At first glance, the idea of the activity approach in Soviet philosophy from the 1960s onwards seems to continue the tradition of the theory of praxis that Marxist philosophy proposed. However, a closer look reveals greater complexity. Curiously, the concepts of ‘praxis’ (praktika) and ‘activity’ (deyatelnost’) have mostly existed side by side, living their own lives in the discourses of Soviet philosophy. Even more astonishing, considering the central role the concept of praxis has played in discussions of Marxist philosophers, both in the Soviet Union and elsewhere, is the absence of a general survey of its place and fortunes in Soviet philosophy.

It is true that the history of Soviet philosophy remains insufficiently explored, but the reasons why this particular concept has not become the object of critical study probably lie deeper. Because the concept of praxis/practice\(^1\) was such a cornerstone of Marxism-Leninism, all attempts to upset it would have rocked the boat of Soviet ideology. Consequently, attempts to rethink innovatively the role of praxis led to a bizarre dichotomy. While the new ideas about the active role of human subjectivity that emerged in the ‘thaw’ period of the late 1950s and early 1960s were discussed in different versions of the activity approach, these ideas had a much smaller influence, if any at all, on the status of the concept of praxis itself, which remained ideologically overcharged. Only after the demise of the Soviet Union and the specific ‘form of life’ it had created did an analysis of this situation become possible; thus, the old Hegelian wisdom of the owl of Minerva is applicable even here.

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\(^1\) The Russian word ‘praktika’ seems to cover semantically both English concepts of ‘practice’ and ‘praxis’. The two terms are used synonymously in this chapter.
Messianistic Expectations About ‘Praxis’

In Marxist philosophy, the concept of praxis stems from two *loci classici*: from the ‘Theses on Feuerbach’, which Marx wrote in 1845, and from Engels’s interpretation in his booklet *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (1886). Despite the fact that Marx’s theses were first published in Engels’s booklet, which means that both works were intimately connected, already a quick glance reveals that the young Marx and the old Engels stressed quite different sides in the idea of praxis. In 1845, Marx clearly used it as a socio-philosophical concept and polemised against both Feuerbach’s ahistorical anthropologism and the subjectivism of the Young Hegelians; in 1886, Engels applied the concept of praxis to gnoseological problems, using it as a weapon against Kant’s alleged ‘agnosticism’. It was Engels, not Marx, who formulated the idea, which was later almost unanimously accepted among the theoreticians of the Second International, of praxis as a criterion of truth. In *Ludwig Feuerbach*, Engels claimed that in the process of practice things become ‘things-for-us’, thereby confuting the Kantian thesis of the unattainability of ‘things-in-themselves’. In order to reinforce his assertion, Engels presented an argument that later gained renown as the ‘alizarin example’. Engels wrote that the invention of synthetic alizarin, extracted from charcoal, replaced the madder-root that had previously been used to get red dye for the uniforms of English soldiers. Thus, Engels argued that modern chemistry showed that the chemical substances produced in the bodies of the plants were not any kind of ‘things-in-themselves’ but instead became ‘things-for-us’ as science and industry progressed. His general conclusion from the alizarin case reads, ‘If we are able to prove the correctness of our conception of a natural process by making it ourselves, bringing it into being out of its conditions and using it for our own purposes into the bargain, then there is an end of the Kantian incomprehensible “thing-in-itself”.’

It may well be that Engels presented his alizarin-argument with tongue in cheek (indeed, reflecting on Engels’s personal character, this is quite possible) but the Marxists of the Second International, followed by Plekhanov and Lenin, took it with an earnestness that was inherited by Soviet philosophy. Although it was quite *chic* to cite Marx’s ‘Theses on Feuerbach’, the Soviet philosophers nevertheless interpreted the idea of praxis primarily in the sense of old Engels: not as a socio-philosophical approach, but as a universal doctrine with both ontological and gnoseological applicability. So the polemical works of Plekhanov,

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2 Engels 1941 [1886], pp. 22–3.