

Lukács's Reading of Rosa Luxemburg's Conception of Totality - A Reappraisal¹

Kaveh Boveiri

As the title of this presentation suggests, I am going to examine Lukács's reading of Rosa Luxemburg's conception of totality.

Let's begin with two clarificatory remarks. The first remark is that the treatment of totality in their works is different. The direct references and elaborations on the conception of totality in Lukács's works are rampant; this is not the case in Rosa, particularly in the texts discussed by Lukács. This does not mean, however, that totality is absent in her works. Their difference is somewhat similar to the difference between the *Grundrisse* and *Capital* in the sense that whereas the direct references to totality in the *Grundrisse* are extensive, this is not the case in *Capital*. This does not, however, entail that totality is not discussed in *Capital*. On the contrary, among Marx's works, *Capital* is the work where totality is most developed in, oddly enough, with barely any reference to the term.

The second point is that the standpoint proposed here adopts the classification suggested by Karel Kosík in *Dialectics of the Concrete* (1966) as its guiding principle.

According to Kosík, three basic concept[ion]s of the [...] totality, have appeared in the history of philosophical thinking, each based on a particular concept[ion] of reality and postulating corresponding epistemological principles.

The first one is

(1) the atomist-rationalist conception, from Descartes to Wittgenstein, which holds reality to be a totality of simplest elements and facts;

¹ Text Presented in the International Rosa Luxemburg Conference in Chicago April 27-29, 2018

The second one is

(2) the organicist and organicist-dynamic conception which formalizes the whole and emphasizes the predominance and priority of the whole over parts (Schelling, Othmar Spann)²;

The third one is

(3) the dialectical conception (Heraclitus, Hegel, Marx) which grasps reality as a structured, evolving and self-forming whole³.

This general classification helps us to see if the two conceptions of totality presented here do not in one way or another become close to the first two classifications. With this, we begin Lukács's discussion of totality.

In discussing Lukács, I try to limit myself to three papers in which he evaluates the conception of totality. These papers are: "The Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg" (January 1921); "Critical observations on Rosa Luxemburg's "Critique of the Russian Revolution"" (January 1922); and "Towards a methodology of the problem of the organization" (September 1922). Here they are discussed thematically with concentration on totality and its neighboring conceptions. What we have here is, unfortunately, not a debate but merely a disagreement, since Rosa dies in 1919 before the publication of these papers.

In all these articles, what is at stake, according to Lukács, is the theoretical-philosophical background that led Rosa to make mistakes or fail to fully pursue the right path she announces beforehand. Lukács announces his aim to be to point to methodological problems, namely, "to elucidate two premises... to postulate a totality firstly as a posited

² The Austrian philosopher (October 1, 1878 – July 8, 1950), the author of *Der wahre Staat: Vorlesungen über Abbruch und Neubau der Gesellschaft*, and *Kategorienlehre*.

³ Kosík (1976) p. 24.

object then as a positing subject”⁴ in order to find the theoretical *foundations* of political viewpoints presented by Rosa.

Along the same lines, here I play his game to weigh his view against that of Rosa.

For Lukács “the whole system of Marxism stands and falls with the principle that revolution is the product of a point of view in which the category of totality is dominant.”⁵

In this respect, he sees a similarity between Marx and Rosa: “Just as the young Marx’s concept[ion] of totality cast a bright light upon pathological symptoms of a still-flourishing capitalism, so too in the studies of Rosa Luxembourgh we find the basic problems of capitalism analysed within the context of the historical process as a whole.”⁶

But what are the characteristics of Lukácsian account of totality? He gives credit to Rosa when she accepts those characteristics and criticizes her when she doesn’t. Regarding his own account, it is noteworthy that although Kosík finds Lukács’s *History and class consciousness* as an exemplary of the dialectical conception, the following discussion casts some doubt on this claim and also highlights the differences between his account and Rosa’s account.

The first point is the strong Schellingian vein in his account. To discuss this issue, we have to remind ourselves that hypostasizing the whole over the parts was introduced as the characteristic feature of the second conception of totality.⁷ If so, we would see that with the introduction of totality as “the all-pervasive supremacy of the whole over the parts”⁸

⁴ Lukács (1971) p. 29.

⁵ Lukács (1971) p. 29.

⁶ Lukács (1971) p. 32.

⁷ That is, “the organicist and organicist-dynamic conception which formalizes the whole and emphasizes the predominance and priority of the whole over parts” Kosík (1976) p. 24.

⁸ Lukács (1971) p. 27.

Lukács lets his own account of totality fall under the same conception of totality. He repeats the same claim as he says that in dialectical method and the conception of totality we witness “the subordination of all the parts to the unity of history and thought”.⁹ In fact, this implicit dichotomy of the whole and parts, and prioritizing the former over the latter is repeated time and again throughout the book. Here is another example: “The category of totality begins to have an effect long before the whole multiplicity of objects can be illuminated by it.”¹⁰ In so doing, notwithstanding all differences, he has an important common feature with Kosík’s second classification, introduced in the beginning of this talk, namely, attributing more weight to the whole against the parts. This is *not* the case in Rosa’s conception. Take the frequently quoted: “Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the *one* who thinks differently.”¹¹ This *one* is of course a part, either an individual, or a bigger part of the whole, the negligence of which determines the characteristic of the whole.

Nevertheless, this common feature is not the only shortcoming of his viewpoint. Through mythologizing this category, i.e., totality, he overlooks the importance of other categories, such as contradiction, categorial movement, etc., and more importantly the relation between them. This linear determination, for which he criticizes his opponents as found in their economic-determinism, is replaced in his own work by the category of totality. Here is an example: “The category of totality, however, determines not only the object of knowledge but also the subject.”¹² This determination, for Rosa, is performed through the action of all categories in the discussion; what is more, the subject-object dialectically

⁹ Lukács (1971) pp. 27–28.

¹⁰ Lukács (1971) p. 175.

¹¹ Hudis, Peter; Anderson, Kevin (2004), p. 305 (Emphasis added).

¹² Lukács (1971) p. 28.

determine the totality as well. Thus, she sees the reciprocal relationship between subject-object and totality, which is absent in Lukács.

There is still another significant shortcoming in his account. Although, he recognized the closedness of Hegel's system and its historical character: "[The dialectics should be] Nonetheless, not any more in the form of a closed system. Hegel's system, as left for us is a historical matter,"¹³ he does not elaborate on the openness of a Marxian dialectic. Furthermore, Lukács does not refute the charge put forward by Ernst Bloch regarding the closedness of his conception of totality. In a paper published after *History and Class Consciousness*, "Realism in the Balance", after quoting Bloch who accuses him of "operating with a closed, objectivistic conception of reality"¹⁴, he does not argue for such a totality to be open, but still takes totality to be the "closed integration."¹⁵ While, I do not find the criticism advanced by some against the claim of closedness or completion of Lukács's standpoint watertight,¹⁶ the claim that because of its shortcoming, Lukács's

¹³ My translation for the following passage „, Allerdings: nicht mehr in der Form eines geschlossenen Systems. Das System Hegels, sowie es für uns vorliegt, ist eine historische Tatsache.“ Lukács (1970) *Geschichte und Klassbewußtsein, Studien über marxistische Dialektik*, Hermann Luchterhand Verlag, Darmstadt und Neuwied (SS. 54-55). The English translation is plainly off the tracks: "Of course we will no longer expect to discover his achievement in his total system. The system as we have it belongs to the past", Lukács (1971), p. xIv.

¹⁴ "Since Lukács operates with a closed, objectivistic conception of reality, when- he comes to examine Expressionism, he resolutely sets his face against any attempt on the part of artists to shatter any image of the world, even that of capitalism. Any art which strives to exploit the real fissures in surface inter-relations and to discover the new in their crevices, appears in his eyes merely as a wilful act of destruction. He thereby equates experiments in demolition with a condition of decadence." Lukács (1980) p. 31.

¹⁵ Lukács (1980) p. 31.

¹⁶ Here is one such response "As many critics of Lukács have remarked [...], this seems to commit Lukács to the view that there can be a complete overcoming of reification resulting in a totally transparent society. However, this interpretation ignores Lukács' insistence that the resistance against reification must be understood as a never-ending struggle [...]" Stahl (2016). The major difficulty with this passage is not that Stahl's claim is not reinforced in the pages he refers to: such a claim makes the status of proletariat eternal!

account of totality is “philosophical mythology”¹⁷ is equally extravagant. Rosa, on the other hand, leaves some room for the openness of the totality different from that of Lukács. She does this, among other things, through introducing the multidimensionality of the capitalist mode of production on the one hand and through underscoring the role of spontaneity on the other.

That said, one common methodological-dialectical feature between Rosa and Lukács is that both admit that contextualization is an essential characteristic of totalization of each analysis. Take the following passage from *The Industrial Development of Poland* by Rosa as an example: “if all these temporary and one-sided phenomena are torn out of their complicated economic context and puffed up into a doctrine of Russia’s anti-Polish economic conspiracy, then what is involved is a complete lack of perspective and overview of the totality of this policy”¹⁸. By the way, this is one of those rare cases where there is a direct reference to totality. Furthermore, Rosa – unlike what Lukács implies – agrees that the growth of proletarian class consciousness and the growth of the communist party (while identical from a world historical point of view) are neither an identical process, nor constitute two parallel processes.

One significant difference between their standpoints lies elsewhere. While Rosa underscores the possibility of the revolutionary totality to be hijacked by the part of the whole, namely the central committee of the party, Lukács highlights the possibility of that totality to be deviated from the revolutionary path by exaggeration of the role of the spontaneity of the masses and dwindling the role of the central leadership. Along the same lines, it is true that Rosa and Lukács both see the need for a *living* interaction between the

¹⁷ Grumley (1989) p. 151.

¹⁸ Hudis (2013) p. 70.

party as a whole and the central committee. Nonetheless, whereas Rosa sees this interaction to be *diminished* by increasing “centralization and discipline”¹⁹ Lukács sees *reinforcement* of this interaction with their increase.

This difference is also seen in the relationship of the vanguard and the masses. In this respect, Lukács writes “the sharp split in the organization between the conscious vanguard and the broad masses is only an aspect of the homogeneous but dialectical process of development of the whole class and of its consciousness”²⁰. Rosa’s account is polarly different here. For her, this is the manifestation of a *gravely* heterogenous dialectical process of developing of the whole class and its consciousness, which leads to a *non-revolutionary* totality.

Conclusion:

Whereas both Lukács and Rosa, to different degrees, admit the reciprocal relation of the whole and the parts in totality, Lukács emphasizes more on the predication, reflectiveness, holisticity, the centrality and internality of totality, sees the continuation in the pre-October and rupture in the post-October era, and seeks to “close the circle of the dialectical method”²¹; Rosa, on the other hand, once more notwithstanding the recognition of the reciprocal relationship between the whole and the parts, underscores more spontaneity, prepredication, individuality, decenteredness, externality of totality, highlights the role of contingency and sees some continuation of organicity both in the pre-October and post-October periods. The difference they hold is the *overemphasis* given to whole by the former

¹⁹ Lukács (1971) p. 337. See also p. 329.

²⁰ Lukács (1971) p. 338.

²¹ Lukács (1971) p. 40.

and part by the latter. In so doing, they distance themselves from the third account of totality given at the beginning of this talk.

A simultaneously organic *and* dialectical totality has to distance itself from Lukács in his support of “the subordination of every part to the whole unity of history and thought”²² as he puts it and the closedness of the totality and leave some room for Rosa’s open totality. It has to distance itself from the prepredicative standpoint implied by the overemphasis of the spontaneity introduced by Rosa, and also from the overemphasis given to the part in contradistinction with the whole.

What form would such an admittedly bold and developable thesis take in each individual case of the class struggle is to be determined, undoubtedly, by the concrete characteristics of that struggle.

This can help us form a socialist society based on human foundations different from “stupidity, egotism, and corruption” as “the moral foundations of capitalist society”²³.

References:

Grumley, E., John (1989) *History and Totality: Radical Historicism from Hegel to Foucault*, Routledge, London.

Hudis, Peter; Anderson, Kevin (2004) *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, Monthly Review Press, New York.

Hudis, Peter (2013) *The Complete Works of Rosa Luxemburg, Volume I, Economic Writings I*, Verso, London, New York.

²² Lukács (1971) pp. 27–28.

²³ Hudis (2004) p. 351.

Hudis, Peter; Anderson, Kevin (2004) *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, Monthly Review Press, New York.

Jameson, Fredric (1980) *Aesthetics and Politics*, Verso, London.

Kosík, Karel (1976) *Dialectics of the Concrete*, Kovanda, Karel and Schmidt, James (Translators) D. Reidel Publishing Company, Dordrecht, Holland.

Kosík, Karel (1966) *Dialektika konkrétního; studie o problematice člověka a světa*. Academia, Praha.

Lukács, Georg (1970) *Geschichte und Klassbewußtsein, Studien über marxistische Dialektik*, Hermann Luchterhand Verlag, Darmstadt und Neuwied.

Lukács, Georg (1971) *History and Class Consciousness*, Rodney Livingstone (Translator), Cambridge Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press.

Lukács, Georg (1980) "Realism in the Balance", in Jameson, Fredric (1980) *Aesthetics and Politics*, Verso, London.

Spann, Othmar (1921) *Der wahre Staat: Vorlesungen über Abbruch und Neubau der Gesellschaft*, Quelle & Meyer, Leipzig.

Spann, Othmar (1924) *Kategorienlehre*, Gustav Fischer Verlag, Jena.

Stahl, Titus (2016) "Georg [György] Lukács", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/lukacs/>, consulted March 13, 2016.