Marx’s analysis of the concept of class in chapter 52 of Capital Volume III is unfortunately far from being complete. This paper aims at reconstructing a Marxian conceptualisation of class on the basis of Marx’s own writings and with the aid of representatives of creative Soviet Marxism such as Evald Ilyenkov and contemporary Western critical theory, specifically the Open Marxism approach and Werner Bonefeld. It proposes that class is not a sociological entity signifying a group or a stratum in society. Rather, it is a fluid being that is logically preceded by its conceptuality: class is a continuously constituted social relation that is mediated politically; it is the mode of being of the human basis of capitalist social relations of production.

Keywords: Class; Concept; Contradiction; Marx; Ilyenkov; Bonefeld

Introduction

Chapter 52 of Capital Volume III, titled ‘Classes’, is, unfortunately, incomplete. Although, through Capital and other works, Marx provides insights about his probable approach to this phenomenon, much more work is required to arrive at a proper understanding of what the concept of class might signify within a Marxian framework. Marx enumerates three major social classes in modern capitalist society: wage-labourers, capitalists and landowners. Further, he emphasises that classes are continuously constituted and reproduced as social relations:

We have seen that the continual tendency and law of development of the capitalist mode of production is more and more to divorce the means of production from labour, and more and more to concentrate the scattered means of production into large groups, thereby transforming labour into wage-labour and the means of production into capital. And to this tendency, on the other hand, corresponds to the independent separation of landed property from capital and labour, or the

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transformation of all landed property into the form of landed property corresponding to the capitalist mode of production.\(^2\)

Class, thus, is a social relation in need of continuous constitution and reproduction; it cannot be conceived independently of the capitalist relations of production and continuous reproduction of capitalist private property, which means the separation of immediate producers from the means of production. In a sense, it is not possible to call social strata of pre-capitalist societies ‘class’ in the proper sense of the term. In this regard Marx states,

> In so far as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interest and their culture from those of other classes, and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a class. In so far as there is only a local interconnection among these small-holding peasants, and the identity of their interests begets no community, no national bond and no political organization among them, they do not form a class.\(^3\)

This paper aims at contributing to a Marxian conceptualisation of ‘class’ on the bases of Marx’s own writings, as well as works of creative Soviet Marxists, in particular Evald Ilyenkov, and some contemporary representatives of Western Marxism, in particular the Open Marxism approach (and specifically with reference to some writings of Werner Bonefeld). Class, accordingly, does not signify a group of people, nor it is a structure. Rather, it is a fluid actuality that is—logically speaking—preceded by its concept, where the latter is the ideal reconstruction of social relations, that is, relations between human beings and their mode of activity. This does not mean that class does not have an objective existence; rather, it proposes that a Marxian concept of class is radically different than sociological conceptualisations of class. Furthermore, conceptuality of class, which means that it is a phenomenon that is continuously constituted within capitalist relations of production, necessitates political mediation as the mode of existence of class as a social relation. Class and class struggle emerge simultaneously; they are two forms of appearance of the same essence, that is, capitalist social relations of production. Class struggle always assumes a political form; as Mansoor Hekmat puts it, ‘Insurrection and revolution are contemporary society’s mechanisms of change. So are revolts, uprisings and wars’.\(^4\) Class is not a physical entity that is given prior to class struggle; such a formulation assumes a neutral ground, upon which classes coexist peacefully. It is for this reason that ‘The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles’ and ‘What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers’.\(^5\) It is in this sense that ‘class is class struggle’. Furthermore, such a

\(^2\) Ibid.
\(^3\) Ibid., p. 187.
politically mediated conceptualisation provides the basic tools for properly identifying the class character of existing social movements.

Traditional Marxist conceptualisation of class and class struggle is based upon its conceptualisation of labour as a transhistorical and social category. To this view, labour has always been social in every social formation but not in capitalism, whereas for Marx, labour is only social in capitalist society owing to the organisation of production towards the abstract social goal of producing (surplus) value, which is the form of wealth in capitalist society. For traditional Marxism, social labour is to be constituted; in this sense its criticism of capitalism is ‘positive’. For Marx, however, labour is to be abolished; in this sense, Marx’s own criticism of capitalism is negative.

Traditional Marxism reduces class struggle into a mere confrontation between the workers (as members of a definite social group) and the bourgeoisie. Worker, to this view, represents a form of identity, just as gender or ethnicity does. Traditional Marxism locates the basic contradiction of capitalist society within this confrontation. What is to be overcome, for this view, is the private dimension of labour from the standpoint of the true, transhistorical essence of labour, that is, social labour. ‘Labour’ as such, for traditional Marxism, serves as the Archimedean point, based upon which a critique of capitalism is possible. On the contrary, Marx’s own project is to provide an immanent criticism of capitalism; it is to show the inner contradictions that makes the self-movement and development of capitalism possible.

Marx’s social theory is not a transcendental theory that locates itself outside of the context (the society) it tends to criticise. As Postone notes, ‘an immanent social critique must show that its object, the social whole of which it is a part, is not a unitary whole’. To put it in Ilyenkov’s terms, it should be able to show the contradictory essence of the phenomenon, the difference in unity, theoretically reconstruct it at conceptual level and thus show the possibility of the self-movement and the self-development of the phenomenon at hand. So be the case, class struggle does not appear as a confrontation between identities (the worker vs the bourgeois), but as a mode of existence of the self-movement of capitalist society.

Immanent criticism also shows that consciousness is not something ‘external’ to the class but it is something in the class; moreover, although class consciousness is not a unitary whole, the classification of consciousness into ‘spontaneous’ and ‘true’ is superficial. Such classification is the reflection of the old-age assumed dichotomy between subject and object, between thought and reality or thinking and action. Class consciousness is a function of political struggle and political movement within class as the mode of activity of the class. Class consciousness is constituted and reproduced within class struggle; it is the expression of this struggle in the political realm. Those approaches that promote spontaneity in contrast to, say, political organisation in the form of party of the class, in fact reproduce this old-age dichotomy; for traditional Marxism party is necessary because the class in itself lacks ‘true’ consciousness.

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and the party is the organ of bringing in this missing aspect. For ‘spontaneism’, political organisation or class party is not welcome because it represents a consciousness that does not belong to and thus is external to the class. All in all, for both ends class and consciousness are qualitatively different and mutually exclusive categories. Bonefeld’s emphasis on the political aspect of the class struggle provides a tool for overcoming the false dichotomy between class and consciousness. Ilyenkov’s approach, on the other hand, provides a unique methodological tool towards the formulation of such an immanent criticism of capitalism, where the relation between the ‘class in itself’ and ‘class for itself’ is not formulated in terms of the relation between the physical existence of the class and class consciousness, but is correctly reconstructed as the modes of activity of the class.

**Concepts**

There is a large body of study about concepts, their formation and development, which has been made, in great extent, by Soviet psychologists from cultural-historical tradition that have been inspired by works of Lev Vygotsky. Yet the achievements of the scientific works of these scholars have not been fully incorporated towards developing an epistemological-philosophical theory that aims at a proper understanding of concepts. Evald Ilyenkov is one of the major figures that has undertaken this task and has made great contribution to a Marxist philosophical theory of concepts and conceptual systems. This paper is also an attempt towards a first step of furthering and deepening Ilyenkov’s philosophical analysis of concepts. To this end, Marx’s concept of class will be analysed with the use of Ilyenkovian approach to concepts. Meanwhile, the relevance of Ilyenkov’s approach and its affinity with contemporary critical tradition will be shown. The paper attempts to show that contradiction is an essential aspect of conceptual and real development. It also aims at showing that the contradictory nature of concepts, on the other hand, reveals the normative aspect of conceptual activity: concepts and thus conceptual systems are not only contradictory but also normative. Normativity is a necessary aspect of conceptual development in that it puts concepts into work, that is, it facilitates the resolution of contradictions that are inherent in social reality and thus causes development of both the real and the conceptual realms; this development reveals itself in form of a new, higher form of contradiction. The normativity of concept is a function of its being a particular form of human activity: the form of human activity and the tools that is deployed for such activity determine the form of human’s metabolic relationship with social nature.

Criticising formal logic Ilyenkov\(^7\) states, ‘Conceiving a thing means forming a conception about the entire totality of its properties and relations’. According to formal logical understanding, a concept is concrete when is devoid of content—‘free from

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all thoughts or properties of this thing’—thus, formal logic considers concepts as impoverishing reality. Following Spinoza and Vygotsky, Ilyenkov elaborates further the idea that true concepts reveal the essence of things. Concepts are not abstractions made from sense-experience (sense-data). They appear in human consciousness at spiritual-theoretical (ideal) culture level. Such concepts mature and crystallise in human intellect gradually. They are not self-obvious and if intellect does not develop within cultural-theoretical context, they will be absent. ‘It is only reasonable knowledge taken as a whole that, as it develops, works out such concepts’.8

Concrete ‘is the unity of diverse aspects’,9 Ilyenkov articulates this idea as follows: ‘the concrete, concreteness, are first of all synonyms of the real links between phenomena, of concatenation and interaction of real aspects and moments of the object given to man in contemplation and in a notion’.10

Concepts, revealing the essence of the real and of the object and as tools of cognitive activity thus facilitate accessing the essence of the real and acting upon that essence; they reveal the necessary connections among aspect of diverse objectivity.

The concrete in thinking also appears, according to Marx’s definition, in the form of combination (synthesis) of numerous definitions. A logically coherent system of definitions is precisely that natural form in which concrete truth is realized in thought. Each of definitions forming part of the system naturally reflects only a part, a fragment, an element, an aspect of the concrete reality—and that is why it is abstract if it is taken by itself, separately from other definitions.11

A definition, a concept has meaning and is possible only within a system of definitions and concepts. An isolated concept is just a mere abstraction devoid of life and meaning.

The traditional view of concepts, when compares concept to contemplative/sensual image of a thing, conceives the former as a lesser, impoverished, one-sided—and in this sense ‘abstract’—image. As Hegel puts, in this view ‘the abstract is counted of less worth than the concrete, because from the former so much of that kind of material has been omitted. To those who hold this view, the process of abstraction means that for our subjective needs one or another characteristic is taken out of concrete … and it is only the incapacity of understanding to absorb such riches that forces it to rest content with meager abstraction’.12

Conceptualisation is different than mere generalisation. Social ‘theory’ aims at classification based on generalisation; social (Marxian) criticism aims at conceptualisation, that is, it aims at critical reconstruction of the facts that are analysed and criticised. In this regard also Bonefeld states,

The theory of social stratification ‘classifies’ the social individuals as members of this or that social group according to some analytical criteria such as level of income,

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8 Ibid.
9 Marx, ‘Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy’, p. 206, quoted in ibid., p. 32.
10 Ibid., pp. 32–33.
11 Ibid., p. 37.
12 Ibid., pp. 46–47.
educational achievement, living standard, etc. In this manner it seeks to render intelligible the observable ‘facts’ of life without conceptualizing them as forms of definite social relations. Instead, it generalizes the ‘raw sense data’ of the ‘sign’ worker into a classificatory category and then applies the classification to the working class to signify it.\textsuperscript{13}

Concept bestows ‘meaning’ onto, or better to say ‘extracts’ and ‘expresses’ the meaning of a specific element of the entirety of reality. To have meaning, as Vygotsky puts it,\textsuperscript{14} is to be made into a tool, that is, to become a concrete universal, which not only is applicable within the system this particular meaningfulness is a part of, but is also applicable within other systems and engulfs newer areas of reality and newer significances. Concept is concrete because it is the non-sine-qua tool of a specific form of action; it is universal because it is a tool that has application beyond the immediate context within which it has been produced.

The universal or the concept has an objective reality, but not in Platonic or Hegelian sense—as a mere idea—but

in the sense of law-governed connections of material phenomena, in the sense of the law of their being joined together in composition of the same whole, in the context of a self-developing totality or aggregate, all the components of which were related as a matter of fact not by virtue of their possessing one and the same identical attribute, but by virtue of their having one and the same common ancestor, or to put it more exactly, by virtue of their arising as divers modifications of one and the same substance of a quite material character (i.e. independent of thought and word).\textsuperscript{15}

Every philosophical and logical system, inevitably, faces contradictions and intends to resolve it. Metaphysical thought considers contradiction a mere subjective phantom, whereas dialectical thought considers it ‘the necessary logical form of the development of thought’.\textsuperscript{16}

What is presented here as ‘contradiction’ is not contradiction in the narrow, formal logical sense of the term; such contradictions (e.g. $p$ and $\neg p$) are to be barred by the rules of formal logic. Contradiction, here, means ‘the unity and coincidence of mutually exclusive theoretical definitions’.\textsuperscript{17} Contradiction appears when the phenomena that form the subject matter of a science are to be systematised conceptually.\textsuperscript{18}

Metaphysical thought, according to Ilyenkov, reduces theory to a piling up and removal of empirically observed antinomies. It explains these ‘antinomies’ in term of deficiencies of cognitive apparatus and theoretical systems. Thus, it looks for empirically universal laws that dissipate such contradictions. Contradiction, in this

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\textsuperscript{15} E.V. Ilyenkov, \textit{The Ideal in Human Activity} (Marxists Internet Archive, 2009), p. 204, \url{https://www.marxists.org/ebooks/ilyenkov/index.htm}.

\textsuperscript{16} Ilyenkov, \textit{The Dialectics of the Abstract}, op. cit., p. 234.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p. 233.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., p. 235.
\end{flushleft}
view, is a purely epistemological–cognitive anomaly, whereas dialectics aims at resolution of contradiction by deducing it from the very movement of the world: “The only way of attaining a rational resolution of contradictions in theoretical definition is through tracing the mode in which they are resolved in the movement of the objective reality, the movement and development of the world of things “in themselves”.”

Natural sciences as well as social sciences, to the extent they are genuine theoretical-conceptual systems, aim at explaining the motion in terms of such contradictions. If this view is true, then explanations regarding scientific progress or change of theories with respect to the piling up of anomalies, such as that of Kuhn’s, fail to grasp the true essence of scientific activity. Conceptualisation is the ideal reconstruction of the contradictions within phenomena. As Bonefeld puts it, ‘conceptualization does not mean “thinking” about things. Rather, it means thinking out of things’. To think out of things necessarily entails a negative element, meaning that it negates the appearance out of which thinking happens. This means that conceptualisation is not an elimination of contradiction but is the reconstruction of the very contradiction because it happens in the world; it is thinking as acting—changing the appearing thing.

According to Ilyenkov, the core of Marx’s methodology with regard to contradiction is not to eliminate contradiction from theory, as metaphysicians do, but, ‘this method is based on the assumption that contradiction in the object itself cannot be and is never resolved in any other way than by the development of the reality fraught with this contradiction into another, higher and, more advanced reality’.

The process of acquisition of independence of value in the form of capital through the process of circulation and valorisation, which is manifest in the transition from C–M–C circulation to M–C–M form of circulation, is the consequence of the inner contradiction of value (contradiction between use-value and value). In this case, capital assumes a life of its own as an independent substance. In a sense, it is an independent substance, but it is the historically formed substance that now, apparently, turns money and commodities to modes of itself. This will be the case with labour power; that is, it will turn into a mode of capital, into a natural force in the service of capital.

According to Ilyenkov, Marx, in contrast to classical political economy, which is also the object of Marx’s criticism, discloses the contradictory essence of value: this essential contradiction is the contrast between use and exchange values. There are two capitalist ‘solutions’ to this contradiction: money and economic crisis. Yet neither money nor crisis is able to resolve this contradiction. Money makes the contradiction invisible but crisis makes it visible once again. However, both are far from dissipating this contradiction. Ricardo introduces the labour force as the basis of value, that is, human labour is the source and the substance of value. However, Marx takes this further by disclosing that labour is not only the substance but also the subject of value. Ilyenkov states,

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19 Ibid., p. 244.
In trying to express (value) theoretically, i.e., through the law of value, a clear logical contradiction was obtained. The point was that profit was new, newly created value, or rather part of it. That was an indisputably true analytical determination. But only new labour produced new value. How, however, did that tie up with the quite obvious empirical fact that the quantity of profit was not determined at all by the quantity of living labour expended on its production? It depended exclusively on the quantity of capital as a whole, and in no case on the size of that part that went on wages. And it was even more paradoxical that the higher profit the less living labour was consumed during its production.²²

Pertaining to Hegelian terminology and formulating Marx’s materialist dialectics in opposition to that, Ilyenkov states, ‘The essence of the Marxian upheaval in political economy may be expressed in philosophical terms in the following manner: In Marx’s theory, not only the substance of value, labour, was understood (Ricardo also attained this understanding), but, for the first time, value was simultaneously understood as the subject of the entire development, that is, as a reality developing through its inner contradictions into a whole system of economic forms. Ricardo failed to understand this latter point’.²³ Capitalist crises and the revolution, as the resolution of the capitalist contradiction—overproduction, which means accumulation of riches in the hands of the few in contrast to poverty of the masses—‘emerges as the inevitable result of the development of the very contradiction which is contained in simple commodity exchange, in the “cell” of the whole system—value, as an embryo or kernel’.²⁴

Concept refers to non-conceptualities.²⁵ For instance, the concept of the space refers to the space of social relations; there is no ‘space-in-itself’—a neutral ‘reality’ or ‘essence’ to which the concept apparently refers. The concept of space refers to the existing social space in the particular form in which it has been actualised, say, in the form of cities, streets, squares, shopping malls, etc. In referring to this space the concept refers to itself: the concept is always contradictory in that it posits itself in its own negation; the concept of ‘space’ is the very social space the concept signifies. The concept of space, as well as the space itself, has no reality beyond the reality of social human activity: space is the social space of human activity. This is the case with the concept of value; value is real and is objective to the extent that it is the product of social relations of production; value has no existence other than its concept, which signifies the capitalist social relations. The negative character of concept is determined by its being in essence the representation of social relations. Conceptualisation is the reconstruction and negation of social relations of which the concept is a mode of existence. A concept cannot be but in a contradictory mode as this negative movement. The objectivity of concept is the objectivity of human activity in social reality. Concept is a tool for criticising this mode of activity

²⁴ Ibid., p. 281.
and the consequent social reality. Criticising capitalist social reality is inevitably a political movement; it can only be actualised via political mediation. This is the point where the Ilyenkovian approach to concept as the method of revealing the formation and emergence of concepts can be used alongside and together with the critical instance of contemporary Western Marxism which emphasises the political essence of capitalist social relations.

**Practice: Materialism vs Pragmatism**

Practice, in materialist sense of the term, is not something in contrast to or alongside the theoretical. It is not the case that there is a ‘neutral’ or ‘pure’ doing (and perceiving) —in contrast to contemplating—which will be later engendered or in-formed by some conceptual framework. The practice is the unity of the theoretical and practical in the sense that the latters are two different modes of existence of human activity. Pragmatism, in contrast to materialism, assumes the duality between the theoretical and the practical. This assumption is itself a reflection of the age-old assumption of the duality and the separation of the subject and object. For instance, according to Quine,26 the ‘belief’ in external world is a matter of theory of the external world, which is stimulated by the impacts of sensory surface. Accordingly, we do not confront the world but we confront the surface of our own sense stimulation: this in turn implies that sensation happens in us (whoever this ‘us’ refers to). The name of this interiority is ‘theory’. It is thus implied that the theory of the external world, that is, the knowledge that we have about the external world, is a propositional-mental (pure thought) phenomenon and thus subject only to formal-logical analysis.27

For pragmatism, the measure of the veracity of the theoretical is pragmatic ‘utility’, which is external to hypotheses. In philosophy of science, for instance, in debates concerning theory choice and theory change the pragmatic view assumes that there are pragmatic virtues that are ‘external’ to scientific theories: ‘conservatism’, ‘modesty’, ‘simplicity’, ‘generality’ and ‘refutability’ are measures external to scientific theories that work as the court of appeal of the truth of theory.28 Objectivity of science, according to Quine, is a function of the ‘intersubjective’ nature of observation sentences.29 Thus, we can conclude that a set of ‘observation sentences’ that cohere within a linguistic community is sufficient for attributing objectivity to those sentences and call the coherent system of these observation sentences ‘knowledge’; after all, they yield a ‘theory of external world’. In Quine’s view scientific objectivity is matter of linguistic agreement among the so-called scientists, that is, those who play this particular language game, the members of this or that particular linguistic community. People participate in language games in order to utilise others for one’s own benefit.

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27 Ibid., pp. 1–2.
28 Ibid., pp. 66–79.
29 Ibid., p. 5.
Quine’s treatment of ‘indeterminacy of translation’ is another indication of pragmatism’s dual epistemology, which separates the ‘mental’ or ‘subjective’ from ‘real’ or the ‘objective. In line with this dualist dogma language is presented as a set of coherent sentences detached from human activity in the world. This is the case with the treatment of thought and logic. In the case of ‘radical translation’, for instance, Quine states, ‘The linguist assumes that the native’s attitudes and ways of thinking are like his own, up to the point when there is contrary evidence. He accordingly imposes his own ontology and linguistic patterns on the native whenever compatible with the native’s speech and other behavior, unless a contrary course offers striking simplifications’. The problem with this seemingly ‘correct’ interpretation is that it separates language from human activity; the ‘contrary courses’ enter the scene only as ‘external’ factors; just as in his pragmatic view of scientific language and enterprise, Quine assumes that changes in theory and the factors that determine the course of the enterprise are merely ‘external’ (the five pragmatic virtues). Quine treats logic as a matter of relationship between sentences just as he assumes thinking to be a mental-sentential process. Thus, logic is something that cannot be acquired externally and actively but can be conjectured only behaviourally, where such behaviour is in a contingent relation to the logic and functions only as an external control element. In other word, logic, in this view, is not the expression of thinking as an outward activity and therefore its relation to ‘behaviour’ is a contingent one. It is a set of relations in the heads of the members of a linguistic community.

The materialist stance towards practice and theory openly contradicts such a pragmatic stance. For materialism when, say, a lumberjack looks into a forest, he immediately perceives it as the source of lumber; he does not first see some trees in a neutral way in order to add the utilised view (concept, theory) of cutting them down for his benefit. This is the case with observing the stars: the first human being who looked up into the skies did not do this owing to some ‘natural’ curiosity; she did not observe the periodical movements of the stars and then put them to use in order to form a calendar. From the outset, such an ‘observation’ was part of the whole of human practice (activity) that turns the world into new organs of human activity. The materialist approach can be formulated in one statement: ‘I do not hit you because I see you; I see you because I want to hit you’.

**Contradiction and the Subject**

Ilyenkov introduces ‘the abstract as an expression of the concrete’. He proposes that a true concept is the one that is the theoretical expression/reconstruction of ‘the cell’ or ‘the unit’ of the phenomenon at hand. The question is how do we identify this so-
called ‘true cell’? How in contrast to, say, social constructionism or relativism, does a historical materialist not end up defending ‘everything goes’? Basically, it can be said that the only criterion at hand is practice, for example, a scientific practice that we are engaged with. In other words, there are no ready-made criteria but practice itself; it is the very work that we do that may eventually bring us the coining of the proper theoretical tool that we need.

In this respect, Ilyenkov contrasts true concepts with mere empirical generalisations. He criticises empiricism for reducing the concept to generalisation of similarities between different objects. In contrast, dialectical concepts reveal the internal bonds between phenomena and depict them as parts of a whole, a totality. The element of normativity comes into the scene at this stage: knowledge via a concept is not contemplation (acquisition of data); rather, it is a form of practice and as practice it really determines the truth. Owing to this practicality (in a Marxian sense and not in a pragmatic sense), normativity becomes an inseparable aspect of concept being a true one: it is not an instrument of interpretation but a tool for acting and changing the world. Concepts are not the consequences of passive confrontation with the world; they are not the consequences of contemplation; this is but an empiricist dogma that bases its epistemology on the ‘observation-learning’ fantastic dictum. From a historical materialist point of view, concepts are products of praxis; this amounts to an epistemology, which, in contrast to empiricism, is based on ‘acting-changing’ as a principle. Knowledge is the reconstruction and the reproduction of this acting-changing with the use of concepts as the tools of production of meaning. Meaning, in this view, is to change a mere object into a tool of action.

This change is real; it is not only a matter of looking into the world with the use of different conceptual lenses. This would be but a reflection and reproduction of the aforementioned empiricist ‘observation-learning’ dogma. The core of the matter is to see that concepts are tools of action that are continuously produced, corrected, sharpened and sometimes even rejected within activity. Applying this to the concept of proletariat, Ilyenkov states, ‘the truth of the concept of proletariat… could not be proved by comparing it with the feature empirically common to all proletarians… The truth of this concept was shown, as is well known, by the real transformation of the proletariat from a “class in itself” into a “class for itself”. The proletariat developed, in the full sense of the term, towards a correspondence with “its own concept”’.31 This development is not unique to the proletariat; in fact all phenomena in the capitalist society assume such conceptuality. In the chapter entitled ‘Cooperation’ in Capital Vol. I, Marx states that the real constitution of capitalist relations of production that requires the employment of a large number of workers by the same individual capitalist is not a historical truth only, but also (and more importantly) a conceptual truth.32 Marx’s analysis of capitalist relations of production is not

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historical-descriptive, but conceptual-critical. It aims at explaining the logic of capital and how, once constituted, it metamorphoses all phenomena preceding it historically into moments of itself. Money, for instance, comes into its full reality once it changes into a moment of capital. Therefore Marx states that money is the first form of appearance of capital.

Conceptuality of capital as a social relation is also manifest in the metamorphosis of the labour process, work, and forms of subsumption of labour (and other fields) to capital under capitalist relations of production. For instance, capitalist over-work appropriates former ancient forms of over-work and domination so that the former forms of domination are drawn into the orbit of capital. One example is the slavery system in the southern states of the United States. To the extent the slave labour was limited to the production of immediate local needs it was conducted under a patriarchal rule, but once it aimed at producing for satisfying the needs of the world market, say cotton for the capitalist textile industry, 'the over-working of the Negro, and sometimes the consumption of his life in seven years of labour, became a factor in a calculated and calculating system. It was no longer a question of obtaining from him a certain quantity of useful products, but rather of the production of surplus-value itself.'

This conceptuality also reveals itself in capital's initial indifference towards the technical aspects of production: 'But capital, as we said earlier, is at first indifferent towards the technical character of the labour process it seizes control of. At the outset, it takes it as it finds it.' Conceptuality of capital constitutes its aim of self-valorisation. Thus, the concrete aspect and the general abstract aspect of labour is for it a matter of indifference. Capital, as a social relation, turns labour into abstract labour, that is, value-producing labour. It then takes over the concrete aspect of labour and turns it into a moment of itself, of abstract labour.

Capital is not a thing, but rather a definite social production relation, belonging to a definite historical formation of society, which is manifested in a thing and lends this thing a specific social character. Capital is not the sum of the material and produced means of production. Capital is rather the means of production transformed into capital, which in themselves are no more capital than gold or silver in itself is money. It is the means of production monopolised by a certain section of society, confronting living labour-power as products and working conditions rendered independent of this very labour-power, which are personified through this antithesis in capital. It is not merely the products of labourers turned into independent powers, products as rulers and buyers of their producers, but rather also the social forces of their labour and socialised form of this labour, which confront the labourers as properties of their products. Here, then, we have a definite and, at first glance, very mystical, social form, of one of the factors in a historically produced social production process.
The transformation of the means of production into capital is the inevitable consequence of capital being a social relation of production. This implies, first, that capital, as a social relation, requires continuous production and reproduction as a social relation; second, it is a definite social relation between classes, where one class appropriates the means of production and the other one is ‘free’ of them; furthermore, it implies that capitalist social relations of production yield a fetishising process—material products, the powers of labour, etc. do assume an actual fetish-like existence.

The subject of the capitalist relations of production is capital itself: we might talk of forms of subjectivity, but these forms are instantiations of subject-ness of capital; they should not be mistaken as forms of being-subject. Attributing subject-ness to forms of subjectivity is to assume mirage-forms to be real forms of being and to naturalising and thus fetishising these forms. Subject-ness of capital is the consequence of the constitution of the specifically capitalist relations of production based on bourgeois private property (separation of immediate producers from the means of production) that amounts to the separation of the head and the hand. ‘Through the co-operation of numerous wage-labourers, the command of capital develops into a requirement for carrying on the labour process itself, into a real condition of production. That a capitalist should command in the field of production is now as indispensable as that a general should command on the field of battle’.37 The emergence of capital as the subject is determined by capitalist production as the process of valorisation. In capitalist production, the reason for production of use-value is not use value itself but is the production of use-value as the material substratum of exchange-value. Capitalist’s ‘aim is not to produce only a use-value but a commodity; not only use-value but value; and not just value but surplus-value’.38 The whole process of value production looks like a process of self-valorisation because dead labour in the form of capital, which purchases labour power, is in fact a constant but thanks to its replacement by living labour it becomes a variable and increases in the process of production. Meanwhile, it becomes another manifestation of the contradictory essence of capitalist production.

The portion of the capital invested in the purchase of labour power is a definite quantity of objectified labour, a constant value like the value of the labour power purchased. However, in the process of production the place of the £90 is taken by labour power which sets itself in motion, dead labour is replaced by living labour, something stagnant by something flowing, a constant by a variable. The result is the reproduction of \( v \) plus an increment of \( v \). From the point of view of capitalist production, therefore, the whole process appears as the independent motion of what was originally constant value, but has now been transformed into labour power. Both the process and its result are ascribed to this independent motion of value. If, therefore, such expressions as ‘£90 variable capital’ or ‘such and such a quantity of self-valorizing value’ appear to contain

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38 Ibid., p. 293.
contradictions, this is only because they express a contradiction immanent in capitalist production.  

Value becomes a subject through abstract labour. It is then possible to say that value, on the one hand, is determined by its substance, while, on the other hand, there is a subjective element into it. The substance and the subject, in this case, are contradictory but they come together to form the so-called value. As Marx states,

The secret wherefore these products of the splitting of commodity-value constantly appear as prerequisites for the formation of value itself is simply this, that the capitalist mode of production, like any other, does not merely constantly reproduce the material product, but also the social and economic relations, the characteristic economic forms of its creation. Its result, therefore, appears just as constantly presupposed by it, as its presuppositions appear as its results. And it is this continual reproduction of the same relations which the individual capitalist anticipates as self-evident, as an indubitable fact.

Proletariat: Class in Itself, Class for Itself

The movement of the class towards its concept is not a matter of gaining consciousness, that is, it does not signify ‘class consciousness’ in contrast to the ‘physical’ existence of the class (without proper consciousness). Rather, it explains the constitution and continuous process of reproduction and reconstitution of class as a social relation and as the personification of capital. ‘As the conscious bearer [Trager] of this movement [of limitless valorisation], the possessor of money becomes a capitalist… it is only in so far as the appropriation of ever more wealth in the abstract is the sole driving force behind his operations that he functions as a capitalist, i.e. as capital personified and endowed with consciousness and a will’. Like any other concept in Marx’s analysis, the concept of class does not aim at removing the contradictions but to reveal and reconstruct the contradictory constitution of class at a higher level. Bonefeld argues along similar lines:

The ‘definition’ of the working class would require at least one additional definition, namely that of the capitalist representing the other side of the class divide. Marx’s critique of political economy argued that the capitalist ‘is capital personified and endowed … with consciousness and a will’. The characterization of the capitalist and worker as ‘personifications of economic categories’, ‘bearers of particular class interests’, suggests that class is not a subjective category that derives from class consciousness. Rather, it suggests that class is an objective category of the false society.

Similarly, with the constitution of specifically capitalist relations of production, labour assumes a socially average character owing to the large number of workers
employed in one field. In addition to the advantages that socialisation of production process provides for the individual capitalist, workers ‘as co-operators, as members of a working organism, merely form a particular mode of existence of capital. Hence the productive power developed by the worker socially is the productive power of capital’. Marx has this conceptual constitution of capital in mind when states that ‘[h]uman anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape’. As Bonefeld puts it, ‘[t]he past does not contain the future as its unfolding destiny. Rather, the present contains the past, and it is the present that reveals the significance of the past as the historical foundation of the existing social relations’. The present is the coming to its fullness of the concept of what once had been but then would be diversified. Interestingly, the unity in difference, which forms the genetic root of the present, can only be conceived conceptually at the present; the concept is the negation of the past in present or the negative reconstruction of the genetic root in present. In this sense, the concept is also the negation of the present. Thus, with reference to the method of analysis of capitalist relations of production, Marx states,

In the succession of the economic categories, as in any other historical, social science, it must not be forgotten that their subject—here, modern bourgeois society—is always what is given, in the head as well as in reality, and that these categories therefore express the forms of being, the characteristics of existence, and often only individual sides of this specific society, this subject, and that therefore this society by no means begins only at the point where one can speak of it as such; this holds for science as well. This is to be kept in mind because it will shortly be decisive for the order and sequence of the categories.

The substance of value, for Marx, is not labour in general, but a historically specific form of labour, that is, abstract labour. On the other hand, according to Ricardo, the substance of the value is the labour realised in a product. What is the determination that differentiates between abstract labour and labour? (Concrete) labour is human activity actualised in the production of any goods. Abstract labour appears in the process of exchange through money as these concrete, particular labours are abstracted from their corresponding human activities. It is the historical emergence of ‘general human labour’, of abstract labour that produces value that yields the concept of ‘labour as such’. The problem is that, when this general human labour is not conceived in its historical concreteness and is made into a transhistorical generality, the very historical specificity or determinate abstractness of this concreteness is ignored. Thus, this very historically specific concrete determinateness appears but as transhistorical naturality, ‘labour in general’ thus conceived of as a transhistorical category that forms the essence of wealth. Such an abstract generalisation, in turn, is the result of a specific form of society—bourgeois society.

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Indifference towards specific labours corresponds to a form of society in which individuals can with ease transfer from one labour to another, and where the specific kind is a matter of chance for them, hence of indifference. Not only the category, labour, but labour in reality has here become the means of creating wealth in general, and has ceased to be organically linked with particular individuals in any specific form. Such a state of affairs is at its most developed in the most modern form of existence of bourgeois society—in the United States. Here, then, for the first time, the point of departure of modern economics, namely the abstraction of the category ‘labour’, ‘labour as such’, labour pure and simple, becomes true in practice.\textsuperscript{48}

This does not mean that bourgeois relations can be naturalised and generalised to cover all history; this would be the mistake of the ideologists. Rather, the formation of the concept of the higher forms enables us to grasp the common genetic root of all these formations as well as the routes of their development.

Class, therefore, is continually constituted alongside the continuous reproduction of capitalist social relations of production. It is the assumed and actual independent existence of value forms that engender such constitution and vice versa. The assumed independent existence of these value forms signifies their ideality, but such ideality does not make them any less real or actual. Reality is actuality; so is the reality of value forms and of the class.

The aforementioned contradiction corresponds to the contradiction between use-value and exchange-value. Value, to the extent that it is the expression of capitalist exchange, is a subject. Moreover, labour forms the basis of use-value; abstract labour is the base of exchange-value. These exclusive contradictories inevitably are united in commodity. Ricardo cannot explain how a product of labour is defined in terms of value because he understands production as concrete human activity, independent of history and relations of production. He includes the finished product in exchange only mechanically. On the contrary, Marx explains how a particular product becomes the expression of use value and a commodity that expresses the exchange value in the process of production. This is to say that there is no production in general, independent of relations of production and socio-historical conditions for Marx. Therefore, contradiction is inherent to the produced entity; it is not attributed to it from without. This contradictory being is also manifest in the contradictory process of constitution of capital, which is rooted and not rooted in the sphere of circulation. ‘Capital cannot therefore arise from circulation, and it is equally impossible for it to arise apart from circulation. It must have its origin both in circulation and not in circulation’.\textsuperscript{49} The precondition of the formation of capital is the existence of labour as a commodity. Commodification of labour requires the existence of doubly free labour: the labour power owner should be a free owner of his commodity (labour power). The labour power owner should sell his commodity for a period of time only and not in a lump, since in that case he will not be free but a slave as he has sold himself; in that case

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., pp. 104–105.

he turns himself from a commodity seller into a commodity. Commodity exchange should be an exchange of equal values. Furthermore, the labour power owner should be free from the means of production so that such a sale and purchase of labour power becomes possible. Capital and labour as commodity require each other and produce each other: ‘Capital presupposes wage-labour, and wage-labour presupposes capital. They reciprocally condition each other’s existence; they reciprocally bring forth each other’.  

Formal logic, in this sense, according to Ilyenkov, aims at dissipating the contradiction with reference to the relations between propositions; whereas, dialectics reveals the objectivity and reality of the very contradiction.

Historical and conceptual analyses are parallels. Concept, according to this thesis, is a historical phenomenon/product. Dialectics identifies the historical laws of development of thought; that is, development of concept. This is to say that logic becomes possible only through an analysis of the process of thinking and through analysis of concept, which is the clearest expression of this development. This conceptual development is the product of human practice and material human activity. As Bonefeld states, 'Concepts are moments of the reality that requires their formation'. Applying this view to political economy, Bonefeld continues, 'The critique of political economy is thus subversive of the reified economic categories. Rather than identifying them on the basis of their immediate appearance, it traces them back to the actual relations of life. It thus negates the deceitful publicity of the economic categories as naturally appearing things'. Thus, the concept becomes contradictory and assumes the form of criticism, the negation of the existent forms of social relations. The natural appearance of economic categories is an illusion, yet a necessary and objective one. It has a mirage-like existence; it is an ideal that is formed at the point of contact of human and the environment, that is, it is formed through and within human activity of a peculiar historical form. It is the form of capitalist human activity. The task of conceptual analysis is to dissolve the objective appearance of the things to their essence as social relations, as relation between humans. Ilyenkov states,

Logical categories are stages (steps) in cognition developing the object in its necessity, in the natural sequence of the phases of its own formation, and not at all man’s technical devices imposed on the subject like a child’s bucket on sand-pies. Not only do determinations of each of the logical categories therefore have an objective character, i.e., determine the object and not simply the form of subjective activity, but the sequence in which the categories appear in the theory of thought also has the same necessary character.

Consequently, necessity and intention (telos), as logical categories, cannot be analysed ‘objective-scientifically’ in the sense that positivism and scientism conceive them. On

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50 Ibid., p. 724, n. 2.
52 Ibid., p. 38.
53 Ilyenkov, The Ideal in Human Activity, op. cit., p. 183.
the contrary, we cannot conceive of these independent from scientific categories such as identity, quantity, and quality; just as we cannot conceive of capital and profit scientifically unless we analyse and conceive of their constituting units—commodity and money. It is in this sense that a unit that is conceptualised by dialectical logic, that is, the concept and the history of its genesis, fits within the history of human productive activity. This is to say that thinking is not the activity of the brain and that it is not realised in the brain; thinking is to apply concepts, which, first and foremost, is a bodily activity/behaviour/praxis.

A concept is always 'in process'; it is truly historical. Transformation of proletariat from an 'in itself' to a 'for itself' class signifies that proletariat is possible as a class only in a revolution. 'Class' is the conceptual prerequisite of the existence of members of the class, where the concept, in essence, refers to the social relations and modes of activity of people; thus, the concept of class is not attainable through an inductive generalisation of the common features of the members of the class; rather, it is a conceptual entity that represents the common genetic root of those who form the class. That genetic common root is the capitalist social relations of production which appears in the form of self-valorising value—capital. As Holloway states, 'Capitalism is the ever renewed generation of class, the ever renewed classification of people'.54 Both the capitalist and the worker are but personifications of capital as a social relation. Class 'is the logical and historical presupposition for the existence of individual capitalists and workers, and the basis on which the labour of one section of society is appropriated without equivalent by another'. It therefore denotes a social relationship that is independent from individuals while prevailing only in and through them.55 Class is a social relation just as society and the social itself. Class struggle is the foundation of class. The precedence of concept to class pertains to class being a social relation. It is not the case that classes first come to be and then get into struggle; they are formed within, though and together with the very class struggle. It is in this sense that in Manifesto Marx defines history as the history of class struggle. As Gunn puts it succinctly, 'Class struggle is class itself'.56 To put it more clearly, class is conceived alongside class struggle; none precedes the other. However, class struggle should be understood in political terms; class struggle is mediated by politics or political movement. Politics is the form of existence of class relations, exertion of power, domination, resistance, and struggle in capitalist society. In this sense, 'class' does not signify a physical location or a structure, but a political tendency within class and society in general. Class is a conceptual constitution: it is the conceptualisation of political horizon that participates in class struggle. With reference to this conceptuality, all forms of struggle in capitalist society are forms of existence of class struggle.

conceptuality or ‘ideality’ of class does not make it any less real; this conceptuality signifies the fluidity of the class and emphasises the central role of human activity, and in particular human political practice, in the constitution of class.

Capital inherits pre-capitalist forms of inequality and discrimination and reconstitutes them under capitalist relations of production as capitalist forms of discrimination: the question is how, for instance, gender relations are mediated. Gender relations cannot be conceived independently of politics and political domination. The addressee of gender equality demands is the society but through the mediation of political machinery, say, the state. The modern state is a capitalist state and not some neutral third term where social contradictions are resolved (as Hegel would formulate it). Therefore, changing or conserving certain gender roles is determined politically in the face of capitalist state. In each society, these roles will assume a different form as the capitalist state will deploy different political measures in different countries. That gender relations can acquire such a wide range in capitalist society (from treating women as second-class citizens under the Islamic regime in Iran to legalising gay marriages in the USA and Canada) shows that gender roles and discrimination are determined and mediated politically. Therefore, no changes are actualisable unless the capitalist state is challenged. In this sense, every social movement for acquiring rights is ‘anti-capitalist’ in ‘essence’. However, the blindness towards such an essence, which is determined by the political siding of the agents and actors of these movements, determines the class character of a particular social movement, an uprising, etc. Gender equality is not actualisable and cannot be properly maintained unless it is politically guaranteed. In this sense, a particular man’s violence against a particular woman, say, in the case of domestic violence, is a mediated form of domination.

Gender relations under capitalism are capitalist gender relations; they are constituted and continuously reproduced under capitalist relations of production. As it was mentioned above, although capital did not invent such forms of inequality and domination, it does not fall short in appropriating them and turning them into sheer monstrosities as is with the case of slave labour. Even familial relations, say, the parent–child relation, are mediated under the capitalist relations of production. Family, as a domain that is supposedly not really subsumed to capital, is necessitated by capital’s need for ‘free labour’; valorisation is not actualisable unless a free labourer exchanges her labour power with capital; family—or any ‘non-subsumed’ domain—is where the free labourer is reproduced. The apparently non-subsumed domains therefore appear to the non-critical eye not as personifications of capital as a social relation, but as domains that are free of capital’s rule and have a life of their own; they thus appear as objective and trans-historical. The relations of domination that are facilitated by these domains also look as if they are independent of capital’s mediation and have an immediate form. The non-critical approaches, rather than criticising these domains and reconstructing the peculiar logic of their formation and

subsumption to capital, fetishise them by attributing a trans-historical and independent existence to them; they take the mirage for the real. In doing so, they interestingly reproduce the sociological approach to class, which takes it to be a mere social strata based on income and job-type or a structure. The political outcome of such approaches will be reformism, the limits of which are determined by capital.

The possibility of proletariat as a class paradoxically depends on its annihilation. ‘For labour, then, its freedom, the free development of its productive power, entails the transformation of means of production into means of emancipation.’ 58 This formulation signifies the passage from the class-in-itself to class-for-itself in Ilyenkovian terms: no such transition is possible unless the capitalist relations of production are abolished. The moment of the class-for-itself, thus, coincides with its moment of abolition. As Rook states, ‘Marx’s work must be understood as a theory of revolution rooted in the class struggle between labour and capital. Communism for Marx was not an ideal or a utopia, but a practical movement whose aim is the regaining of control by the direct producers of their labour and its product—a society based on free labour.’ 59 The concept should contain the possibility of annihilating itself; this annihilation is not a simple ‘falsification’ in the philosophy-of-science sense of the term, nor is it a formal logical negation. The objectivity and truth—the ‘this-sidedness’—of the concept of proletariat lies in this transformation that depends on and necessitates the abolishment of the conditions of the objective existence of proletariat as a class. The so-called ‘class consciousness’ is not something to be brought from ‘without’, but it is the manifestation of this transformation: it is not importing an external, alien element that is lacking in class but is to make the class for-itself, to bring it into its concept.

A formal abstraction which could be made in the mid-19th century by comparing all individual representatives of the proletariat, by the kind of abstracting recommended by non-dialectical logic, would have characterised the proletariat as the most oppressed passively suffering poverty-ridden class capable, at best, only of a desperate hungry rebellion.

This concept of the proletariat was current in the innumerable studies of that time … This abstraction was a precise reflection of the empirically general. But it was only Marx and Engels who obtained a theoretical expression of these empirical facts, a conception of what the proletariat was a ‘class in itself’ (an sich), in its internal nature expressed in the concept, what it was not yet ‘for itself’ (für sich), that is, in empirical reality directly reflected in a notion or simple empirical abstraction. 60

Conclusion

The proletariat’s revolution is a historical necessity, which stems from ‘what proletariat is’; the ‘consciousness’ of the proletariat, that is, proletariat becoming a class-for-itself (in contrast to being a class-in-itself), abstractly-logically speaking, is a moment where the realisation of class and its abolition coincides. Criticising Bauer brothers in The Holy Family Marx states,

When socialist writers ascribe this world-historic role to the proletariat, it is not at all, as Critical Criticism pretends to believe, because they regard the proletarians as gods. Rather the contrary. Since in the fully-formed proletariat the abstraction of all humanity, even of the semblance of humanity, is practically complete; since the conditions of life of the proletariat sum up all the conditions of life of society today in their most inhuman form; since man has lost himself in the proletariat, yet at the same time has not only gained theoretical consciousness of that loss, but through urgent, no longer removable, no longer disguisable, absolutely imperative need — the practical expression of necessity —is driven directly to revolt against this inhumanity, it follows that the proletariat can and must emancipate itself. But it cannot emancipate itself without abolishing the conditions of its own life. It cannot abolish the conditions of its own life without abolishing all the inhuman conditions of life of society today which are summed up in its own situation. Not in vain does it go through the stern but steeling school of labour. It is not a question of what this or that proletarian, or even the whole proletariat, at the moment regards as its aim. It is a question of what the proletariat is, and what, in accordance with this being, it will historically be compelled to do. Its aim and historical action is visibly and irrevocably foreshadowed in its own life situation as well as in the whole organization of bourgeois society today. There is no need to explain here that a large part of the English and French proletariat is already conscious of its historic task and is constantly working to develop that consciousness into complete clarity.61

It is in this sense that a scientific concept—a ‘true concept’ as Vygotsky puts—always includes a normative aspect. In other words, normativity is the indispensable aspect of the truth of a concept. This is closely related to what Marx defines as the ‘this-sidedness’ of thought and to his idea of ‘changing the world’. The measure of truth of concept is its ability and success in changing the reality. In epistemological terms, one can speak of the truth of the concept to the extent that it changes the existing rationality, to the extent that it shows the perversion of the present situation, and to the extent that it can propose a new rationality instead of the former. Normativity is a necessary aspect of human activity. Since concept is the tool or the organ of human cognitive activity, it determines the truth of the real, because it determines the practical production and the practical alteration of reality (just as means of production determine the relations of production and in turn being determined by these relations).

Back to the concept of proletariat; what does it mean to speak of proletariat as becoming a class for-itself? It means the proletariat’s becoming a revolutionary

class; that is, the proletariat is inseparable from its struggle. On the one hand, the proletariat is constituted and determined by the necessity of historical conditions and social relations. On the other hand, despite being developed within the relations of production, that is, despite being a mode of existence of the relations of production, it is also the movement and the possibility of the change of these relations. This, according to Ilyenkov, is the dialectics of reality: a result changing into a cause or a mode changing into an essence; as an in-itself class, the proletariat is the mere result of the relations of production and is a mode of existence of capital as a social relation; it is an element of capital. As a for-itself class, it becomes the subject of history; the power that revolutionises the relations of production; it becomes the essence as the negation of capital—the substance-subject. This being the case, the proletariat ‘ceases to be a mass of oppressed and downtrodden labourers scattered throughout the country and divided by competition, it becomes a monolithic class realising its world-historical mission—revolutionary abolition of private ownership and of the class form of the division of labour in general’.  

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