Studies in East European Thought (2023) 75:479–482
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11212-023-09557-7

BOOK REVIEW

Review of Ivan Landa, Joseph Grim Feinberg and Jan Mervart (eds.), *Karel Kosík and the Dialectics of the Concrete*, London, Brill 2022, Hardcover: ISBN 978-90-04-50324-4, E-book: ISBN 978-90-04-50324-3, € 144.45

Martin Küpper[1]

Accepted: 11 April 2023 / Published online: 17 May 2023

His political life and philosophical work has made Czech born Karel Kosík (1926–2003) one of the most remarkable philosophers of historical socialism. Last year, just shortly before the twentieth anniversary of his death, Brill London published the anthology *Karel Kosík and the Dialectics of the Concrete*, edited by Joseph Grim Feinberg, Ivan Landa and Jan Mervart. As pointed out in the introduction, Kosík's international popularity among philosophers, artists and writers after *Dialectics of the Concrete* was published in 1963 did not in any way lead to his philosophy being "still fruitfully interpreted or further developed" (p. 1). On the contrary, it is questionable whether his writings are still read at all. His philosophy "is 'well known' as a historical document, but it is overlooked and ignored as a living contribution to social thought" (Ibid.). Kosík thus suffers the same fate as many other philosophers of historical socialism, waiting to be rediscovered.

The anthology can be considered a successful attempt to put an end to this inappropriate situation in Kosík's case and save him from oblivion. The editors have succeeded in compiling contributions that both explore the historical context and examine Kosík's ideas for their current relevance. Thus, the publication represents a useful model for future rediscoveries. With 18 essays, divided into five parts and a postscript, the book opens up various approaches to a contemporary reception of Kosík's philosophy.

The first part is dedicated to the reform years and the origins of *Dialectics of the Concrete*. Here Jan Mervart traces Kosík's intellectual and political development up to the Prague Spring. By reconstructing Kosík's political life, which began in the communist resistance against the Nazi occupation, Mervart shows how Kosík turned to communist reformism in the 1960s and finally became a prominent protagonist of the Czechoslovak intelligentsia after Stalin's death and the 20th Party Congress of the CPSU in 1956. Following Marx and Lukács, he developed the concept of Concrete Totality from the second half of the 1950s. In addition to smaller essays and lectures,

✉ M. Küpper
makuepper@icloud.com

[1] Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Institute of Philosophy, Kiel University, Kiel, Germany

milestones of this development were his historical study *Czech Radical Democrats* (1958) and his essay "Dialectics of the Concrete" (1963), which was translated into many languages. In his essay, Tomáš Hermann shows very convincingly the continuity of both works.

The concept of Concrete Totality means the unity of social relations constituted by human practice. This should not be confused with the pseudo-concrete, i.e., the apparent everyday world in which, for Kosík's ideology, alienation and fetishism dictate the pulse of life. The everyday world should be freed from its grievances through revolutionary practice on the basis of the socialist revolution already achieved. This included the critique of existentialism and, for example, Heidegger's philosophy with its ahistoric concepts like "care".

The question of how far the emancipation of man had progressed, virulent at the time, received an ambivalent answer through Kosík. His plea for the destruction of the pseudo-concrete could be interpreted not only philosophically, but also as a critique of Communist Party policy. In any case, Kosík took sides for communist reformism and was elected to the Central Committee of the KSČ in 1968. His political action, however, was supported more by a visionary-intellectual programme than clear political tactics. For Kosík, the autonomous fields of philosophy and art were the guarantors of a non-alienated life. The political, on the other hand, was for him part of the pseudo-concrete, which is why he hardly used their means, although he did expose himself politically (p. 36). After the end of the Prague Spring, he was expelled from the Charles University in Prague and the KSČ in 1970, and from then on lived in a kind of "inner emigration". In 1990, he re-emerged as a philosopher at the Faculty of Arts of the Charles University and criticised the restoration of capitalism. His commitment against the restoration again led to his expulsion from the university in 1992 and a renewed marginalisation. After that, he worked at the Philosophical Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences.

In the second part of the anthology, the authors Francesco Tava, Ivan Landa, Ian Angus, Siyaves Azeri and Tom Rockmore try to approach the concepts of praxis and labour. In his essay, titled "Praxis in Progress: On the Transformations of Kosík's Thought", Tava shows that praxis constitutes the human species for Kosík. In praxis one determines the means he or she wants to use to achieve his or her goals. At the same time, human beings determine their possibilities for action within reality. Kosík therefore understands praxis as a form of movement of the society, as a precondition of conscious being and as a form of realisation of freedom (p. 59). Tava also shows that after 1968 Kosík used central insights of existentialism and phenomenology to concretise the concept of freedom when he turned to the phenomena of the tragic, the comic, and the ridiculous.

In the same vein, Angus traces Kosík's social ontology as the beginning of a Marxist theory of culture in his essay. For Kosík, being human means praxis, praxis in turn meant labour, and labour was ultimately organised in a historically variable, economic structure. Culture should be distinguished from labour. It is to be understood as praxis on the one hand and non-labour on the other. Only with art and philosophy do culture and freedom begin. This is where Angus begins to position his own cultural Marxism (p. 121). Following Mildred Bakan, Angus tries to show that culture does not follow labour, but is founded in labour itself. Labour includes work as object

production and language as intersubjective communication. The language inherent in labour can — analogous to surplus production — detach itself from immediate production, become independent to the point of play, and is therefore always a mediator between labour and culture. It is questionable, however, how language can mediate culture if it is itself quasi-culture ("Culture as Language" (p. 120)).

In the third part, "Modernity, Nation, and Globalisation", the authors Xinruo Zhang, Xiaohan Huang, Joseph Grim Feinberg and Anselm K. Min approach the question of how far Kosík's approach is suitable for understanding present global developments. Min, who died in 2020, tries to answer this question in his essay "The Dialectic of Concrete Totality in the Age of Globalisation: Karel Kosík's *Dialectics of the Concrete* Fifty Years Later". Here, the author reminds us that the idea of a Concrete Totality has an epistemological and methodological background. Kosík was less concerned with making specific analyses than with developing the epistemic tools to be able to make analyses of the Concrete Totality. Applied to the present, this means: The elaboration of the world market provides not only the conditions of social production, but also the conditions of a transformative, cosmopolitan solidarity among the exploited (p. 224).

The fourth part, "Intellectual Encounters", with essays by Tomáš Hříbek, Vít Bartoš, Petr Kužel and Jan Černý, is reserved for the critique of Kosík's central concepts. In particular, the old accusation that Kosík was bogged down in the abstract and did not himself redeem the concreteness he demanded is reiterated here from various perspectives. Bartoš attempts to argue against the concept of Concrete Totality in his critique. Unfortunately, Bartoš sets up a series of straw men against Marxism. Modern Marxism in general and Kosík in particular, for example, would have no physical theory of nature to show nature as a self-regulating, active complex. Bartoš thus ignores the tradition of Marxism's dialectics of nature and philosophy of science when he short-circuits "Western Marxism" with Eastern Marxism (p. 249). Instead, he proposes a scientistic pantheism. Marxism should accept that "natural systems of all kinds are as active as human subjects" (Ibid.). It can be objected to Bartoš that natural systems are not active in the same way as human subjects. A biotope, for example, does not maintain friendship with other natural systems.

In the last part, "Influence and Reception", the authors Gabriella Fusi, Diana Fuentes and Peter Hudis devote themselves to the reception of Kosík in Italy, Mexico and the USA. In his contribution "Karel Kosík and US Marxist Humanism", Hudis shows that Raya Dunayevskaya's Marxist Humanism corresponds with Kosík's defence of philosophy in Marxism. This is not only because the two were in correspondence in 1968, and Dunayevskaya translated parts of "Dialectic of the Concrete" into English. Both argued for the immanence of the absolute, structured contradictorily in itself, as a form of history that could be grasped through dialectics (p. 333–339). Consequently, this means that dialectics as a philosophical discipline is — contrary to the current zeitgeist — an integral part of Marxism and capable of formulating viable alternatives to capitalism.

The volume concludes with a personal postscript by Michael Löwy, in which he points out continuities and breaks in Kosík's thinking. By characterising Kosík as "an authentic man of the Enlightenment" (p. 354), Löwy shows that his philosophy is still an unretrieved treasure in the English-speaking world. In any case, the anthology provides a useful map for future treasure hunts.

Funding Note Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

Declarations

Competing Interests The author declare that he has no conflict of interest.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.