

Thus, in the subjective process of individuation, the “self-creation” of the human, there is also the objective side. The human is formed “under the aspect of eternity” in the sense that infinite externality – natural, social and human – is negated into each

individual through nature and nurture and constantly changed through human practical activity.

Contained in human nature, and as its precondition, there is biological nature.

Ilyenkov's felicitous passage in *Dialectical Logic*, in which activity including thought, *forms and shapes* the human as the conscious, performing part of nature, builds on Spinoza's concepts. It also looks forward to the new understanding of the brain's neuroplasticity which allows our 100 billion brain cells to change and develop in response to our practice in the external world – an example of materialist dialectics if there ever was one.

“The ensemble of social relations” makes it possible for the child to individuate itself in a process of humanisation. This development of the individual personality gives rise to a new whole with its own logic of development. It is NOT the “sum” of the parts, but a new human being – and – potentially, a “free, independent subject”.

Ilyenkov's friends and contemporaries Alexei Leonteyev and Alexander Meshcheryakov³⁶, theorised, researched and put into practice the psychological and practical dimensions of this approach.³⁷

But how can this self-realisation take place under today's conditions? How can de-alienation be undertaken? How to re-establish the relationship with the whole under conditions of total alienation both from natural and social being under the distorting conditions of present society? This was the issue that Spinoza sought to address for his times, Ilyenkov for his and we for ours.

The ensemble of social relations is far more intense and more connected than ever before in history. Terms like “networked individual” and “transindividual” have entered the language as social being becomes ever more complex and more connected through mobile information technology, and social networking³⁸. Alongside the “loss” (or rather *negation*) of old identities, there is the possibility of a greater and deeper ensemble of relations than before. This has changed what we understand by the self, the world of social being and our relationship to it.

Spinoza proposes that we become free by understanding the world and acting accordingly. Such a Spinozan-Ilyenkovian perspective can help us arrive at a richer, dialectical understanding of collective/individual freedom to achieve social and political transformation. As Andrei Maidansky writes in his essay about Ilyenkov's Ideal, human concepts have the advantage of “absolute freedom”.³⁹ Or to quote conductor and pianist

Daniel Barenboim: “The more a person can determine his or her thoughts... the more he or she can arrive at a self-determined existence and real freedom.”⁴⁰

Developing a perspective for a new subject must embrace the revolutionary potential in the negative side of nature, society and thought that has brought new generations on to the streets throughout the world. Ilyenkov, his friends and colleagues – in dialogue with Spinoza – can help us rejuvenate the reflexive materialist dialectic for this purpose.

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¹ Vesa Oittinen, *Introduction*, Studies in East European Thought, special issue devoted to Ilyenkov 2005

² See Ilyenkov’s letter to the Central Committee, *Brief des Philosophen Iljenkow an das ZK der KPdSU*, Published in *Marxistische Blätter* 1-06. <http://tinyurl.com/bm94dkn> Translation from Russian by Gudrun Richter

³ Steven Nadler, *A Book Forged In Hell: Spinoza’s Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age*, Princeton University Press 2011

⁴ Engels later added: "It is to the highest credit of the philosophy of the time that it did not let itself be led astray by the restricted state of contemporary natural knowledge, and that – from Spinoza down to the great French materialists – it insisted on explaining the world from the world itself and left the justification in detail to the natural science of the future." (*Dialectics of Nature*).

The great admiration of Marx and Engels for Spinoza was revealed by Plekhanov, who recalls a conversation he had with Engels in 1889: "‘So do you think,’ I asked, ‘old Spinoza was right when he said that thought and extent are nothing but two attributes of one and the same substance?’ ‘Of course,’ Engels replied, ‘old Spinoza was quite right’." (Plekhanov, *Selected Philosophical Works*, Vol. 2, p. 33)

Marx and Engels had already commented on the importance of Spinoza’s concept of substance in *The Holy Family*. “In Hegel there are three elements: Spinoza’s Substance, Fichte’s Self-Consciousness and Hegel’s necessary and contradictory unity of the two, the Absolute Spirit.”

Marx, *The Holy Family* <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/holy-family/index.htm>

⁵ Evald Ilyenkov, *Dialectical Logic* Progress Publishers 1977

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid page 167

⁸ Vesa Oittinen has explored the twists and turns of Hegel's approach to Spinoza in *Spinozistische Dialektik, Spinoza - ein Dialektiker wider Hegel*, Peter Lang 1993
<http://caute.ru/spinoza/vo/index.htm>

⁹ Evald Ilyenkov, *Notes for the Spinoza lecture* ("The History of Dialectics") written in 1965. From *The Drama of Soviet Philosophy*, 1996. Russian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Philosophy. Ed. A G Novohat'ko. English translation unpublished

¹⁰ Evald Ilyenkov, *The Question of the Identity of Thought and Being in Pre-Marxist Philosophy*, Russian Studies in Philosophy, Vol. 36, No 1, Summer 1997, from the Russian text, Nauka 1964

¹¹ Evald Ilyenkov, *The Dialectics of the Abstract and the Concrete in Marx's Capital*, Progress 1982. The Russian edition was published in 1960, but the English language edition only appeared in 1982

¹² Evald Ilyenkov, *Notes for the Spinoza Lecture*

¹³ Evald Ilyenkov, *Leninist Dialectics and the Metaphysics of Positivism*, New Park Publications 1982 page 31

¹⁴ Ilyenkov, *Notes for the Spinoza lecture*

¹⁵ Sergei Mareyev: *A Philosopher under Suspicion*, Journal of Moscow State University, Volume 7, No. 1 1990. English translation – *Socialist Future* Vol. 5 No 1 Summer 1996
<http://www.aworldtowin.net/resources/Ilyenkov.html>

¹⁶ Evald Ilyenkov, *From the Marxist-Leninist Point of View*, Marx and the Western World (ed N. Lobkowitz), University of Notre Dame Press 1967

¹⁷ Vesa Oittinen, *Introduction*

¹⁸ Corinna Lotz and Paul Feldman, *Gerry Healy, A Revolutionary Life*, Lupus Books 1994

¹⁹ John Hoffman, *The theory of Praxis*, Lawrence and Wishart 1975

²⁰ Paul Feldman and Corinna Lotz, *A World to Win*, (Chapter The Global Corporate Web; De-Alienation, Regime change and power) Lupus Books 2004

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- ²¹ Mateusz Janik, *Thinking the Future: Spinoza's Political Ontology Today*, 2009
<http://spinozaresearchnetwork.wordpress.com/>
- ²² Roy Bhaskar, *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom*, Verso 1993
- ²³ Antonio Negri, *Subversive Spinoza (un)contemporary variations*, Manchester University Press, Angelaki Humanities 2004 page 2
- ²⁴ In the second part of *Ethics*, "Of Nature and the Human Mind", there is an intrinsically dialectical view of the way that ideas in the mind are formed as ideas of "actually existing" bodies. (Propositions 10 and 13)
- ²⁵ Spinoza states: (Proposition 10) that "The Being of substance does not pertain to the essence of man, or in other words, substance does not constitute the form of man." And again: "The first thing which forms the actual Being of the human mind is nothing else than the idea of an individual thing actually existing."
- (Proposition 13): The object of the idea constituting the human mind is a body, or a certain mode of extension actually existing, and nothing else".
- So Spinoza makes a clear separation between "inside" and "outside", between the Being of mind and things, objects, bodies outside the mind. There is, to use Hegel's words, "a content that stirs" in cognition.
- ²⁶ Negri and Hardt, *Labour of Dionysus: A critique of the state form*, University of Minneapolis, 1994
- ²⁷ Jason Read, *The Hidden Abode of Biopolitical Production: Empire and the Ontology of Production*, Rethinking Marxism: Vol.13, No.4 (Fall/Winter 2001)
- ²⁸ Antonio Negri, *The Savage Anomaly*, University of Minnesota 1991 page 213
- ²⁹ Antonio Negri, *Subversive Spinoza (un)contemporary variations*, Manchester University Press, Angelaki Humanities 2004
- ³⁰ Sean Grattan, *The Indignant Multitude: Spinozist Marxism after Empire*, Mediations Vol. 25 No 2 published online 2012
- ³¹ Greg Dawes, *Against the Grain*, Contracorriente, Vol. 1, No 1, 2003
<http://acontracorriente.chass.ncsu.edu/index.php/acontracorriente/article/view/43/4>
- ³² John O'Neill, *Empire versus Empire*, Theory, Culture and Society 2002
- ³³ Ilyenkov, *The Dialectics of the Abstract and the Concrete in Marx's Capital* page 124
- ³⁴ John Holloway, *Change the World without taking power*, Pluto Press 2002 page 172

³⁵ V I Lenin, *Philosophical Notebooks, Vol. 38 Collected Works*, Lawrence & Wishart 1972
page 168

³⁶ Leda Kamenopoulou, *Establishing an idea of the self*, review of Alexander Meshcheryakov's
Awakening to Life <http://www.aworldtowin.net/reviews/Meshcheryakov.html>

³⁷ David Bakhurst, *Revolution and Consciousness in Soviet Philosophy* Cambridge University
Press, 1991

³⁸ Corinna Lotz, *Jacobins with laptops* review of Paul Mason's book *Why it's kicking off
everywhere* <http://www.aworldtowin.net/reviews/PaulMasonKickingOffEverywhere.html>

³⁹ Andrei D.Maidansky, *Ascent Toward the Ideal*, *Russian Studies in Philosophy*, Vol. 48, No. 4
2010

⁴⁰ Daniel Barenboim, *Klang ist Leben - Die Macht der Musik*, Pantheon 2009