The post-Stalinist period of Soviet thought (the 1950s and 1960s) saw serious scientific interest in the category of activity (deyatelnost’). At that time, Soviet society realised the need for transformation and to increase the effectiveness of socially significant kinds of activity, which included the economic, socio-political and scientific. Activity had to become the object of purposeful regulation and management. As is quite often the case, the interest in the problems of activity resulted in serious theoretical works (by E.V. Ilyenkov, G.S. Batishchev, G.P. Shchedrovitsky, E.G. Yudin and others) and a peculiar ‘cult of activity’ when the category was overemphasised and formed the basis of explanation of all phenomena of human life. This fact was recognised in the 1970s. In 1976, V.S. Shvyrev pointed out the widespread use of the word ‘activity’, as if it possessed some kind of magic, and which was not supported by corresponding conceptual analysis.¹

Nevertheless, the theoretical conclusions of those who aimed at profound analysis, along with those who only yielded to the ‘magic’ of activity, both relied on the ideas of Karl Marx. Strangely, however, it not only led to dogmatism but, in a number of cases, assisted in the creative development of Marxism. It is worth recalling one well-known situation. At a conference on the problems of creative work held in autumn 1974, Arseni Gulyga, an eminent Soviet philosopher, was talking with E.S. Ventsel about the situation in modern philosophy. In Gulyga’s opinion at that time, the serious philosophers included Hegelians (Ilyenkov and his followers), existentialists (Erikh Solov’ev, Piana Gaidenko), Kantians (among whom Gulyga ranked himself) and even Platonists (Aleksey Losev). When E.S. Ventsel responded incredulously, ‘And what about Marxists?’ Gulyga answered without hesitation, ‘They are all Marxists.’² It seems as though the general meaning of the process that took place in the USSR’s philosophy of the latter part of the twentieth century was grasped correctly in this dialogue.

The ideas of Marx have also influenced the formation of the activity-approach in Soviet philosophy. As is well known, Marx rethought the notion

¹ Shvyrev 1976, p. 68.
of ‘activity’, refuting the interpretation that was typical of German classical philosophy (Fichte, Schelling, Hegel) that activity was the immanent activity (aktivnost’) of consciousness. Instead, Marx began to consider activity as a proper human ability, determined by the objective world. Thus, Marx put into philosophical circulation the category of ‘objective activity’ (gegenständliche Tätigkeit; in Russian, predmetnaya deyatelnost’), which formed the foundation of many of the Soviet philosophers’ theoretical investigations. In its essence, activity in Marxism appears as objective, transforming and practical activity. Moreover, it is practical activity that underlies the explanation of theoretical, spiritual and contemplative human activity. Human nature itself is considered as object-active.

It is just in his work upon the objective world, therefore, that man really proves himself to be a species-being. This production is his active species-life ... The object of labour is, therefore, the objectification of the species-life of man: for man produces himself not only intellectually, in his consciousness, but actively and actually, and he can therefore contemplate himself in a world he himself has created.3

In the process of practical activity, a man not only changes the external world but also transforms himself. It is a unity of two processes: changing of conditions and self-modification. This idea of Marx has become one of the most significant for Soviet philosophy. As Lektorsky said, ‘The subject can transform himself only if he exposes himself outwardly, actively exteriorises himself; whatever the different forms of this exteriorisation are, beginning with a labour-activity and finishing with a moral act, an interaction with another person, creation of objects of spiritual culture.’4

E.G. Yudin

Marx’s idea that the processes of changing the world and self-modification, exteriorisation and spiritual action are incorporated in practical activity, has allowed the possibility of extended interpretation of the category of activity for the Soviet philosophers. As E.G. Yudin noted, Marx’s accentuation of the interconnection of theoretical and practical forms of activity appeared to be

3 Marx 1959 [1844], p. 76.
4 Lektorsky 1985, p. 32.