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SOVIET PINS: SOUVENIRS AS SPOILS IN THE TRIUMPHAL PROCESSION

ALEX LEVANT*

ABSTRACT. In Moscow today, old Soviet pins, which had once been awarded to school kids as a rite of passage, are sold as souvenirs to tourists. These pins are an example of the many ruins of the Soviet Union that have experienced a metamorphosis: they connote an entirely new set of meanings that have supplanted their previous significance without any change in their material form. This article explores the transformation of these "cultural treasures" through the creative output of another Soviet "ruin": the post-Stalinist philosopher, Evald Ilyenkov, whose work challenged the hegemony of Soviet *Diamat*, but has not been adequately studied in the West.

Keywords: materialism, ideality, commodity fetishism, Ilyenkov, Benjamin

Introduction

Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which current rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried in the procession. They are called "cultural treasures," and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment. For in every case these treasures have a lineage which he cannot con template without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great geniuses who created them, but also to the anonymous toil of others who lived in the same period. There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is never free of barbarism, so barbarism taints the manner in which it was transmitted from one hand to another. The historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from this process of transmission as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain (Benjamin, 1940: 391-392).

The triumphal procession continues today just as it had during the Roman era and in Walter Benjamin's time. Sometimes it happens in its classic form, as the plunder of cultural treasures in the wake of military conquest. Sometimes it appears in other, less recognizable, forms, like the purchase of souvenirs on a trip abroad. For tourists who go to Russia, these souvenirs can serve multiple functions, such as gifts or personal mementos of their trip. However, whatever function they end up serving, they must first be purchased; in every case, they always appear as commodities.

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Some of these souvenirs had a previous existence before they became commodities. For instance, consider the Soviet school pin. Prior to becoming a souvenir for foreign tourists it served an entirely different function, namely as a rite of passage for Soviet school children. This object experienced a fundamental shift in its meaning without any sensuously-perceptible changes to its material form. This transformation in its signification reflects a deeper social transformation – the decomposition of a set of social relations, a way of acting in the world, objectified in corresponding institutions, laws, and concepts, inscribed in material objects like statues, buildings, street names, and even school pins. Walking through the streets of Moscow fills one with the sense that they are in the midst of ruins of a fallen empire. Among the ruins are these souvenirs. In this way, Soviet pins can be thought of as spoils on display in the triumphal procession.

Digging through these ruins one can also find cultural treasures of a different type, treasures that have not been commodified, but instead have been left in the rubble. One of the most interesting treasures of this variety is the work of post-Stalinist Soviet philosopher, Evald Ilyenkov, who was part of a subterranean tradition of *creative* Soviet Marxism¹, which developed on the margins of, and in opposition to, official Soviet Marxism. Ilyenkov was a leader of a group of theorists who sought to break with Soviet *Diamat* during the Khrushchevite *thaw* – a courageous stand for which he lost his position and eventually was prevented from teaching.² He took his own life in 1979. Although he had a profound impact on a generation of Soviet philosophers, his work is only now becoming more widely read in the West.³ His original conception of *ideal* phenomena can help us to analyse the transformation of these pins.

Combining these two ruins of the Soviet Union can be explosive, in part because of the actual journey of the Soviet pin, and in part because of Ilyenkov's theoretical insights, which can be used to retrieve a forgotten past. At issue here is the relationship between the pin as a material object, and the significance that it

¹ The term 'creative' [творческий] Soviet Marxism is used by some contemporary Russian theorists to distinguish certain currents in Marxist theory from 'official' Soviet Marxism in the form of *Diamat* (Maidansky, 2009: 201-202; Tolstykh, 2008: 10; Levant, 2008; Mezhuev, 1997). David Bakhurst uses the term 'genuine' (Bakhurst 1991: 3). This 'creative' Soviet Marxism could be found in various academic disciplines, most notably in the 1920s and 1960s. These currents are distinguished from official Soviet thought by their departure from positivist conceptions of subjectivity. However, a history that draws out the historical and theoretical connections between these currents, which articulates creative Soviet Marxism as a coherent tradition, is yet to be written.

² In 1954, as a junior lecturer at Moscow State University, Ilyenkov famously declared to the Chair of Dialectical Materialism that in Marxism there was no such thing as 'dialectical materialism' or 'historical materialism' (referring to *Diamat* and *Istmat*), but only a materialist conception of history. (Mareev, 2008: 8; Bakhurst, 1991: 6.)

³ Despite Ilyenkov's impact within the Soviet Union (which remains a subject of ongoing debate), his insights have 'to this day remained a Soviet phenomenon without much international influence' (Oittinen, 2005a: 228).

assumes. How do we make sense of these two lives of the Soviet pin? What gives rise to these very different sets of meanings? When read through Ilyenkov, the metamorphoses of the Soviet pin can tell us much about the transformation of the society that produced it and the society in which it now exists.

Same object, different meaning

One of the first things that one finds striking about these pins is how different is their current significance as souvenirs from their former existence as school pins. Without any perceptible changes to their material form, these objects have assumed an entirely different set of meanings. The way we account for this shift in meaning is significant, and this is where Ilyenkov's work is interesting, as it offers some insights into the relationship between object and meaning that set him apart from other theorists whose views on the subject have been quite influential.⁴

Taking aim at what he called *neopositivism*, he sought to articulate an anti-reductionist, anti-essentialist, and anti-dualist⁵ conception of the *ideal* (i.e., non-material phenomena, such as laws, customs, mathematical truths, concepts, and so on). Writing primarily in the 1960s and 1970s, his principal opponents were crude materialists who reduced the *ideal* to a mental phenomenon, a property of the physical brain.⁶ However, he also distinguished his approach from theorists who identified the ideal with language, as he believed that these also suffered from reductionism.⁷ In contrast, he offered a powerful and nuanced conception of the *ideal* informed by the German classical philosophical tradition, as well as the cultural-historical school of Soviet psychology, which includes figures such as L. Vygotsky, A. Luria, among others. For Ilyenkov, the ideal quality of a material object cannot be located in the material object itself, nor is it a projection onto the

⁴ For example, in *Dialectics of the Ideal* (2009a), he takes direct aim at Heidegger, Husserl, and Popper as representatives of neopositivism in the West.

⁵ Contemporary scholars have noted Ilyenkov's attempt to avoid Cartesian dualism by developing a Spinozist monist materialism in light of Marx. As contemporary Finnish philosopher, Vesa Oittinen writes, "Ilyenkov stresses the methodological value of Spinoza's monism, which means a change for the better compared with the dualism of two substances in Descartes [...] The Cartesians had posed the whole question of the psycho-physical problem in a wrong way: they desperately sought to establish some kind of a causal relation between thought and extension, although such a relation simply doesn't exist. Thought and extension are simply two sides of the one and same matter", (Oittinen, 2005b: 323).

⁶ For instance, one his principle opponents, I.I. Dubrovsky, wrote "The ideal is a purely individual phenomenon, realised by means of a certain type of cerebral neurodynamic process" (Dubrovsky, 1971: 189).

⁷ "Neopositivists, who identify thought (i.e. the ideal) with language, with a system of terms and expressions, therefore make the same mistake as scientists who identify the ideal with the structures and functions of brain tissue" (Ilyenkov, 2009b: 153).

material; rather, it is a form of human activity. This “activity approach” situates Ilyenkov in a theoretical current called “activity theory” for which he came to be known as the “philosophical mentor” (Bakhurst, 1991: 218).

The *ideal*, for Ilyenkov, is neither purely mental nor purely physiological; rather, it exists outside the individual and confronts her as a “special reality”, as “all historically formed and socially legitimised *human representations* of the actual world [...] ‘things’, in the body of which is tangibly *represented something other than themselves*” (Ilyenkov, 2009a: 14). This ideal plane of existence can be understood as the “intellectual culture of a given people”, i.e., the state (in Hegel’s and Plato’s sense, as “the whole general ensemble of social institutions that regulate the life-activity of the individual”) (Ilyenkov, 2009a: 15). Far from a mental phenomenon existing only in the minds of individuals, the ideal has an objective existence outside the individual, in which is reflected the material world. But the ideal has a “peculiar objectivity” in the sense that it exists only in the context of human activity. In the absence of human activity, there can be no ideal.⁸

The ideal has an objective existence in human activity – in the process of creating ideal representations of the material world, and the reverse process in which these representations inform human activity. “The ideal form is a form of a thing, but outside this thing, namely in man [sic], as a form of his dynamic life-activity, as goals and needs. Or conversely, it is a form of man’s dynamic life-activity, but outside man, namely in the form of the thing he creates, which represents, reflects another thing, including that which exists independently of man and humanity. ‘Ideality’ as such exists only in the constant transformation of these two forms of its ‘external incarnation’ and does not coincide with either of them taken separately” (Ilyenkov, 2009a: 44).

From this perspective, the significance of an object arises only as it is brought into the orbit of a system of meanings that informs human activity. It is understood as part of a process that cannot be grasped in isolation from the object itself or from the activity into which it is put to use. “Since man [sic] is given the external thing in general only insofar as it is involved in the process of his activity, in the final product – in the idea – the image of the thing is always merged with the image of the activity in which this thing functions. *That constitutes the epistemological basis of the identification of the thing with the idea, of the real with the ideal*” (Ilyenkov, 2009b: 162). In this way, the meaning of the Soviet pin emerged out of the function it served in both societies.

⁸ This is one of the distinguishing features between Ilyenkov’s concept of the ideal and Popper’s concept of World 3. However, as Guseinov and Lektorsky write, “The substantive difference lay in the fact that, for Ilyenkov, ideal phenomena can exist only within the context of human activity.” (Guseinov and Lektorsky, 2009: 15.)

The value-form and the ideal form

When the Soviet pin becomes a souvenir for tourists it assumes the form of a commodity. The commodification of the pin fundamentally transforms it as it acquires a quality it had not previously possessed: it acquires value. One of the great insights of Marx's concept of the value-form is the notion that an object in the form of a commodity becomes a bearer of the value-form, the socially-necessary labour time typically required for its production.

These pins, however, were not produced as commodities; they acquired the form of commodities as a result of their subsequent commodification, following the collapse of the Soviet state. The logic of their production was entirely different from their current existence. Moreover, their value as Soviet souvenirs have nothing in common with the labour-time required for their production. However, Marx may yet be useful here if we examine another aspect of the value-form that may be even more important, and certainly more applicable to an analysis of commodities such as the Soviet pin.

In his most original work, *Dialectics of the Ideal* (2009a), our other "cultural treasure", Evald Ilyenkov, argues that Marx's conception of the value-form carries a deeper philosophical insight: what is most significant about the value-form is not its quantitative content, but that it is ideal in its essence – it has no material properties, it is suprasensuous. For instance, the value-form of gold cannot be found in its substance, in its physical or chemical properties. It is an ideal property that is attributed to gold.

But it is not simply a mental projection onto gold; rather, according to Marx the value-form has an existence that is independent of the individual mind, namely value is congealed labour, human activity embodied in the form of a commodity. The value-form of gold is the socially-necessary labour time required for its acquisition, extraction, production, etc. It is a form of activity that exists independently of the individual mind. The value-form confronts the individual with an objectivity similar to material objects.

Ilyenkov illustrates this point brilliantly by revisiting Kant's example of "real" and "ideal" talers. Recall how Kant sought to demonstrate that the presence of something in one's mind does not mean that this thing *actually* exists. He illustrated his point by noting the difference between having "ideal" talers in one's mind and "real" talers in one's pocket. This distinction might appear self-evident; however, Ilyenkov notes how Marx mused what would happen to Kant with his "real" talers were he to find himself in a country where talers had no value? His real talers would become different objects without any changes to their material form. It appears that value has an objective existence outside the mind of the individual, yet it does not reside in the object itself.

Ilyenkov sees Marx's insight about the relationship between the value-form and the material form of the commodity as an example of the relationship between the ideal in general and the material in general. For him, what is most significant is not that the value-form is a reflection of socially-necessary labour-time, but that it is a reflection of labour more broadly, labour as activity, and most-significantly, that this form is entirely independent of the material properties of the object in which it temporarily "dwells" (Ilyenkov, 2009a: 21). He reminds us that according to Marx, the value-form of a commodity is purely ideal – it has no material properties, and it bears absolutely no relationship to the material properties of the commodity itself.⁹ "This is a purely universal form, completely indifferent to any sensuously perceptible material of its 'incarnation' [воплощения], of its 'materialisation'. The value-form is absolutely independent of the characteristics of the 'natural body' of the commodity in which it "dwells" [вселяется], the form in which it is *represented*." The value-form is, for Ilyenkov, an illustration of the ideal form in general.

In light of Ilyenkov's work, we can see how the ideal form of the pin changes without any changes to its material form. Its ideal form changes because it is brought into a different system of meanings and a different system of practices. As the pin is commodified it loses its ideal form as a school pin and assumes the commodity form as a souvenir. In place of its former set of meanings, it acquires value.

The animation of the commodity and commodity relations

The transformation of the Soviet pin from being a rite of passage for Soviet children to being a souvenir for tourists signals a fundamental change in social relations. If the pin as a rite of passage was a sign of a certain social order that mediated the relations between its members, then the pin as a commodity is a sign of a different social order that mediates their relations in a new way. One distinctive aspect of this new form of mediation is the central role of the commodity.

A society mediated by commodity relations differs from all other societies. Because the class of producers is atomized, production is geared for exchange, and all products assume the form of commodities. Since they must be exchanged before they can be used, they first appear in value-form, which is always measured in terms of other commodities. This way of integrating objects into a system of social practices produces this reductive signification, their signification as value. In a society mediated by commodity relations, objects lose their qualitative differences and come to be seen primarily in terms of their quantitative "worth".

⁹ Marx mocks political economists who identify the value-generating quality of capital with the object in which it is represented, as opposed to human activity: "It becomes a property of money to generate value and yield interest, much as it is an attribute of pear trees to bear pears." (Lukacs, 1923: 86).

In addition to this reductionism of the world of things, a society mediated by commodity relations is also distinguished by an inversion between producer and product, where the product comes to dominate the producer. This product is not only the sum of the actual things that are produced, but also the *ideal* product, the process of production, which is likewise produced and reproduced.¹⁰ Commodity relations reflect a process of production that is out of control of the producers, a process that dominates the producers. Independent producers who are free from each other's control as to what and how to produce find themselves dependent on the relations between their commodities – i.e., on the market.¹¹ Because they produce independently of each other, their relations become mediated by relations between their commodities, by the market in which they are exchanged – the world of commodities.

What is most significant about this form of mediation is its autonomy from, and dominance over, the people whose relations it mediates. Marx tried to grasp this phenomenon with his concept of commodity fetishism.

It is absolutely clear that, by his activity, man [sic] changes the forms of the materials of nature in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will (Marx, 1906: 163-164).

This will is a product of the fetishism of ordinary things when they become commodities. These things, as commodities, come to be worshipped, and achieve a certain autonomy from their producers. Moreover, they become the cell-form (Marx, 1977: 12) of an organism called capital, which comes to dominate its creator in a manner reflected in various ideal representations, from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to more recent cinematic representations like the *Terminator*.

To be clear, the Soviet pin as a rite of passage is no less “straightforward” a thing than it is in the form of a commodity; however, their fetishism differs. While it can be said that the pin in both forms stands above its producer, one

¹⁰ Ilyenkov insists that this is precisely how Marx understood the process of idealization: as “the process by which the *material* life-activity of social man [sic] begins to produce not only a material, but also an *ideal* product, begins to produce the act of *idealisation* of reality (the process of transforming the “material” into the “ideal”), and then, having arisen, the “ideal” becomes a critical component of the material life-activity of social man, and then begins the opposite process – the process of the *materialisation* (objectification, reification, “incarnation”) of the ideal” (Ilyenkov, 2009a: 18).

¹¹ “The owners of commodities therefore find out, that the same division of labour that turns them into independent private producers, also frees the social process of production and the relations of the individual producers to each other within that process, from all dependence on the will of those producers, and that the seeming mutual independence of the individuals is supplemented by a system of general and mutual dependence through or by means of the products” (Marx, 1906: 121).

must differentiate the order of alienation in each case. It can be said that both, the Soviet worker and the worker under capitalism, had been alienated from the product of their labour. However, there is a fundamental difference between the two, which has to do with the fact that the Soviet pin had been produced with a particular use in mind, while a commodity is produced for the single purpose of being sold (its use is only important insofar as it facilitates its sale). While the worker may be alienated in each case, Soviet production was directed by the planning of various decision-making bodies, but commodity production is directed by an atomized class of capitalists whose activity is largely coordinated by the market.

The role played by the market is vital to understanding the difference between the fetishism of the pin as a commodity and its fetishism as a rite of passage. Recall that, "Objects of utility become commodities only because they are the products of the labour of private individuals who work independently of each other" (Marx, 1906: 165). Independent producers form a market, which comes to dominate the whole production process. The use-value of ordinary products becomes locked in a shell of value, because all commodities must be exchanged before they can be used. Consequently, commodities come to be seen as something other than products of human labour. A forgetting occurs when a product becomes a commodity: it sheds the source of its production and becomes reborn as an animated being which lives in a web of relations with other commodities. As a commodity, the Soviet pin is no longer fetishised for its use-value, but for its value; it becomes fetishised as part of a new form of life buoyed up by the market.

Commodity fetishism is also much more pervasive in its scope and depth. The process of commodification seeks to transform all aspects of life into the form of a commodity. Consequently, commodity fetishism is much more "effective" than the fetishism of Soviet ideological products in mediating human relations. Indeed, it is rare to have a human interaction under capitalism without it being mediated by a relation between commodities.

The fact that commodity fetishism played a much smaller role and existed differently in Soviet production indicates that human relations existed in a fundamentally different way. Although both the Soviet and 'Western' working classes had been alienated from the product of their labour, in the USSR this alienation had not penetrated individual relationships to the same extent and in the same way. While in the 'West' the working class is atomized, this process had not penetrated the Soviet working class to the same extent because commodities had not mediated their relations like in the 'West'. Ideological products, like Soviet school pins, interpellated people as members of a community-in-the-making, not as bearers of commodities in a market.

This difference comes into sharp relief when different *ideals* come into direct contact and are seen directly against each other. For a moment both ideals become visible in a new way. As Jonathan Flatley recounts, this juxtaposition was quite common following the immediate collapse of the Soviet state:

In 1993, there was still a grotesque (in the formal poetic sense) juxtaposition of old Soviet spaces with newly “capitalist” or “Western” ones. At the time, Aleksander Ivanov and I took the opportunity to write a little about the strangeness of the moment. We noted that what was remarkable about that Moscow was not so much the *existence* of “Western” signifiers, but that they appeared next to and within Soviet spaces and sign-systems. Indeed, the photo-journalists for the local English language newspaper, *The Moscow Times*, rarely missed the chance to exploit the seemingly endless supply of visual ironies: a Coca-Cola kiosk set in front of a constructivist style mural with the slogan “We Are Building Communism,” or the young entrepreneur selling posters of Rambo and soap opera stars in the metro under a huge marble mural of Lenin. These incongruities had a curious effect: just as commodity fetishism here seemed unfamiliar and even absurd, so too properly Soviet spaces – like the Metro or state stores or even Red Square itself – also acquired a new face. [...] Like any space that organizes one’s perceptions (like ideology itself), totalitarian space must be *invisible* to function (Flatley, 1999: 3).

The image from Photo 1. exemplifies this effect: a large billboard on Arbat St. advertising Winston cigarettes, depicting an aerial view of a seaside resort with an eagle apparently flying out of the ad and the words ‘Complete Freedom’ along the bottom. Next to this ad, a plaque to commemorate Soviet soldiers in WWII. This contrast created the effect that Flatley had observed, however, the Soviet plaque was only there during the Victory Day celebrations in May and was subsequently replaced by an ad for the youth Olympics in July, while the Winston ad had become a permanent fixture.



Photo 1. Advertising on Arbat street, Moscow, 1998. Author’s photo

As the pin acquires the form of a commodity, it is removed from the Soviet ideal and integrated into the market. It becomes animated as part of a different ideal. In this new ideal, the pin joins the ranks of commodities, which mediate social relations.

Emptying out the ideal-form

The fetishism that accompanies the commodification of the Soviet pin animates it as a commodity, but simultaneously, it also destroys its sacredness as a Soviet rite of passage, it empties out its ideal form. The fact that production under capitalism is the production of commodities means that no individual products are given special status aside from their value-form. Every commodity has a price. Thus, while all products are animated, no single product is sacred.

This sacrilege is significant because it performs a necessary operation for capitalism to function: the exorcism of the producer from the product. Consider Michael Taussig's claim: "In precapitalist economies the embodiment of the producer in the product is consciously acknowledged, but in a capitalist system it is essential that this embodiment be 'exorcised'" (Taussig, 1980: 28). Under capitalism the producer is alienated from the product of her labour. Not only does she not keep what she makes, but she is not to think of her product as something that she makes; instead, what she makes is money in the form of her wage. In contrast, Taussig cites Marcel Mauss' study of Maori exchange, where there is "the belief that an article that is produced and exchanged contains the life-force (hau) of the person and objects in nature from whence the article derived" (Taussig, 1980: 28). However, under conditions of capitalist production, the 'life-force' of the producer is purged from the product.

This exorcism occurs because the production of commodities is geared for exchange, not use. Since commodities must be exchanged before they can be used, the relations of exchange among the commodities (i.e. the market) dominate what is produced. Thus, as we saw above, there is a reversal of the direction of the control of the production process from the producer to the products of her making. Consequently, the products that are made under such conditions are 'lifeless'; that is, they do not embody the life-force of their producer. Instead, these products are animated by the commodity form, which is plugged into the electricity grid of the market, itself ultimately powered by the labour of its producers.

Similarly, when the Soviet pin is commodified, it is purged of the life-force of its producers. This is not the exorcism of its immediate producers, but of the society of producers, it is the emptying out of the Soviet *ideal*. As the pin leaves the system of practices that produced the Soviet ideal, as those practices disappear, the pin becomes hollowed out. If it had once signified a rite of passage,

when it sits in the market with a price tag it appears as an ornament, which confirms the exorcism of the Soviet ideal from its material form. Recall that Lukacs noted Marx's observation that commodities do not originate within communities, but on their borders. "That is where barter begins, and from here it strikes back into the interior of the community, decomposing it" (Taussig, 1980: 85). We can observe the decomposition of Soviet society in the commodification of this pin.

This notion illuminates a process by which Soviet artefacts become "de-Sovietized". The Soviet past is a site of struggle whose configuration is key to maintaining the hegemony of the new elite. This involves the erasure of Soviet achievements, as well as the identification of "democratization" with "anti-communism". More generally, it means reconstructing its history from the perspective of the dispossessed bourgeoisie, and the silencing of other voices and other histories. However, in addition to these deliberate efforts by ideologists, this transformation of the past is also achieved by the above process, whose ideological effects are not deliberate, but are nevertheless real.

Recall the similarities and the differences between Marx's concept of ideology and his concept of commodity fetishism. In contrast to some contemporary notions of ideology, which understand it as a perspective or as a world-view, Marx identified it as a practice that occludes social relations (Marx, 1970: 67). This is a powerful concept, which continues to be used by contemporary sociologists.¹² However, in *Capital*, he drops this concept and examines the impact of other practices on consciousness, including commodification. The production of commodities also produces an *ideal* product, which involves their fetishism. This process helps us to understand how de-Sovietization happens on a level beyond overt ideological struggles, but as a consequence of a new organization of human activity, as a product of a new set of practices.

The war veteran who sells his medal to tourists outside Izmailovski market best illustrates this transformation. Possession of this war medal no longer signifies a special honour for defending the Soviet Union, but its opposite – a sign of Soviet defeat in the Cold War. Benjamin's "historical materialist" contemplates such a "cultural treasure" with horror for two reasons: first of all, because of the "anonymous toil" of its producers, but also because of "the manner in which it was transmitted from one hand to another". The second horror that the historical materialist experiences is the horror of defeat, it is the horror of the destruction of a way of life.

This horror stems from the underside of civilization, its other: barbarism. As Fredric Jameson writes, "throughout class history, the underside of culture is blood, torture, death, and terror" (Jameson, 1991: 5). The dialectical nature of civilization and barbarism is a significant theme in the Marxist tradition. While

¹² For instance, see Bannerji, 2011.

Marx saw a “civilizing” moment in capitalism, he insisted that capitalist production always begins with the forced separation of people from their means of subsistence (Marx, 1977: 875). He shows that as capitalist production develops, as people are “civilized”, they simultaneously become more barbaric due to the estrangement of their activity. Most significantly, they lose human influence over the production of the *ideal* to the market. Ilyenkov attributes the phenomenon of idealist philosophy to alienation rather than faulty thinking: because people become alienated from their means of making the world, they become alienated from the world that they make. Their world comes to resemble Hobbes’ state of nature, of a war of all against all. Appearing as nature is what Lukacs called *second nature* – a world where social relations appear as things, and therefore as immutable, given and “natural” (Lukacs, 1923: 83).

Brushing history against the grain

Benjamin contrasts the historicist, who views these souvenirs as “cultural treasures”, with the historical materialist, who “dissociates himself from this process of transmission as far as possible.” Yet historical materialists (including Benjamin), often collect these “cultural treasures”, despite their horrific origin(s). One is faced with the question of how to relate to these documents of culture and barbarism, these spoils in the triumphal procession?

Benjamin invites the historian to grasp “the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one” and to stop “telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary” (Lukacs, 1923: 263). From this perspective, the present is not the culmination of a sequence of events, but the past is a “constellation” of events that have been ordered in light of present concerns. This “Copernican revolution” (Benjamin, 1999: 388-389) approaches the past as a contested terrain that is produced in the present. Taken separately, these events have no singular meaning; rather, their significance arises out of their role in the “constellation” that is made according to present concerns. This insight is captured in the wisdom of the popular joke: “In Russia nothing is more difficult to predict than the past” (Van der Zweerde, 2009: 178). It also recalls the relationship between the significance of a material object and the system of practices in which it moves. In fact, Ilyenkov likewise makes reference to the stars to illustrate this, very similar, relationship. “Thus at first he directs his attention upon the stars exclusively as a natural clock, calendar and compass as means and instruments of his life-activity, and observes their ‘natural’ properties and regularities only insofar as they are natural properties and regularities of the material in which his activity is being performed” (Ilyenkov, 2009a: 44). In this way, Soviet pins are themselves contested terrains, whose meaning, like the past itself, is difficult to predict.

At stake here is obviously much more than the meaning of Soviet pins, or “cultural treasures” more generally, but the very present itself because the ideal is not only the phenomenon that enables the individual to acquire meaning, but it is the very phenomenon that produces the human individual. In other words, one’s sense of self – what often appears in popular culture as a natural, pre-social individual, an automatic product of our biology, of our human brain in particular – requires the presence of an *ideal* that exists in social practices within which the individual becomes self-aware, and in the absence of which no sense of self or human consciousness would emerge. Ilyenkov describes the ideal “as the *universal norms of that culture* within which an individual awakens to conscious life” (Ilyenkov, 2009a: 5). His rationale for the necessity of the ideal for the emergence of individual consciousness: “Consciousness and will become necessary forms of mental activity only where the individual is compelled to control his own organic body in answer not to the organic (natural) demands of this body but to demands presented from outside, by the ‘rules’ accepted by the society in which he was born. It is only in these conditions that the individual is compelled to distinguish himself from his own organic body. These rules are not passed on to him by birth, through his ‘genes’, but are imposed upon him from outside, dictated by culture, and not by nature” (Ilyenkov, 2009a: 38-39).

This line of argument was developed on the margins of Soviet philosophy in the 1960s in response to official Soviet *Diamat*; however, it is closely related to the “activity approach” that had emerged in Soviet psychology, particularly in the work of Lev Vygotsky (another cultural treasure, which has been much more thoroughly studied in the West than Ilyenkov).¹³ Vygotsky offers an anti-essentialist approach to human consciousness in the sense that consciousness does not develop spontaneously along with the development of the human brain in the body of a child, but that consciousness is in its essence a social product. In Vygotsky’s account, children develop “higher mental functions” as they acquire speech; that is, as they internalize the system of signs that they inhabit. Vygotsky writes, “The system of signs restructures the whole psychological process and enables the child to master her movement” (Vygotsky, 1978: 35). From the perspective of “activity theory”, the ‘higher mental functions’ and ‘meaningful perception’ that are associated with human consciousness do not arise from the brain itself, but must be *acquired* by the child with the help of her brain, and that in the absence of this acquisition, the child would not develop a genuinely human consciousness.¹⁴

¹³ A number of theorists have noted Vygotsky’s influence on Ilyenkov; for instance, Bakhurst, 1991, Mareev, 2008, among others.

¹⁴ As another “creative” Soviet Marxist put it in a very different context: “Individual consciousness is not the architect of the ideological superstructure, but only a tenant lodging in the social edifice of ideological signs” (Voloshinov, 1929: 13).

From this perspective, what is at stake in the struggle over meaning is the present and the future – it is the production of the individual, the type of person that is produced. In post-Soviet Russia, social relations are becoming mediated in new ways, particularly by commodities, which are becoming more and more prevalent, though fewer and fewer people can afford them. Older people are finding themselves in a nihilistic and decaying society, while a new generation is growing up, relating to each other through commodities. For instance, consider the following scene:

Zoya told me how her friend Katya, a divorced mother and teacher, lost her nine-year-old son. She makes about \$125 a month. The son stole the equivalent of \$18 from her. When she confronted him, he said he was going to go live with his father and his grandparents, since his father has a car and makes good money, while she's just a poor teacher. He called his grandmother and admitted taking the money, but said he needed it for things, like a gas pistol. And he left. A few days later he called his mother, explaining that if she made more money, he could live with her. Katya's in shock; she can't understand where this monster appeared from. Actually, one could say he's well-socialized into the new value-system (Mandel, 1998: 92).

This monster is the fruit of the new value-system, which is the *ideal* aspect of a new system of practices, a new set of social relations.

"Brushing history against the grain", then, cannot simply amount to the orientation of an individual toward these cultural treasures. The point is not to step out of the present, but to change it by retrieving a forgotten past. The Soviet pin appears not only a social artefact that reflects its society, but it also becomes a palimpsest on which another ideal had been recorded. Just beneath the "surface" of the ideal form of the pin is evidence of another ideal. As the pin sits in the market with a price tag, as a cultural treasure on display in the triumphal procession, it continues to haunt.

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ALEX LEVANT

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