

TROUBLES WITH PRAXIS

Late Soviet Philosophy of “Activity”

Andrey Maidansky and Vessa Oittinen, eds., *The Practical Essence of Man: The “Activity Approach” in Late Soviet Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 204 p.
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The Practical Essence of Man is a collection of essays edited by Andrey Maidansky and Vessa Oittinen, the purpose of which is to give a coherent image of the late Soviet school of “activity approach.” It contains a broad introduction and eleven chapters written by different authors. A reader who chooses this book will gain comprehensive knowledge about the philosophy of Evald Ilyenkov and his several disciples and critics. It is worth underscoring that the authors of these essays have tried hard to portray late Soviet philosophy as attractive and understandable for Western readers, especially those trained in modern analytical philosophy of mind, language, etc. Readers can also learn about the historical context of the foundation and later abandonment of the “activity approach” among Soviet thinkers in the 1960s and 1970s. It is also an exciting overview of the whole tradition of Soviet Marxism.

The book contains eleven chapters written by different authors. The first six of them elaborate crucial concepts related to the “activity approach” in late Soviet philosophy. It starts with a chapter from David Bakhurst, which provides a general overview of Ilyenkov’s philosophical project. In the following chapters, written by Oittinen and Maidansky, we explore criticisms of the dialectical materialist category of “practice.” Inna Titarenko, in his chapter, explains how the category of “activity,” which was supposed to replace the allegedly rigid category of practice, was understood in post-Stalinist Soviet thought. Edward Swiderski, in his chapter, tries to analyse different possible meanings of the term “activity” in the Marxist tradition. Then Sergey Mareev, in his essay, explains how this term differs from the notion of labour in Soviet philosophy. The remaining chapters focus on various comparisons between Soviet theory of activity and other philosophical traditions. Elena Mareeva compares it to the humanist Marxism of the Kiev Philosophical School, founded in the 1960s by P. V. Kopnin. Aleksandr Khamidov tells us a story about the evolution of Genrikh Batishchev’s views on the theory of activity. Vladislav Lektorsky, in his chapter, compares late Soviet philosophy to contemporary cognitive studies (for example, the ideas of Francisco Varela, James

Gibson, and Thomas Nagel) focusing on the relation between activity, cognition, and cultural objectifications. Pentti Maattanen compared the similarities between the concepts of the scheme presented in both Ilyenkov's and Jean Piaget's theories of mind. At the end, Alex Levant compares Ilyenkov's and Walter Benjamin's understanding of the notion of "materiality."

The idea of the "active side" of the human being in the world encouraged many Soviet philosophers to focus on human subjects and the role that the notion of the "ideal" plays in human cognition and consciousness. As Lektorsky explained, the "activity approach" can be derived from the idea that consciousness is mediated by activity. The category of "activity" was supposed to be a medium that allows one to go beyond a strong opposition between "inner" and "outer world," between "subjective" and "objective" (141). As with other "revisionist" interpretations of Marxism on the East (for example, the Praxis Group in Yugoslavia), the "activist approach" of philosophy broke with the vulgar interpretations of Lenin's theory of reflection, in which human cognition was supposed to be merely a reflection of sensations from the "objective" world. However, above all there was good reason to abandon official Party ideology and its "dialectical materialist" narrative, which understood human relations to the world as passive and contemplative, just like in the mechanical materialism of Feurbach.

The editors of the book, Maidansky and Oittinen, announce in the introduction that one of the main sources of the need for the "Activity Approach" in Soviet thought was the obvious vulgarization of the category of Praxis as a criterion of truth in official Soviet philosophy, known as "dialectical materialism" or "Marxism-Leninism." In his own chapter, Oittinen argues that Engels poisoned Marxist epistemology and ontology for decades through a misreading of Immanuel Kant: "Engels claimed that in the process of practice things become 'things for-us,' thereby confuting the Kantian thesis of the unattainability of 'things-in themselves'" (30). Although it is not known what exactly Engels meant by this, Plekhanov, Bukharin, Lenin, and after them a whole generation of Soviet philosophers took his judgement as a sign that the category of "practice" is the most certain key to truth. Practice was supposed to be a mediating term that makes it possible to resolve all old philosophical problems. In more concrete terms, official Soviet ideology underlined that the process of discovering truth lies mostly in "experiments" and "industrial production," which directly echoes Engels's idea that the progress of science would expose hidden truths to daylight (33). These kinds of vague statements about practice, based on the official works of Stalin, were undisputed until the sixties, at which point, Oittinen observes, various Soviet logicians started to follow "the strategy of formally accepting the postulates of *diamat*, but at the same time insisting on the necessity to pay attention to the relative autonomy of the 'sub-system of logico-gno-seological categories.' [...] They then pursued research that, in principle, did not differ greatly from Western analytic philosophy of science" (34). This strategy was based on observations of procedures in modern science, which in many cases were linked to "practice" only "in the last instance" (33).

The vagueness and primitivism of the category of “practice” in Soviet *diamat* was only one of numerous defects in this rigid “philosophy.” Equally problematic was the ambiguity of notions such as “matter” and “ideal.” In *diamat* they were consistently opposed to each other, creating the impression that Soviet philosophy had resurrected the old Cartesian dualism between “body” and “spirit.” This resurrection hardly seemed consistent with the idea that Marx had initiated a new approach to philosophy that was without precedent in the history of human thought. Ilyenkov tried to respond to this problem through his “activist” monist philosophy.

In activist thought, we cannot speak about the category of “practice” as the “criterion” of a true reflection of the material world that mediates between thought and objective reality because both (human) thought and reality are produced by human activity. The problem of correspondence between an imperfect world of thoughts and an “objective” world of things seems to disappear. The authors of the chapters in the book are convinced that this approach constitutes pure monism in a very Spinozist sense. All historical issues about both subject-object and ideal-material relations are gone because, just like in Spinoza’s work, we have one “substance” with many attributes. Of course, this not the end of the story. The book under review gives Western readers the opportunity to look deep inside the arguments developed by Ilyenkov’s disciples, allowing us to draw a wider picture of this “activist substantialism” and its consequences.⁵

Among those disciples of Ilyenkov who continued his philosophical project, one in particular stands out for his significant and interesting objections: Genrikh Batishchev. Although his positions might strike contemporary readers as Spinozist, Batishchev argued that the “substantialism” of the activist approach is, in fact, a materialist reinterpretation of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. As Bakhurst in his chapter explains: “History, as the activity approach would have us see it, is not *Geist*’s voyage to self-consciousness and absolute knowledge, but material activity’s journey to free, self-determined fulfilment under communism” (21).

Another problem, according to Batishchev, is that Ilyenkov’s kind of “monism” is rather reductionist and assumes activity as a “supercategory” from which all aspects of human life can be deduced. It implies an instrumental view of the human-world relation; therefore other concepts like “community” and “communication” are needed to derive a more sophisticated theory. Batishchev also accused the philosophy of activity of being extremely anthropocentric. In other words, the activist approach was supposed to assume that humans are capable of taking control of any sphere of the world and existence (22). According to Khamidov’s chapter, this critique finally drove Batishchev to take his own philosophical path with an “anti-substantialist” and “intersubjective” stance (121–126). However, Bakhurst in his chapter aptly points out that the “substance”

⁵ See also David Bakhurst, *Consciousness and Revolution in Soviet Philosophy: From the Bolsheviks to Evald Ilyenkov* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Alex Levant and Vesa Oittinen, *Dialectics of the Ideal: Evald Ilyenkov and Creative Soviet Marxism* (London: Brill, 2013).

is not the human activity but the dynamic, material world to which humans belong. Other authors in the book share his point.

A similar kind of interpretation of Ilyenkov's thought is visible in the writings of his disciple Erik Yudin. Inna Titarenko in her chapter summarizes his point: "The entire history of human society, of the development of its material and spiritual culture, can be presented as the realization of the creative attitude of a man towards the world, expressed in the construction of new modes and programmes of activity" (71). Yudin, in his dispute with G. P. Shchedrovitsky – an important representative of the Moscow Methodological Circle – supports that view, and he added that the category of activity is unable to explain the rich variety of manifestations of human personalities, and not all manifestations of human existence, like creative work, can be derived solely from one category (67–69).

If we speak about the dynamic materialism of the "activity" thinkers, how should we treat Lenin's "old" dialectical materialism? Maidansky has no doubts that Lenin wrongly understood Marx's original thought. Marx claimed that "objective reality is *not given, but seized* from nature by human labour, by the sweat of a man's brow." Lenin's definition of matter, on the other hand, included "sensations" in place of "practice" (43).

This can be confusing because the reader can receive the impression that Lenin perceived the human subject as passive and therefore that his conception directly contradicts Marx's activist position. Fortunately, the activity approach thinkers had a hidden answer for that kind of dichotomy in the history of Marxist thought. The answer for the above problem can be found in the activist philosophy of Vadim Mezhuev, referred to in Maidansky's chapter. Mezhuev's distinction aimed to avoid the risk of being accused of ontological idealism by defining human activity as an "arche" and the main category of everything that exists. He also introduced the term "phenomenology of labour," which is, in my opinion, the finest description of the "activist" reading of Marx's theory of history.

Why labour instead of "human activity"? This is well explained in Sergey Mareev's chapter. According to Mezhuev, this is the problem of the relation between abstract and concrete notions of activity. In other words, we should distinguish between "activity in general" and "specific human activity." However, according to Mareev, moving from the former notion to the latter is impossible, as it is impossible to move from the general notion of fruit to a concrete peach, for example (96). Therefore, the concrete notion of human labour as a socially and historically determined form of activity should replace the abstract notion of activity in general.

From the reading of various chapters contained in the book, we can also gain knowledge that the common assumption in the activity approach philosophy is a belief about man's power of transforming reality. Nevertheless, what exactly does human transforming activity mean? The strong side of the book lies in the fact that we can look on late Soviet thought from the perspective of thinkers who wrote their chapters in spirit close to analytic philosophy. Thanks to that, we can gain knowledge about the exact

meaning of particular terms used, but undisputed by the activity approach thinkers. Edward Swiderski's chapter is a good example. His analytical work, based on some ontological assumptions borrowed from works by Donald Davidson and John Searle, shows that the term "transformation" could be understood as a kind of action in "the 'human world,' where the mutually constitutive relation of practices and their products precludes any fixed outside ('transcendental') point of observation other than that provided by *historical* narrative within that very world – the history of our production" (94).

Therefore, the book is certainly worth reading by those interested in Eastern Marxism and the history of modern philosophical thought in general, insofar as this chapter in Soviet Marxism represents an important, though often-overlooked, piece of modern philosophical thought. I think in that sense *The Practical Essence of Man* fulfils its aims.

However, it is quite visible that the authors of the chapters contained in the book seems to be hostile to Dialectical Materialism, but their critique is rather superficial. They simply reject it without any attention to the interconnections between *diamat* and modern science. For example, the authors did not pursue detailed discussions about the different meanings of praxis in Eastern Marxism. Also, despite giving some credit to young Marxist and Soviet philosophers, they are attracted more by Spinozist and Hegelian threads in the late Soviet philosophy. They avoided putting them in a wider context in the history of Marxist thought, and they focused mainly on official Soviet *Diamat* to show the alleged narrowness of Engels and Lenin. That kind of presentation of the relationship between Engels, Lenin, and activity theory seems to be problematic. Lenin analysed developments of natural sciences like physics. How could he explicitly write about the "practical" character of matter in space, for instance? As a political thinker devoted to the problems of the socialist movement, he obviously wrote hundreds of pages about the active side of the human practice of classes, which shapes the social world under different historical circumstances. In his major philosophical works, he also discussed "non-practical" dimensions of matter. However, later codifiers of *Diamat* focused mainly on his philosophical (gnoseological) works, disconnecting it from his political and social thought.

From that point of view, readers interested in the general history of Marxism, and especially readers sympathetic to Leninism and official dialectical materialism, may be slightly disappointed.

However, the book gives us an entirely coherent picture of the late Soviet philosophy, and it is definitely a good starting point to pursue research in Soviet Marxism more deeply.

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