Rosdolsky’s Methodology and Lange’s Revisionism

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Among non-Stalinist but leadership-conscious Marxists, there is hardly a work that has gained the acclaim accorded to The Making of Marx’s “Capital” by Roman Rosdolsky. Published in Germany in 1968, it has now been brought out by Pluto Press in an English translation for the fantastic sum of $35. It is as if the price itself testifies to its importance. If not a “classic,” it is, after all, about the only available lengthy, serious commentary on Marx’s Grundrisse, which has only recently been published in English for the first time.

Roman Rosdolsky, a well-known Marxist theoretician, tells us that ever since 1948, when he obtained one of the rare copies of the Grundrisse then available, he has been studying that “Rough Draft” of Capital and set himself a twofold task: (1) to write a commentary, or more precisely, an exposition of the new discovery “mainly in Marx’s own words”; and (2) “to make a scientific evaluation of some of the new findings which it contained” (p. xi). The preoccupation with the latter comprises Roman Rosdolsky’s original contribution. To it he devotes Parts One and Seven—“Introduction,” i.e., mainly the origin and structure of the work; and “Critical Excursus.” To these 225 pages should really be added some 35 pages (Part Six, “Conclusion”) which summarize what he found in the exposition and commentary of the work. Since, as he correctly notes, “Of all the problems in Marx’s economic theory the most neglected has been that of his method both in general and, specifically, in relation to Hegel” (p. xi), methodology is the underlying motif not only of his “critical excursus,” but the reason for writing the whole of the 581 pages.

I wish I could report that a genuine contribution to dialectical methodology had been made by Rosdolsky. Unfortunately, nothing could be further from the truth. If there is anything that is totally missing in his massive study, it is dialectics. To the extent to which he does make a contribution to the

1 Contrast this to Chapter 2, Section B, entitled “The 1850s: The Grundrisse, Then and Now,” pp. 61–76, Philosophy and Revolution, from Hegel to Sartre and from Marx to Mao; also for changes in the structure of Capital, see Marx’s “Capital” and Today’s Global Crisis, especially sections entitled “The Relationship of History to Theory,” pp. 29–36, and “Appearance and Reality,” pp. 77–82. [These are sections from Chapters 5 and 8 from Marxism and Freedom. —Editor.]
comprehension of the *Grundrisse* (lots of quotations, especially on Money, but no self-movement of the whole), the reader gets neither a view of the historical sweep of Marx’s concept of what the totality of his greatest work was to be, nor an understanding of why Marx nevertheless decided to start everything “anew.”

1  **The Missing Dialectic**

This is said not to play down the significance of the *Grundrisse*, much less to say that “starting anew” meant Marx discarded the validity of the range of the “Rough Outline” just because, instead of the six books there listed, Marx readied for publication only three, and finished only one. Quite the contrary. While he definitely rejected its shapelessness, comparing it to the formlessness of “sauerkraut and carrots,” Marx meant to develop further some of the most brilliant and profound of his writings that could not find their way into the new dialectic structure of *Capital*, Volume 1—like “The Pre-Capitalist Economic Forms,” and “the absolute movement of becoming” [*Grundrisse*, p. 488]. We get a whiff of this in a footnote in the totally new “Fetishism of Commodities” when Marx refers to the Taiping Revolution, as against the quiescent European workers following the 1848 revolutionary defeats, as if China embarked on their revolution “to encourage” the Europeans to revolt.

Rosdolsky, on the other hand, who writes 581 pages to expound the *Grundrisse*, has not a word to say about the originality, dialectic, and dimension of the new, *totally new*, concept of the Orient, China especially, contained in “Pre-Capitalist Economic Forms,” though the period he was writing in followed the 1949 Chinese Revolution, which was the compulsion for the European Marxists to publish, first, that very section, and finally the whole of the *Grundrisse*. (The English translation, however, first came out in 1973.)

It was the specific section on the economic forms preceding capitalist production that became most relevant to the new birth of a “Third World.” Nor was it only a question of relevance. It was the dialectics of liberation that gave the dialectic of thought a new dimension of revolution. It is the dialectic that is missing from Rosdolsky’s methodology. By using it synonymously with methodology, he has managed to reduce both to mere presupposition.

2  **The Presupposition**

Let’s take a second look at Rosdolsky’s claimed preoccupation with methodology. It has led him, among other things, to create a special Appendix directly