

On Evald Ilyenkov's Cosmological Humanism

There are mainly two motivations for claiming nowadays extinguishing of a human condition. The first one stems from ethical and evolutionary dismissal of humankind for all its atrocities in relation to nature, ecology, society. According to these accusations anthropocentrism is an obsolete planetary and social paradigm.¹ Another path of post-or-in-humanism derives from overhumanism and goes back to Nietzschean nihilism; its present interpretations could be traced in accelerationism.² It grounds the end of man by the incapacities of human being to exceed cognitive, biological and social finiteness. This finiteness is caused by individualist, philistine interests not enabling the human society to compete with technology, abstract and autonomous knowledge, and to overcome the limits of “folk politics” (Nick Srnicek) or earthly existence. Autonomous knowledge becomes the kernel of speculative realism to claim that knowledge should be liberated from subject-object correlation and has to be able to provide de-subjectified mathematized, utterly scientific and “sapiient” description of reality, devoid of philosophical mystification (Negarestani).³

However, it was exactly in philosophy that the dimensions exceeding the human cognition or sensitivity – the Kant's Sublime or Hegel's Absolute spirit - were on the one hand considered as the threshold of human consciousness, but on the other - still retained the universalist speculative dimension implied at least as a regulative idea if not an acquirable knowledge. Philosophy had already claimed the human condition with the scale of the inhuman as its attribute. So that all the inhuman phenomena were envisaged there as extending the human capacities – in terms of knowledge, mind, consciousness, invention, science. But such an extension didn't make the name “human” collapse. On the contrary, it was confirmed by those inhuman extensions.

Marx was probably the first to claim humans had never existed and that human condition is the project of a communist future. In his “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844” he posits the condition of humaneness as yet unaccomplished and unattained without evacuation of private property and reaching the communist society. It is only a human being that can “be” not only for oneself but also for others and other species. The possible answer to Latour from Marx would be that to attain equality between the human and non-human agents one needs precisely the human society and human agents.

Some time later numerous theories, manifestos and researches of Russian avant-garde envisaging a communist society and constructing conditions of humaneness went often in the vein of the Marxist idea of achieving the generic dimension of human consciousness under the influence of communist economy and its social conditions.

The Russian avant-garde was gearing various experiments in exceeding the human finiteness – radical bio-genetic and bio-social transformations of the living conditions, of sexuality, of production, technological acceleration and cosmist utopias. However, in all the experimental theories and practical endeavors of Russian avant-garde – in A. Bogdanov's bank for blood transfusion to rejuvenate population, in the idea of “white humanity” by Malevich, in the project of overcoming sexual drives by A. Platonov, and earlier in Nikolai Fedorov's idea of resurrecting humans in noosphere – the notion of humaneness was kept intact.

Meanwhile the main difference of Russian cosmism or of the Soviet socialist philosophy from Kantian critique or Hegel's idealism, or the more so from the contemporary post-humanist theories is the following: the sublime issues which are simultaneously human and inhuman in

¹ This direction of research is developed in actor-network theory, cyber-feminism, geophysical theories of Anthropocene.

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German idealism are nevertheless considered to be alien, metaphysical, transcendent. And the human mind is exactly the tool to extend oneself to such uncomfortable alienated otherness – this was the core issue of philosophy from Kant to Adorno. Speculative realism and accelerationist and object oriented theories are dispensing with this double-bind construction – of the inhumanness within humanness (of the fake "beyond" within the human mind) – and they are doing so merely by rejecting the fact that human mind has any capacity at all to grasp what is alien – matter, the reality or the real, the cosmological ancestrality of earth, the cosmological dimension. Consequently, what is alien is automatically in-human. No surprise, then, that gnoseology in new materialisms has to be operated by non-human subjectivities. Such condition could be related to the way emancipatory politics is understood in accelerationist theories. In them the political change or emancipatory shift is achieved by excelling over alienation, which implies accepting its conditions. How can one win over alienation without entering that very alienation to the full? Only out of technological and cybernetic handling of alienation it is possible to navigate that very alienation.

Yet in early Soviet experiments of production of humanity the radical social, anthropological or technical emancipation was on the contrary envisaged via a converse procedure – via de-alienation. (Just to repeat, de-alienation is not claiming any overall or ontological sublation of alienation, but certain political, social and economic procedures that tell on societal infrastructure as de-alienating.) We all know what de-alienation would mean in social and economic terms – the end of division of labor, of class society, of economics based on surplus value. But on the level of thought its demand would be to stop to separate the dimensions of the conceptual, cognitive, ideal, general, on the one hand, and the realm of the empirical, material, concrete, on the other.

Actually an amazing thing is happening in Russian avant-garde's neo-humanism as well as in the Soviet Socialist materialist idealism (e.g. in works by Evald Ilyenkov). There is nothing in the natural, scientific or anthropogenic transformation that would posit any sublimity, or any futurological imaginary as alien or as detached from human society. It is precisely human society that is to follow any scientific breakthroughs, mutations or even post-human catastrophes.

One of the important features of such stance in Soviet thought is an attempt to converge the ideal with the immanent and the real in some sort of dialectical monism. Such an attempt is already obvious in Russian cosmism – in works by A. Fedorov, K. Tsiolkovskiy, V. Vernadsky, later in A. Bogdanov's theories of tektology and empiriomonism,⁴ or in Andrey Platonov's monist animism. Monism presupposes the convergence of the cognitive (abstract) and the material (concrete) phenomena. As it was already argued above, the demand here is the fusion of the matter and the concept, of the empirical and the ideal - against the gap between the nominal, empirical, immanent presences and the idea or the ideal. For example, in Hegel the objective reality in all its negativity is viable but has to be further appropriated by Absolute spirit, whereas Ilyenkov, quite in the vein with Marx overturns Hegel's scheme. Hegel's Absolute spirit – is the anticipation of a specific form of consciousness that would be able to merely function as a reflection of the generality of societal matter. If idea can be implemented it is not torn from empirical being. At the same time the thought resides not in the mind of a human subject, but in objective reality, which in its own turn needs an idea and evolves into it.

In his phantasmagoric treatise "The Cosmology of Spirit" (mid 1950-s)⁵ Evald Ilyenkov goes even further than any radical theories of cosmism. In fact, all those theories envisage better and

⁴ See Alexander Bogdanov. *Tektology*. Ed. by Center for Systems Studies. University of Hull, 1996. And *Empiriomonism*. M.: Respublika, 2003.

⁵ Evald Ilyenkov, "Cosmology of the Spirit" in *Stasis #8*, 2017. Pp.164-190. Trans. by Giuliano Vivaldi. http://stasisjournal.net/images/Stasis_v05_i02/eng/stasis_v05_i02_06.pdf, also see

more just existence of humanity, initiated by techno-scientific, economic and social breakthroughs. The starting point to claim the human condition in “The Cosmology of Spirit” by Ilyenkov is, on the contrary, the complete extinction of life, of humankind, and even of solar system altogether. However, in the midst of inevitable entropy and thermal death, Ilyenkov tries to invent the logical turn to assert the paradox of counter-entropy. Bearing this aim in mind, it is not only the Universe that he considers as the “home” of humanity, but even the extinction of any existence on earth (or even of the solar system altogether) would not hamper accomplishing the human condition. Ilyenkov provides his treatise with a long subtitle which is as follows: “an attempt to establish in general terms the objective role of a thinking matter in the system of the worldly interacting”, and further in brackets – “Philosophic-poetical phantasmagoria, relying on the principles of dialectical materialism”.

The Soviet thinker’s point of departure is that solar system, as well as humankind, is sooner or later perishable even despite technological capacities of resisting its finitude. Hence, thinking mind as the attribute of matter in that system will also perish. The first stage of decline of solar system would be thermal cooling, followed by thermal explosion turning everything into hot steams and gases. But as Ilyenkov alleges, when the solar system begins to fade away, it will be precisely a thinking human mind that would foster this declining process voluntarily, striving towards explosion into thermal death. Human mind sacrifices itself by voluntary death during the gradual cooling (self-resigns), to produce excessive energy in this explosion initiated by mind, which will enable to generate life in another location of the Universe. **The thinking mind’s altruist quest towards an inevitable destruction of life implies an intentional awareness of mind about its inevitable eclipse.**

However, this is not merely Nietzschean destructionism; but by speeding up the end of life in an explosion added to thermal **cooling** the thinking mind facilitates approximation of matter to its primary juvenile condition, so that the new life could be emergent from matter in its primariness again, and the emergence of this new life could then inevitably imply a new emergence of thinking mind, since matter can not but extend into mind.

As Ilyenkov states, the reason why complete destruction of matter would be impossible in this explosion initiated by mind and imposed on slow death in cooling, is that the energy that incites destruction releases the excess of energy, i.e. even more energy, than is spent for this destruction. The mind would be destroyed by voluntary self-**resignation**, but it would do so in order that the matter could develop again in some other constellation of the universe. The logic of eternity and infinity here is the following: if mind is ever the attribute of matter, and matter can not do without thinking, any matter will ever develop into mind, and since mind is only the human mind, the humankind will always be able to be reborn in other galaxies.⁶

No matter what the physical and technological parameters of that new humankind would be. What counts is the inevitability of matter to develop dialectically into mind. Ilyenkov wants to

Alexei Penzin’s “Contingency and Necessity in Ilyenkov’s Communist Cosmology”. In e-flux #88, February, 2018.

E. Ilyenkov “Cosmology of the Spirit”, [Космология духа. In E. Ilyenkov. Philosophy and Culture. [Философия и культура]. Moscow, Izdatelstvo Politicheskoy Literaturi, 1991. P. 415-437.

⁶ As Ilyenkov writes, «Therefore death is outlined by this hypothesis of perishability not as senseless and fruitless end but as an act which in its essence is a creative end, as a prelude to a new cycle of life for the Universe. “. E. Ilyenkov. “The Cosmology of Mind”. Trans. J. Vivaldi. In: Stasis #8. 2017. P.188.

prove in this phantasmagoric text that even the eclipse is not merely a natural contingency of universal matter, but it happens with the participation and initiation of a human mind (at the communist stage of its development) and human consciousness.

We thus see how the second law of thermodynamics about the inevitability of entropy acquires the impact of antientropy. This is what Ilyenkov writes:

Dialectical materialism [...] is resolving the issue of the “aim” of existence in the category of universal interaction. (Which means that Ilyenkov does not at all endow humanity with a central role in existence – *K.Ch*). Humankind with its thought hooked up to this universal interaction, is engendered within it and is developed and, at some point, disappears within it. The notion of the “highest aim” of human existence is sublated rationally in the understanding of the necessity of its genesis, development and death inside and through the medium of this universal interdependence of all forms of motion of universal matter.⁷

There are a few important consequences to this statement. 1. That the human thought and history of humanity are just part of a bigger cycle of a universal movement of matter. 2. That a subject of thought is not identical with personal consciousness, hence all the moves of a thinking organ are something else than solely knowledge, cognition, consciousness or the unconscious. Thinking is generic and not dependent on individual will. 3. That universe is conditioned not only by progress, but also by an inevitable decline; but this condition does not make the role of thinking and human mind less emancipatory.

In “After Finitude” by Q. Meillassoux⁸, on the contrary, the end of life in the solar system is the condition to claim the human history and the pretension of mind to correlate itself with the Universe senseless. The universalism in the frame of the history of human thought is only a fake projection of a finite human mind that is not able to acquire the grip of existence, because reality is absolutely autonomous from man’s historical or ethical projections. Moreover, matter does not fit into the notion of death and life, the dead and the living. Thus, a history of humanity, its material culture, or the history of human thought is but a tiny episode of the life of Universe and any thought then happens to be mythologizing what a pure knowledge could be; knowledge partakes of a human mind, but to be effective it should extract the procedures of cognition and intellect from the human brain and mind, to duly stratify them.

Ilyenkov starts exactly from claiming the unity of matter, thought and human being bringing forth three important premises – 1. That thought is an attribute of matter (a paraphrase for Spinoza’s thesis on thought as the attribute of Substance). So that matter cannot exist without thought and vice versa, thought needs matter. 2. That thought can only be a human thought and not any overhuman intelligence or competence. So it is exactly the human thought that is the extension of cosmic and planetary matter. Consequently, a human being is although a temporary but an indispensable part of matter since in him thought can find its material realization. 3. That the development of mind needs precisely communist society as its gnoseological breakthrough and paradoxically it is only the communist altruist mind that is able to initiate the decision of self-resignation. Yet it is important to keep in mind that this self-destruction is cosmologically exerted in the name of future life, not merely finalization of Universe.

In this logic death and destruction are inevitable, but impossibility of death and destruction is inevitable too. Such anti-egoist consent to one’s eclipse is for Ilyenkov confirmation of the premise of materialist dialectics according to which objective matter and reality are prevailing over consciousness, be it individual or collective. But this does not imply any critique of

⁷ Ibid. p.172.

⁸ Quentin Meillassoux. *After Finitude*. London. Continuum, 2009.

correlation of mind with matter, as is the case with speculative realism. On the contrary, humble and generous awareness of perishability of human life and thought, acceptance of the objective role and supreme role of universal matter by the mind only confirms the maturity of mind and its indispensability for matter. Human existence here is not a senseless and fruitless ending, but even its destruction is considered to be a creative act which could become a “prelude” for the new cycle of the life somewhere else in Universe. In short, the decline of humanity happens to be an act that could be justified and needed from the point of view of the universal circulation of matter, which develops according to its objective rules. Ilyenkov writes in his treatise:

Thought remains a historically transitional episode in the development of the universe, a derivative (“secondary”) product of the development of matter, but a product that is absolutely necessary: a consequence that simultaneously becomes the condition for the existence of infinite matter.⁹

The conjecture that there is something more developed for the practice of thought than a thinking brain of a human being would lead to allege religious or other metaphysical reasons of existence, i.e., a form of development extrinsic to a human one. Consequently, all modes of transgressing the thinking matter in favor of something exceeding a thinking brain – (no matter whether in favor of finalizing thinking altogether or excelling over it) – would mean theologizing thought, history and matter and its dialectical development.

This is the reason why Ilyenkov juxtaposes Kant’s sublime reality incomprehensible for human thought to Hegel’s idealism, in which the overhuman Mind albeit remains to be an allegation, but still a human thought is able to reach its niveau - the niveau of the worldly Objective mind (Absolute reason), and is able thus to acquire the degree of the “higher reality”.

As it was mentioned above, the matter at some stage of its development cannot but generate the thought. Hence instead of the dichotomy of the empirical and the transcendental, or the abstract and the concrete, body and idea, senses and cognition, both components are incorporated by means of a dialectical procedure. It is because of this that in the protocommunist social conditions the idea invades the immanence of living process, rather than is cast into the realm of metaphysics. Then the ‘normal’ life and the every-day themselves render the universal and the ideal - be it in material culture or just “banal” communication. So if in Hegel, the general, the Absolute, the idea reside in the human or overhuman spirit that clashes with the otherness (*Andersein*) of the objective reality and consequently has to dialectically tune it to fit the Absolute mind (spirit), for Ilyenkov (who is following Marx), the reality and its diachronic historicity, - as well as even its further extinction - presuppose that the general is generated by the matter, and resides in it; so that, it is reality and its objectivity itself that produce the idea, thinking and the dimension of the general.

We approach the core issue from which we started. To assert the human condition and communist sociality Ilyenkov needs to start from the complete ruin of human life in Universe. However, such complete extinction does not terminate the human condition and the sociality of common good. Although the thinking brain can be extinct and perish, while it disappears in one spot of infinite space it cannot but appear in another spot of infinite universe.

At the same time, both such birth of life and its disappearance are not contingent (as is the case in speculative realism), but are part of the awareness of a thinking mind and are inscribed into it from the very beginning as the *supreme eschatology* which is not pessimistic; it is not pessimistic due to self-awareness that despite the inevitability of eclipse, thinking can not but reappear anywhere else.

⁹ Ibid. p. 188.

The assumptions made in this treatise disavow the issues that became the kernel of speculative realism – that humanity being just a short term in the existence of solar system and matter is not able to claim any capacity to cognize the reality in its absolute dimension.

Ilyenkov's radical standpoint quite easily resolves the dilemma brought forward in speculative realism between the ancestrality of Universe and the transitory human history. Human thought cannot die, because in its death it confirms its immortality, because it ever remains to be part of matter, even if ancestrality precedes it or even if some unimaginable futurity is ahead of it.

The question is then the following. Would the creatures - in whom the thinking organ might manifest itself again somewhere else in the Universe after it had been extinct together with earth – be human? Could it be said that it is not important to whom or to what thinking mind belongs, when human life is over and the thought appears in other cosmic constellation. And if it is exactly thinking that is the supreme realization of a universal matter what makes thought the chief attribute of humanness at all, if it will belong to other creatures after earthly life is extinct? Why is Ilyenkov insisting that it is the thought that realizes the human, but as well that whoever the other thinking creatures might be, this appearance of thinking capacity would be related to humaneness anyway, and not to machinic intelligence or extra-natural higher reason?

It seems that the term 'human' in this case is just a potentiality to realize the dimension of the general (the non-self being) bodily and materially via thought and senses. But still, how would it be possible to claim human condition or the inevitable potentiality of communism and common good without human life, or any life whatsoever? The answer that stems from Ilyenkov's work is that what humanity aspires for in its beginning and end will ever be posited by means of universal matter extended in thinking spirit regardless of where thinking appears or perishes. Meanwhile a human is not just a natural, or necessarily an earthly human being; it is the performance of aspiration for the general (common, the communist) and its material implementation. Hence when thought would derive from matter in other non-earthly conditions it still would remain what the human mind ever had to aspire for – not merely intelligence, but as well the common good. Thus to achieve the dimension of the general, of the common good (the stage that will happen to be the dialectical unity of matter and mind), mind (consciousness) has to be aware that it is never the self, that it is always *other determined non-self*, destined to generalize itself in the direction of objective reality and **social being; the stance due to which social being and daily sociality acquires a cosmological dimension.**

This is because human thought is not merely knowledge that is accumulated and shared; no surprise that gnoseology was never meant by Ilyenkov as the augmentation of the cognized. This capacity for the general (common, non-self), due to which mind is able to self-resign in the name of the new life is essential for thought on the stage of its communist development; but it exceeds merely intellect or knowledge. In "Menon" by Plato, Socrates is claiming that knowledge is not just cognition, but is first and foremost a virtue. So thought's enlightening striving is not merely about accumulation of knowledge, but it is more about capacity for self-resignation, about awareness of its own end, bringing the human mind to modesty that does not at all contradict its courage in cognitive quest or political activity. Such awareness of self-resignation and of *a non-self being* (as one of the main conditions of the general) is not only cognitively productive, it is as well communist in its ethics. So what sustains as the human mind when there will be no humans is exactly the virtue – the virtue for the general that thought as the matter's extension will ever bear in itself – in other words, communism inevitably inscribed in the matter.

This is the reason why it is essential not to read Ilyenkov's apology of this complete eclipse of life triggered by thought in the Nietzschean context, or as some embodiment of Spinozist Naturphilosophy. This is the fallacy that occurs in S. Zizek's recent interpretation of Ilyenkov's

“Cosmology of Spirit”.¹⁰ There he identifies Ilyenkov with Sade, relying on the passage from book 5 from de Sade’s *Juliette*, in which de Sade appeals for the total “orgy of destruction” as ultimate annihilation of life which could end the cycle of constant rebirth and decline of human life and “thus return to Nature her absolute privilege... to cast the dice anew”.

Zizek is impressed here by Soviet Marxist thinker’s proximity to such transgressive thinker as de Sade, in so far as both of them, according to Zizek demand confirming the climax of mind and subjectivity by means of mind’s voluntary entropic eclipse (as the ultimate negativity surpassing simpler negativities like finite world and death). Meanwhile, to dispute the aforementioned negativist dystopia as a simplified form of negativity, Zizek brings the arguments of Lacan against Sade’s and Ilyenkov’s appeal for destruction envisaged by them as the free autonomous and voluntary act of a thinking mind. According to the Lacanian standpoint, the total destruction and annihilation (“second death”, as Zizek puts it) “does not come at the end of progress”, but the radical negativity is already inscribed in Subject initially and by definition. Total negation (catastrophe) “has always already happened”, as Zizek puts it. And therefore, both de Sade and Ilyenkov in their belief of self-regulating cosmos with its cycle of progress and regress are premodern. This is the reason why Zizek chooses not give the garland for modern cosmology to a Soviet dialectician, - this is only to confirm that Soviet materialist dialectics could not be sophisticated enough to truly accept negativity, - the reason why it remained outside structuralism and post-structuralism.

For Zizek the merit of most advanced thought is negativity, and unexpectedly coming across the Nietzschean destructionism in the Soviet materialist dialectics which is rather associated with the “naïve” reproduction of Hegel’s and Marx’s principal postulates, he precipitates to assume that this negativity in Ilyenkov’s cosmology is as pre-modern as the Sade’s one, hence not ‘proper’ negativity at all. Meanwhile, Zizek happens to miss the role of destruction in Ilyenkov’s cosmological narrative. Moreover, his argument overlooks the principal difference in the appeal for destruction between de Sade and Ilyenkov. For de Sade destruction is effectuated as resentment towards endless cycle of life-reproduction and its senselessness. Whereas, for Ilyenkov, human mind’s decision about self-destruction is motivated by **awareness of the inevitability of end and preemptive self-resignation in the name of the new life and other selves**. In fact, Ilyenkov’s message is not at all negatively oriented, or Nietzschean, as interpreted by Zizek. On the contrary, his extremism is harsher than de Sade’s destructionism, or Spinozist substantialism without a Subject. What **Ilyenkov** endeavours to claim is that even despite total destruction, the mind, hence the dialectical communist Subject and hence the human condition is infinite and eternal. In terms of logical form, this assumption - that despite entrophy, destruction, eclipse of life, what reigns is only communism and social good - is a sort of a theological postulate. But this is not at all a postulate of the preliminarily established harmony in the midst of cyclical turnover of Nature. Such attempt to leap over entropic ruptures and the struggle with deep trans-social contradictions is an impossible excessive zeal, a sort of virtue of communist subjectivity, which is able to transmit any “crack” or “cut” - through which as Zizek reiterates existence is inevitably seen, - into infinite potentiality of universal common good. In short, communism in this case, is posited by Ilyenkov as constant zealous labor amidst ontic, ontological and social contradictions and ruptures; i.e. not merely political or social work, but also a dialectical labor of mind, - a philosophic, gnoseological procedure, that has to constantly uplift that very initially given negativity to the modus of ‘good’ in the midst of an inevitable decline that can not be surpassed even in the conditions of the already established society of justice and equality.

¹⁰Slavoj Zizek. “Evald Ilyenkov’s Cosmology. The Point of Madness in Dialectical Materialism”. In *The Philosophical Salon*, Dec. 10, 2018.

<https://thephilosophicalsalon.com/evald-ilyenkovs-cosmology-the-point-of-madness-of-dialectical-materialism/>

