

# On Kosík's Criticism of Pseudosubject

-- Based on the Interpretation of The Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Observations from the 1968 Era

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this article is to shed light on the criticism that Czech Marxist philosopher Karel Kosík contributed to pseudosubject in his important work entitled *The Crisis of Modernity*. Pseudosubject in Kosík's terminology, refers to the mystified pseudosubject hidden behind the two systems of free competition and bureaucratic rule. This pseudosubject not only governs the two systems but also develops into a kind of limitless subjectivism. The pseudosubject based on the principles of manipulability and calculability reduces man to pure tools for the operation of the system. Kosík holds that humanistic socialism can make people a real subject because it is the establishment of a revolutionary alliance of workers and intellectuals in practice and theoretically destroy the mystique and derivation of pseudosubjects in light of dialectics of concrete.

**Keywords:** Karel Kosík, Pseudosubject, Crisis of Modernity, Dialectics of concrete, Humanistic socialism.

## 1. Introduction

Marxist philosopher Karel Kosík's most significant work, *Dialectics of the Concrete* (1963), was a contribution to examine and criticize the modernity in the light of concrete totality, and managed to incorporate the latest trends of phenomenology and existentialism in the Marxist philosophy, while *The Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Observations from the 1968 Era*, is Kosík's another crucial work on the root of the crisis of modernity. Kosík pointed out that the crisis of modernity has been transformed into a crisis of the relationship between man and system. In other words, man has become a vassal of the system, and the system has become a pseudosubject of modern society. Enslaved by this system, modern man is driven from one thing to another because of absolute dissatisfaction and indulgence. That is to say, people are separated from reality, and modern people are involved in permanent false needs, whether it is consumption or production. Kosík points out that this absolute poverty transforms people, things, values, and time into nothing but ephemeral objects or fleeting states devoid of any essential meaning.

## 2. Kosík's Conception of the World of the Pseudoconcrete and Pseudosubject

In *Dialectics of the Concrete*, Kosík depicted two forms of totality, represented by concrete totality and pseudoconcrete. In Kosík's term, the category of totality is definitely the category of concrete. Concrete totality means that "objectivity is expressed in and through subjectivity[1]." as well as "essential reality dynamically mediates concrete whole and abstract part"[1], while the world of the pseudoconcrete is related to procuring and manipulation.

"While describing this world of the pseudoconcrete, Kosík clearly has in mind liberal capitalism, but also actually existing socialism, in which the critical and dialectical praxis which is at the core of Marx's thinking has been substituted for a fetishized one, with the consequence of a general

bureaucratization of the social and political apparatus.[2]" In the second chapter "Our Current Crisis" and the third chapter "Socialism and the Crisis of Modern Man" in "The Crisis of Modernity", Kosík discusses the existence of universal manipulation as a pseudosubject in modern society.

First of all, Kosík believes that the so-called pseudosubject refers to a generalized control system following the principle of manipulability that overrides the two systems: the free competition system in capitalist society and the Stalinist bureaucratic system. The principle of manipulability means that for this system, everything is reduced to the raw materials for the operation of the system, and furthermore, for those things that cannot be reduced to the elements of the system, they are not real. In other words, 'man is merely an object of manipulation, which has transformed him into a cog in the machine' [3]. On the one hand, this pseudosubject parasitic on the two systems has a dual nature. From the external and superficial level, it is characterized by the pursuit of interests, manifested as utilitarianism and materialism; from the implicit level, it is characterized by indifference, a kind of features are completely irrelevant. In Kosík's recognition, "reality is a human reality with man as the subject, as well as the object of it"[4]. Nevertheless, reality was reduced to a system, a pure object in the 20th century while nature is transformed into "a seemingly inexhaustible storehouse of raw materials and energy at the service of man"[5]" and the human spirit degenerates into a false reality without a soul. On the other hand, under the dominance of this system of universal manipulability, human beings who should be the subject of reality is downgraded to a pure tool to make this system work. Furthermore, the system of universal manipulation colonizes the spiritual world of people, completely negates the subjectivity of people, reduces people to the existence of objects, and the rich connotations of people Simplified, stripped away, leaving only the inhuman non-essentials that conform to the universal system of manipulation. In Kosík terms, 'the system of manipulateness is a system of indifference and apathy, where truth mixes with falsehood and good with evil. Apathy elevated to a governing and constitutional category of reality

signifies the identification of truth with untruth, good with evil, the lofty with the base, and accordingly, universal leveling with universal disparagement[6].” Thus, in a universally manipulated world where lies and evil triumph over truth and good, moral apathy prevails, and people become impotent and uninterested in difference: apathetic, dull, confused, sensitivity, emotion and rationality will also be suppressed. At the same time, the false consciousness of the generalized control system intensifies people's indifference, because false consciousness is chaotic and does not distinguish between good and evil at all. It needs to blur the sense of boundaries to achieve full dominance over people.

In addition, the generalized control system is also manifested as boundless subjectivism. It takes the false attainable perfection as its fundamental principle, and is a symbiotic whole and building formed by the aggregation of economy, technology and science. This building has the characteristics of blocking and the advantage of encircling all activities. Attainable perfection means false infinity, that is to say, it cancels the boundaries of all things, all standard is at a loss, and the highest standard is reduced to a pure single comparability and calculability. On the other hand, subjectivism is the concrete manifestation of the evil totality in the false totality in modern society, because it replaces the human being as the real historical subject as an inhuman technical economic force and political force independent of human consciousness and will, causing the products of human activities to be separated from humans. Subjectivism that follows the logic of self-production contains a nihilistic impulse that denies or devalues human spirit. Kosik is convinced that subjectivism measures everything with its own infinite growth, all existences that hinder its own growth are denied and destroyed, and spirit is excluded as an unreasonable factor. At the same time, subjectivism can only establish the existence of its subjectivity through endless production, for production has become the fundamental and only way of the relationship between man and the world, but it no longer creates anything, except for the limitless expansion of quantity. The extreme affirmation of quantitative logic by subjectivism definitely and undoubtedly includes the extreme negation of spirit itself, because the meaning and value of human existence cannot be measured by quantity form. Under the governing of subjectivism, the essential content of the meaning of existence is removed, leaving nothing but the pure quantitative relationship without content. The spirit(value) is ceased to be a positive force that comes from, belongs to, and for humans, but has become a nihilistic force that is external to, demeaning, or even destroying humans themselves.

### **3. Kosik's Critique of Pseudosubject**

Kosik holds that, as far as the relationship between man and system is concerned, “man always exists in a system, and being one of its components he is reduced to certain aspects (functions)and to certain(one-sided and reified)forms of existence. At the same time, he is always more than a system, and as man he cannot be reduced to one[7].”hat is to say, the relationship between people and the system is not a simple reduction and reduction relationship, but a dialectical relationship; radically separating people from the system will lead to the mystification of the system on the one hand, which is similar to economic the theory of factors, that is, people can only exist in the system as atomized individuals, and can only be grasped quantitatively, and people can only be obedient to

the system; on the other hand, it will cause people to be unable to establish their own existence. It is manifested in the fact that human beings become homeless, empty and boring, until they become absurd existence. Outside of system, people lose the intermediary of self-establishment; without people, the system cannot operate, but it cannot change people, that is, it cannot create humanity or bring new content to it, because man's activity should not reside in an attempt to leave one world of the pseudo-concrete in favor of a second world, represented by concrete totality[8].”Therefore, people must have the ability to transcend a certain system, otherwise they can only become a functional element. From Kosik's point of view, the critique of materialism is the kind of confrontation that every individual in a system of one kind or another can have to fight. Under the rule of the modern system, people lose the ability to transcend the system. Kosik pointed out that in modern ages, the industrial social system has acquired the sovereignty of the present era, and this system that only revolves around production and consumption begins to determine and even dominate the rhythm and pace of human life. The man who constructed and set in motion this mechanism of production and perfection became more and more obsessed with it over time, becoming this modern pseudosubject, this ambitious and omnipotent a kind of pure adjunct to the substitutability. On the one hand, it causes the impoverishment of time and the impoverishment of morality. First, in light of materialist dialectics, man is a historical existence, existing in the unity of past, present and future. On the contrary, modernity loses the dimension of time and becomes something without content and substance. Kosik sees the further decline of morality and the modern Man is becoming more and more insensible. The poverty of time has plunged modern man into haste and restlessness, and man has become someone driven by an insatiable false longing.

In this system of generalized manipulation, ego, selfishness, metaphysical desires, hatred, competition and emptiness, the highest good are all transformed into an illusion, and the illusion begins to be elevated to the height of the highest good as the internalization of economic structures. In essence, “the transformation of all values into mere passing moments in the general and absolute race for distant values has as its consequence the emptiness of life. The degeneration of the notion of happiness into physical comfort and that of reason into rationalizing manipulation of people and things, that everyday atmosphere of modern life that concerts means into ends and ends into means is anchored in an economic structure expressed in a simple formula: money-goods-more money[9].”Regarding the distortion of human beings' own feelings, Marx also discussed it in Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844. Marx believed that under private ownership, people's feelings do not come from the internal nature of people, but they obtain things through the direct use and possession of capital, thus reducing all physical and spiritual feelings to the feeling of possession, that is, all The simple alienation of feeling. According to Marx, if human nature is distorted, that is, the concept of happiness degenerates into physical comfort, then the richness of human nature will be deprived and become absolute poverty. Only by liberating people from private ownership can the richness of people be realized and people can become real people.

However, Marx's theory of revolutionary emancipation, namely the abolition of private property, has aroused skeptical doubts in the contemporary era. In Kosik's view, it's not that Marx's revolutionary theory is outdated. To be clear,

the biggest problem is that when some Marxists exert dialectics on grasping the modern world, “they disregarded materialism in favor of idealism, dialectics in favor of metaphysics, criticism in favor of apologetics[10].” At this level, we must go back to Marx, and we must understand that Marxism is the return of the consistent use of dialectics in contemporary society. The destruction of the pseudosubject is “to restore revolutionary character and theoretical vigour to Marxism at crucial historical junctures when its institutionalized and degenerate versions were temporarily in crisis and it also seemed possible to qualitatively alter social reality[11].”

#### 4. Kosík's Destruction of the Pseudosubject

For Kosík, there are three approaches to destroy the pseudosubject. Humanistic socialism is one of the most important process of actualization of freedom to destroy this pseudosubject which result in the liberation of the real subject in modern society, because it contains dialectics, revolutionary essence, critical and humanitarian thought, and can expose the derivation of pseudosubject theoretically and practically.

On the political level, “humanistic socialism emerges as a revolutionary, humanistic, and liberating alternative to any and all deformations of the system of universal manipulation[12].” In doing so, its actualization rests on the revolutionary alliance of workers and intellectuals. Through this union, every citizen will become a real subject with real political life, political rights and responsibilities.

From a theoretical point of view, dialectics of concrete is the deconstruction of the pseudosubject, which can dispel the mystery of the practice of fetishization in order to achieve the purpose of transforming reality. Kosík argues that the question of modernity is essentially a question of the relationship between reification operations and humanizing practices, between fetishization operations and revolutionary practices. In the practice of man's fetishization, that is, in the process of procuring and manipulation, the world exposed to him is not a real world, although it has the "certainty" and "validity" of the authentic world; On the contrary, it is a representational world, which is a certain ideological appearance formed by the idea of things in the posture of things in themselves. But it does not have the natural characteristics of objects and reality; on the contrary, it is the projection of a certain rigid historical environment in the subject's consciousness. Dialectics dissolves the man-made attributes of the material world and the spiritual world, destroys the pseudosubject, and reveals the creation of history and human practice. At the same time, the concrete dialectic is the dialectic of revolution. Dialectics, in its inertia, in its destructive, all-encompassing process, never compromises with anything or anyone. At the same time, dialectics is rooted

in the practice of human revolution, and it is the unity of theory and practice. Materialist dialectics is the theory of human emancipation movements that uphold the unity of classes and all humanity in practice. In the course of objective history, this unity has been in constant danger of being either simply constructed through the totalization of contradictions, or degenerated into divisive and opposing poles. Concretely, the isolation of that which concerns class from that which pertains to all mankind leads to sectarianism and the mystification of bureaucracy and the distortion of socialism; and the separation of that which pertains to all mankind from that which pertains to class leads to optimism and reformist utopian fantasies. They are distortions of reality and of confronting a reality that is distorted. Dialectics confronts this reality, exposes these contradictions of reality mercilessly, and resolves them through practice.

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