

## Kosik's Dialectics of Concrete Totality

Denko Skalovski

University "Ss. Cyril and Methodius"

Setting out from the categories of totality and histori(cism) in Kosik's *Dialectics of the Concrete*, we look at the relationship between theory and praxis: empty, abstract totality versus concrete, reified and alienated practice (Lukacs, Habermas, Honneth); a bad totality, in which the real polydimensional subject is replaced by the one-dimensional, mythologized, fetishized, and economically reduced "subject" of consummation (Marcuse, Baudrillard). The dialectics of concrete totality implies a marxistic critique of the ethical and juristic universalism, in the context of the "positive" side of globalization and political unilateralism, as a concrete, militant, hegemonistic, post-colonial, and neo-imperial practice (Apel, Habermas, Chomsky, Zinoviev); globalization as totalization, the "last man," the "end of history," and the "end" of dialectics in its neo-liberal, eschatological, empty ideological "realization" (Hegel, Marx, Fukuyama, Arendt); the totality of the (invariable) being as a pseudo-concrete and pseudo-dialectical ontological speculation (Heidegger): A "return" to a concrete history and a return of the "positive" dialectics as a critical awareness, mind, and method in the discourse "game" of human's cognitive, creative, and practical powers. The assumption of Kosik's humanism is a synchrony of nature and history in the "absolute" totality of human's concrete existence (Lukacs, Goldmann, Adorno, Sartre, Kosik).

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"In the war against the Serbian people, besides weapons being tested on living targets, and the capabilities of military headquarters, what is also being tested is the psyche of people. It is necessary to process the behavior, feelings, and thoughts of human beings to such an extent, so as to be ready and willing to accept the call of the British tabloid *The Sun*: 'Shoot them (the Serbian people, of course) like dogs!' The US war against the Serbian people is a public declaration of what everyday life and normalcy will look like in the XXI century... Madness, as Shakespeare says, ordering reason: You will be my servant... The war against Yugoslavia, with unheard brutality, has brought to light the essence of the world which inclines towards 'euro-american values'... From within those values, the world cannot be sustained."

Karel Kosik (on the occasion of the bombing of Serbia in 1999/2007)

Karel Kosik's philosophy is manifold, complex, transdiscursive, and interdisciplinary, and it cannot completely be presented in an overview so brief, such as this paper. Thus, we can only generally conclude: Providing philosophical objections to the content and problems of art, Kosik feels that philosophy and art are the highest forms of human reflection and two basic creative ways of becoming aware of creating and "practically" changing human reality. Thus, we shall focus only on some aspects of his work and particularly on the category of concrete totality.

Karel Kosik's philosophical work *Dialectics of the Concrete* appears at a time when not only is Marxist interest turned towards the philosophy of practice, but also the general philosophical interest, in the spirit of

Aristotle's Praxis, and as such, in the early 1970s of the XX century where there is a peculiar "rehabilitation of practical philosophy" (Riedel 1972). On a social and ideological-political level, it more or less overlaps with the well-known student demonstrations and movements of 1968 in the west, the famous *Prague Spring*, and the infamous intervention by the troops from the Warsaw Pact, in Czechoslovakia in 1968, as well as the student demonstrations and movements in Belgrade, Zagreb, Ljubljana, Skopje, and other university centers in former Yugoslavia. Those may be the most renowned pages in the history of contemporary socialism. Simply put, and generally speaking, it is a period of the second wave of "revisionism" within the "official" Marxist philosophy, ideology, and doctrine, based on the Stalinist distortion, radical vulgarization, decontextualization, and dogmatizing of some Marxist philosophical premises (Grebing 1977). At the same time, it is also a period of the "second wave" in the overall development of that which we simply call *Western Marxism*, started by Georg Lukacs (Anderson 1979).

Today, when we talk about the *Dilemmas of Contemporary History* (Kosik 2007), Kosik's dialectics of concrete totality is just as relevant, regardless of whether we are talking about the era of "bureaucratic socialism" or the era of "democratic transition" (Kosik 2007). We have condemned by acclamation totalitarian socialism as alienation and anti-humanism (Arendt 1990). Critical and dialectical analyses make us appraise transition (in post-socialistic countries) as an insufficiently clearly defined (post)modern "project," whose "realization" is taking too long and whose consequences are completely uncertain (Habermas 1981). After all, this is a consequence of the neo-conservative wave and the chronic shortage of productive "socialist" ideas, in conditions of a neo-liberal capitalist democracy and its already confirmed contradictions, new paradoxes, and absurdities (Bell 1976; Honneth 2010), as well as new forms of global hegemony and technocratic imperialism, supported by the technological/digital "revolutions" (Zinoviev 1999).

The skeptics of the post-socialist countries (it would be absurd to call them post-communist!) ironically qualify the process of transition as "watering a stake." The once explicit and Stalinist totalitarianism has been replaced with a sophisticated, "cultivated," and westernized totalitarian capitalism (Zinoviev 2002). Kosik calls this world of Machiavellian and Orwellian capitalism a world of cultural utopia and a powerlessness of culture; a world of satire, grotesqueness, and absurdity. Franz Kafka's *Joseph K* and Jaroslav Hasek's *The Good Soldier Sveik* are characters in this world, whose experiences cause "mixed" feelings in the reader: They evoke laughter, and at the same time, they give chills. They appear funny, yet painful at the same time. They evoke feelings that people wish to avoid. That which causes people to run away, to avoid, or that which people wish to remove themselves from is not sadness, death, man's final act, but rather absurdity (Kosik 1983; 2011).

Separated from the traditional centennial relatedness, which fetters, but also gives a feeling of enrootedness and safety, the modern man wanders bewildered as the embodiment of loneliness (emptiness), abandonment, and homelessness... the modern man travels, runs away from his own void in all corners of the world, but never being free from that void, because he carries it within him and everywhere along with him. (Kosik 2007, 255)

Kosik is a follower of the ontological interpretation of a work of art, which is fully in the spirit of the phenomenological-ontological orientation of aesthetics in the second half of the XX century (Djeparoski 2009). For this reason, even though he feels that the work of art is socially conditioned, he is far from any kind of a "socialization" or "ideologization" of art, which is too prevalent in some well-known Marxist proponents from that time, such as Adorno (Adorno 1968).

Kosik's dialectics of concrete reality is the true philosophical answer to the empty and hollow, shallow,

ideologized, absurd, quasi-philosophical analyses, pseudo-theories, so-called expertise, and the multitude of meaningless phrases which have appeared in the last several decades. Their mass, global expansion occurred after the “fall of socialism” and the final “historic victory” of the western, “liberal,” social concept of the civil society, based on a capitalist political economy and a parliamentary democracy, as well as their transmissions (above all, the mass media and digital technologies). Taking a step back from the triumphant, yet temporary offensive of capitalism, the once revolutionary Left, and the philosophical intellectual elite, gave up on “metaphysical” issues, such as class war (this time, global and international), means of production (this time, globalized), revolutionary activities (this time, without a social, class subject), as well as the nature of the bourgeois state (this time, corrupt) and social state (this time, destroyed) (Eagleton 2005; Beck 2003; Berger 1997). This philosophical indecisiveness, this insufficiency of dialectical and historical mind, ingrained with political opportunism and resulted in a colossal historical, global betrayal of the intellectuals, led by some self-proclaimed “philosophers,” “dialectians,” “historicists,” “Hegelians,” “Marxists,” “globalists,” “post-modernists,” and numerous other “ists” (Benda 1992; Fukuyama 1994).

If in philosophical theory, we use different philosophical terms and terminology that does not mean that we are not, in essence, discussing the same philosophical issues and problems that for centuries have “plagued” modern and post-modern philosophy. As an example, we can take the relation of the philosophical discourse used by Lukacs and Heidegger, which, at first glance, is substantially different, and yet upon reading Lucien Goldmann and his comparative analysis of both philosophies—we “realize” that the renowned “ontologist” of the XX century, Martin Heidegger, has skillfully taken a number of ontological opinions from the “ideologized” and Stalin-proscribed Georg Lukacs (Goldmann 1976).

It appears that Kosik is aware of the changes in these philosophical terms and the new philosophical facades, which, once we have stripped, reveal new discussions about old problems, using new vocabulary. Hence, Heidegger's example is an example of the allegedly concrete ontology. As opposed to Heidegger's philosophical verbalism, if we were to bare Lukacs' ideological floscule “the class consciousness of the proletariat” and take his posthumously published work *The Ontology of Social Being*, we get the premises of a fundamental ontology of the XX century, as well as its complicated relation to the particularity of social ontology, whose ontic differentia specifica needs to be yet delved into by the Marxist philosophy of the XXI century (Lukacs 1977; 1984). It is this philosophical research that Heidegger does not offer enough, yet Kosik does abundantly.

Kosik, with his *Dialectics of the Concrete*, successfully manages to complete this great philosophical “task;” this is the reason why he follows the best traditions of the Marxist and European philosophy and also holds a critical stance towards the philosophical and cultural heritage of Europe (Machiavelli, Hegel, Marx, Husserl, Lukacs, Heidegger, Sartre, Goldmann, Marcuse, Kafka, Hasek). Kosik's complex philosophy builds a dialectical discursive interference of ontological planes (levels) with historical-anthropological ones. Focusing his attention on the term praxis, Kosik “manages to overcome the abstract ontologism, epistemology, and anthropologism in Marxism itself” (Vranicki 1985).

#### Praxis and totality

“Man exists in the totality of the world, but man belongs to that totality with his ability to reproduce it spiritually.”

(Kosik 1967, 77-79)

After the crucial term praxis, Kosik's analysis of the category concrete totality is the second most important point in differentiating and making a distinction from the vulgar, banal materialist and pseudo-Marxist dialectics, and non-dialectical humanism in the corpus of the Marxist philosophers. Encouraged by the great Marx's thought, critically picking and using parts of the existentialist hermeneutic conceptions (Heidegger and Sartre) with his understanding of the social-historical reality as a complex structured concrete totality, Kosik surpasses the dogmatic Marxism and economic determinism. "Concrete totality—the fundamental category of the dialectical cognition of reality—according to Kosik, presupposes destruction of the pseudo-concrete, i.e., of the domain of fetishized practice, tutorship, and manipulation" (Leshaja 2007). Critically absorbing the knowledge acquired by modern science, structuralism, and the theories of the large systems, including "capitalism as the best possible system" (Kosik 1967), Kosik builds the notion of concrete totality upon the criticism of three modes of "false" totality:

- (1) as an empty totality, which lacks reflection, determination of individual moments and analysis; empty totality excludes reflection, i.e., the appropriation of reality as individual moments, and excludes the work of the analytical mind;
- (2) as an abstract totality, in which the formalized whole stands as opposed to its parts and ascribes a "higher reality" to hypostasized "tendencies"; such a totality has no genesis and development, shaping of the whole, structuralization, and destructuralization. The totality is a closed whole;
- (3) as a bad totality, in which the real subject has been replaced by a mythologized subject.

(Kosik 1967, 77-79)

As an example of a successful critique of this type of empty and insufficiently analytical concept of totality in the history of philosophy, Kosik mentions Hegel's renowned satirical and humorous critique of the romanticized concept of totality, led by Schelling, in whose philosophy of the identity all cows are black, and the romantics "manage," with one "total" stroke to cover everything—God, the absolute, life—all that with just one gunshot (Kosik 1967).

Attempting to rethink in the spirit of Kosik's dialectics of concrete totality and starting from the Marxist philosophy as a critical theory which is interested in liberation and is constituted with that very emancipatory interest (Habermas 1980; 1975), we can position empty totality against the capitalist social reality which has been flooded with fetishized, alienated, and reified practice (Lukacs 1977; Honneth 2005).

I feel that anyone who would attempt to analyze certain global phenomena of modern society, with the help of Kosik's notion of a bad totality, phenomena such as globalization, would succeed in writing the most philosophically relevant analysis and critique of this global phenomenon of the XIX and XX century, which was already anticipated and described in *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* by Marx and Engels (Berger 1997; Beck 2003; Beck/Sznajder/Winter 2003; Skalovski 2010).

Globalization represents a bad totality, in which the real, concrete, and polydimensional subject (for example, an individual, stratum, and a class) is replaced by a one-dimensional, mythologized, fetishized, reified, and economically-reduced "subject" of consumption (Marcuse 1989; Baudrillard 1970). Homo oeconomicus is a limited man, interested only in profit and increasing his gain, and as such, he is a symbol of the whole system; "homo oeconomicus is man as part of the system, a main element of the system... and capitalism is the best possible system" (Kosik 1967; Grlic 1973; Žižek 2008). As Kosik says, capitalism is a system that destroys the world. It is the modern Leviathan:

a monster, which subjects people into its drive, reshapes, and adapts to the needs of its own growth, i.e., devastating boom. It is not even the mechanism of the state, nor the totalitarian trinity of the party, state, and leader, but that expanding cave is the "absolute authority" of our age, being a power which is capable to shape and model people. (Kosik 1967, 77-78)

Simply put, Kosik is far from being an "enemy" of liberal, democratic, and "open society" (Popper 1971), but he is a furious enemy of any kind of (capitalistic) system of repression, absolutism, and exploitation: A liberal and democratic society must not be reduced to the capitalistic system—the system is always closed; the world is always open.

Furthermore, the dialectics of concrete totality also implies a critique of the ethical and juristic universalism and holism as abstract totalities: Moral is a problem, not a definite solution. Thus, as Kosik says, "the problem of morality becomes a problem of the relation between reified practice and humanized praxis, between fetishized practice and revolutionary praxis" (Kosik 1983), and the praxis of globalization is neither revolutionary nor humane, it is simply American. "Globalization as a global process" is an ideological substitution for the ideology of the former "socialism as a global process," while the "concern for human rights" represents a moral hypocrisy which attempts to legitimize globalization as a humanistic project, at a time when the consequences of globalization have proved catastrophic for all undeveloped and poor countries. Global poverty has increased dramatically; the state of the environment is horrific; and the only one to profit from this state of affairs is the global capitalist elite (Lash 1996), which knows no national borders and shows no respect for various traditional, moral, or any other humane and spiritual values and principles, and is ready and willing to sacrifice all of humanity (Zizek 2008). Hence, Marxist axiology has been tasked with a number of philosophical issues, both now and in the future, in terms of a racial, confessional, ethical, cultural, aesthetic, gender, etc. nature.

Influenced by the western media machine and propaganda, which create a false (or one-sided) information and impression of events around the world (such as the war in the former Yugoslavia, and especially in Kosovo and Macedonia), Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas continue to naively believe in some kind of a "bright" side to globalization, as well as in the existence of a universal, planetary macro-ethics, post-national constellation, supranational economy, and labour market. They don't see (or don't want to see?!) the domination of economic liberalism as a negative/tragic consequence of globalization, which practically hinders any kind of development of ethics of a wider social responsibility (Jonas 1979). In this way, they are able to rationalize the standstill in progress as being a result of cosmopolitan moral "management," and as such, they become unintentional ethical apologists of ideological and political unilateralism as a concrete, militant, hegemonistic, post-colonial, transnational, technocratic, and neo-imperial practice (Apel 1991; 2000; Habermas 2001; Chomsky 2004; Bauman 2006; Zinoviev 1999).

Zygmunt Bauman is right when, from a postmodern perspective, among other things, he points out two important characteristics of the modern moral state of affairs:

(1) Morality cannot be made universal, which means that it is always a local (and temporary) tradition; all the different types of moral behavior practiced up to now are connected with a certain place and time, and as such are brought about by the whims of the local or tribal histories and cultural property;

(2) From the perspective of a "rational order" (social and political), morality is, and will remain, irrational, due to the fact that every social totality, which has a tendency towards uniformity and discipline, considers moral individuality and autonomy to be scandalous. The controlled mass majority sees moral individuality as a virus, as chaos and anarchy, and as such, as something that must be brought to reason and put in order, so that the implementation of the proclaimed "perfect"

co-existence among people is made possible.

(Bauman 2005, 22-31)

Nevertheless, some ethical imperatives are universally acceptable due to the very abstractness of their nature. However, if we like to accept the contemporary moral grammar of the global social conflicts and escape from a new ethical dogmatism, we have to recognize (Honneth 2008) that everything else is “dialectics of the concrete,” in each individual and separate race, nation, religious confession, gender, class, mentality, cultural tradition, and cultural heritage. Thus, culture is the main sphere in which man can attempt to find the way towards modern human existence. Culture is the main tool with which the level of society as a whole is measured (Kosik 1967; Vranicki 1987).

Finally, the one thing that we might mention as a possible downside where Kosik is concerned is the insufficiently defined relation towards nature (at least during the time when *Dialectics of the Concrete* was written) (Markovic 1967). Of course, we would be much too harsh towards Kosik, were we to expect from him a highly developed sense towards the environment, at a time (in the early 1960s) when renowned scientists had yet to begin to make predictions concerning the consequences of the destruction of nature, using non-renewable natural resources and pollution. In any case, the attempts at a new philosophy/dialectics of nature are evident, and Kosik's “contemporaneity” and “simultaneity” of man in the totality of nature and history provide a solid theoretical foundation for a practical environmental strategy, for which we cannot reach a consensus to the present day, in terms of how it should be carried out globally and totally (Kosik 1967) (In accordance with the well known Kosik's slogan from 1968, Ecology believes it is sufficient to preserve the natural environment; philosophy ascertains that it is necessary to protect the world and of course, this particular topic deserves its own special analysis!).

In conclusion, Karel Kosik's *Dialectics of the Concrete* takes us back to a concrete history; it brings us back from the “end of history;” it brings us back from the “last man;” it brings us back from the end of dialectics in its neoliberal, eschatological, ideologically empty “realization” of the end of the XX century (Fukuyama 1994). If Lukacs, in the middle of the XX century, identifies “destruction of mind” (Lukacs 1966), then Kosik takes us to a “positive dialectics” as a critical awareness, mind, enigma, and method in the discourse “game” of man's cognitive, creative and practical powers and their unlimited development. If Lukacs, at the beginning of the XX century, warns about the “crisis of the objective mind,” then Kosik's dialectic method is fundamental, “abstract” philosophical methodology of the objective mind, in its analysis of objective reality and in discovering the truth about the concrete totality. The hypothesis of new humanism is a synchrony of nature and history in the “absolute” totality of man's concrete existence—today and in the infinite future (Lukacs 1984; Sartre 1983; Adorno 1979; Kosik 1967).

Thus, to persist with the cognition of truth means uprising against the rigid relations, rise from deadness toward a dignified life, and a constant new movement from rising and sustaining, from emergence and coming into existence, beginning anew the attempt to breakthrough from the closedness of the system to the openness of the world. (Kosik 1967)

Precisely this—the closedness of the system and the openness of the world—is quintessential to the social philosophy of Karel Kosik. From this point, his strong resistance towards the scientism and philosophical reductionism begins; from this point, his rebellion against each form of historical fatalism and finalism begins; the expression of his mild, real optimism and positive utopian, philosophical and poetic energy, which gives the human individual a self-liberating power to always start anew from the beginning, to always contemplate and

adjudge the essentiality and the authenticity of the one's own individual existence in unity with Others (Honneth 2010); expression of his unrelenting critique of the closedness of every system, including every system of thinking, be it the "most open," "the most authentic," "the most poetic," and the "most perfect," and as such the most suitable to (non)changeability of human nature.

Kosik believes in the possibility of unlimited creation of an alternative reality of a world with more truth, virtue, beauty, and freedom, basically a more humane world for all people. The struggle and engagement for the perpetual creation and re-creation of the world is a permanent assignment, task, and responsibility for every contemporary philosopher, which will allow the world to have less evil, and at least a little bit more poetry. Of course, every beginning is hard—that is an old truth—however, Kosik claims that "what liberates, grows, and sprouts, ripens, a bit hidden, and in the beginning appears as a ridiculous insignificance. But, in the history, there are examples, when great events derived from insignificant beginnings. No matter how insignificant it might seem, the beginning is important" (Kosik 2007).

Karel Kosik had a productive cooperation and maintained strong connections with the philosophers and sociologists from the former Yugoslavia, especially with the *Praxis*—philosophers from Belgrade and Zagreb. His anthological work *Dialectics of the Concrete* was translated into Serbian and it was published in Belgrade, just two years after its original, Czechoslovakian edition in 1965. The Foreword to the Yugoslav/Serbian edition was written by the famous Yugoslav/Serbian philosopher—Mihajlo Marković (Kosik 1967). Furthermore, Kosik was a member of the Editorial Council of the famous philosophical journal *Praxis* (which was later banned) and he was a regular participant at the famous philosophical "Korchula Summer School" (which was later closed), where during the Cold War Herbert Marcuse, Ernst Bloch, Lucien Goldmann, Erich Fromm, Jürgen Habermas, and Zygmunt Baumann, took part, as well as numerous other philosophers and critical intellectuals of the east and west.

The most eminent philosophers at the time from Zagreb, Belgrade, Ljubljana, Sarajevo, Skopje, and other university centres in former Yugoslavia were writing about Kosik and had a dialogue with him, such as: Mihajlo Marković, Predrag Vranicki, Gajo Petrović, Danko Grlić, Milan Kangrga, and a myriad of intellectuals, who back then in the 1960's were young and to whom Karel Kosik represented the philosophical and humanistic idol in their quest for socialism with a "human face." Kosik is included in all collections, encyclopedias, philosophical lexicons, and history books on Marxist philosophy, printed in former Yugoslavia (Grlić 1973; Vranicki 1978; Petrović 1986a; 1986b; Vranicki 1985; 1987).

Later, in the early 1980s, a selection of several of his articles was published in Belgrade, entitled *Dialectics of Crisis*, as well as a selection from the bibliography of his works. Aleksandar Ilić translated this work from Czech and afterward wrote the Foreword to it (Ilić 1983). In recent years (in 2007), his work *On the Dilemmas of Contemporary History* was published in Zagreb. The last part of the book contains sections about his life and a bibliography of his works. The Foreword was written by the philosopher Milan Kangrga, who proclaimed this book to be the best European work of the past 20 years. The texts were chosen and translated from Czech by Ante Leshaja, who also wrote the Afterword (Kosik 2007). In addition, philosophers Lino Veljak and Slobodan Shnajder addressed this work and wrote book reviews.

In Macedonia, in the past few decades, there were several philosophers and intellectuals who wrote on Kosik, including Dimitar Dimitrov (in his doctoral dissertation, 1992), Ljubomir Cuculovski (in his doctoral dissertation, 1992), and Ivan Džeparoski (as a student, in his first philosophical book, 1984 and afterward in another book dedicated to György Lukács, derived from his master's thesis, 1991) (Dimitrov 1992; Cuculovski

1992; Djeparoski 1984; 1993).

Most recently in Macedonia (in 2011), Karel Kosik's text "Švejk and Bugulma" (or The Birth of Great Humour) was published, as the Afterword to Jaroslav Hashek's book "Crazy stories" (*The Good Soldier Švejk and other strange stories—Dobrý voják Švejk a jiné podivné historky*). Throughout the past few decades, all philosophical lexicons and collections (anthologies) which cover Karel Kosik's have been translated from Serbian and Croatian to Macedonian language and have been published.

In the past few decades in Macedonia, several sociologists and politologists wrote about Kosik, among which were Slavko Milosavljeski, Petre Georgievski, and Dimitar Mirchev. The official politics of Yugoslavia/Macedonia, as well as all the young intellectuals of that time, openly supported Prague Spring and the Government of Aleksandar Dupchek.

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