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Through Exchange: Karatani Compared with Marx

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Abstract: The following paper has as its object the political philosophy of Kojin Karatani, in particular its relationship with the work of Marx. The Japanese philosopher, in fact, reinterprets some elements of Marxian theory in the light of Kantian categories, hybridizing the ethical and moral theory of the latter with the critique of political economy of the former. The result of Karatani's project can be seen, in particular, in two works. With the first, *Transcritique*, Karatani moves into the realm of philosophy to try to construct a method that holds the two theoretical poles together. The concept of 'Transcritique', in fact, represents the junction between Kantian and Marxian insights. With the second work, *The Structure of World History*, the Japanese philosopher shifts the analytical focus from ethics to economics, proposing a different interpretation of capitalism and its historical cycles. The analytical novelty is represented by the shift of the observation of the capitalist system from the sphere of production to that of exchange. Carrying through to the end the methodology developed in the previous work, Karatani traces back to exchange all the productive, institutional and political dynamics produced over time. Cycles of accumulation thus become cycles of exchange. The author, in fact, determines a correspondence between the specific modes of exchange and the consequent political structures, highlighting the centrality that money occupies, both in theoretical elaboration and in political reality. The prevailing mode of production, based on the exchange of commodities, relies on the absolute mobility of money and on the strength of the state political institution, which acts as a hinge between the global dimension of exchanges and

the territorial need for appropriation of surplus value. Karatani's critique is embodied in a political proposal, articulated through two key figures: community and cosmopolitanism. With the first term, the philosopher opposes the materiality of human relationships based on reciprocity to the abstract equivalence of economic relationships. By the second term he indicates the need for an extended political practice in which the pursuit of local freedom goes hand in hand with the realization of global justice. The paper traces these themes both through direct exposure of Karatani's work and by offering critical comparisons with other authors who have addressed similar issues. Finally, the purpose of this paper is to emphasize the originality of the Japanese author's philosophical-historical work, suspended between utopia and pragmatism, also through criticism, in order to highlight its strengths and underline its possible weaknesses.

Keywords: transcritique, money, exchange, community

Introduction:

This article will analyze the relationship between the theoretical work of the Japanese intellectual Kojin Karatani and the work of Karl Marx, especially trying to emphasize some issues that emerge from two of his works: the first is *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx*, and the second *The Structure of World History: From Modes of Production to Modes of Exchange*. Already from the titles, we can see that in both works, the Marxian analysis is certainly the frame that Karatani uses to read the anthropological dynamics of capitalism, that is, the structural horizon of the relations between subjectivity and institutions. Given the vastness of the themes raised by the density of both works, we will focus on the analysis of some key words, which are able to fully render both the strengths and the criticalities of the theoretical work of Karatani. These keywords, suspended between the construction of the conceptual analytical apparatus and the philosophical and political planning amended by the author, are the following: transcritique, value and politics.

Each of these concepts, in fact, refers to an alternative theoretical dimension, which in the intentions of Karatani himself, is situated

beyond the existing theoretical canons and polarities, with the ambition to reformulate the status of the 'critique'. In this sense, social criticism (cultural, theoretical, political, economic), from a mere space of opposition and rejection, is now transformed into a space of connection between the different hypotheses and dynamics under scrutiny by the observer. Karatani's philosophical operation opposes a system of constant relation between the different positions to the seriality of the classically understood dialectical antinomies, those composed within the triad between thesis, antithesis and synthesis. In this way, the different phenomena, which are not subsumed once and for all in an abstract dimension, are constantly problematized and re-elaborated.

Transcritique, in fact, is the name given to this analytical methodology, which has its roots in the anti-Hegelianism of the French structural and post-structural wave, and that, consequently, shifts the theoretical focus from the dialectical totality of the Hegelian matrix to Kantian critical rationalism, both from the formal-gnoseological point of view and from the ethical-political one. This important theoretical dislocation, this precise choice of 'authorial' field, in fact, makes clear what the political options put on the plate by Karatani are. The latter eschews the typical opposition between 'reform' and 'revolution', but addresses them in the sense of a coexistence within the boundaries of the main structure, for the construction of new cosmopolitan and republican practices 'revised' in the light of the connective sensibility of Karatani (whose possible criticalities will be analyzed in the course of this paper).

1. Parallax: Kant and the Antinomies of Philosophy

The antinomic nature of the subjective experience of the Real, irreducible to theoretical categories (and, consequently, to the different analytical schools) and not synthesizable, is the foundation of Karatani's philosophical choices. In this sense, we can certainly agree with Žižek, who, relying on the definition provided by Karatani himself, defines Karatani's work (the object of the Slovenian philosopher's analysis is *Transcritique*) as a *parallax view*, that is, the irreducible gap between the different oppositions with which to conceive radical criticism as an operation situated between the interstices,

as a philosophical politics of structural difference¹. Karatani draws heavily from the Kantian corpus, starting mainly from the revolutionary impact of the Königsberg philosopher's '*Copernican Turn*', from the problematic assumption of the *Thing* as an imperfect and constantly moving synthesis between subjective empiricism and rationalist objectivism. In fact, he writes:

In the same manner Kant managed to get around the basic contradiction in the philosophy of his time, whether it was founded in the empirical senses (as was empiricism) or in rational thinking (as was rationalism). Instead, Kant introduces those structures- that is, forms of sensibility or categories of understanding- of which one is unaware, calling them transcendental structures. Words such as 'sensibility [Sinnlichkeit]' and 'understanding [Verstand]' had long existed as conceptualization of life experience [...] What is crucial is this architectonic that is called 'transcendental'².

The transcendental, as distinct from the transcendent, is the methodological device that the Karatani uses to enhance his own critical endeavor, in which the subjective relationship with the structures of the Real is constantly open and subject to all kinds of revisions of meaning and content. In this sense, relying on Kantian aesthetics, the universality of the faculty of judgment—and thus of the faculty of understanding—presupposes both the singular experience of thought and the impersonal experience of a-priori understanding: 'Je Pense' is the fundamental apperceptive synthetic unity, suspended between these two dimensions.

Karatani's debts to the Kantian interpretations of Deleuze and Lyotard are evident. From the *transcendental empiricism* of the first author, Karatani borrows the fundamental role assigned to the desire for knowledge as the fundamental drive of the Critique, and of speculation as a dynamic, 'disjunctive' practical synthesis, to quote a term used elsewhere by Deleuze himself. This continuous desire of knowledge finds its own synthesis in the faculty of imagination, as a synthetic operation immanent to the same activity of thought³. Of

¹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, <https://libcom.org/library/the-parallax-view-karatani-s-transcritique-on-kant-and-marx-zizek>

² Kojin. Karatani, *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx* (Boston: MIT Press, 2004), 31.

³ Gilles. Deleuze, *La filosofia critica di Kant* (Bologna: Cappelli, 1979), 53-64.

the second, Karatani uses the reading of the internal ambivalences within Kantian work, present in both the historical-political and analytical-aesthetic texts. Two texts are illustrative of Lyotard's interpretation. The first, from 1987, is dedicated to the 'Sensus Communis', to the formation of the *intellectio communis* as a constitutive synthesis of social space. This element, in fact, 'lowers' reason to the singular intellect, and, at the same time, exalts and perfects the presence of the universal in the singular, enhancing its cognitive power. Clearly, all this finds realization through communication, therefore, through language: the common experience of reason, then, is a communicative experience, an abstraction suspended between Idea and Intuition⁴. The second text, from 1989 (1986 the original edition), continues in the wake of aesthetic and political reflection, using enthusiasm as an analytical concept. Kantian enthusiasm for the French Revolution becomes the object of an excursus that posits this passion (or intuition) as a product of the observer's pleasure in the revolutionary event, and as the driving force behind the desire for active participation in the same events. This experience, which can be classified as a dislocation of the power of the Sublime, remains suspended between materiality and ideality, and can only be fully expressed by translating itself into the language of duty, thus moving further into an ethical-moral dimension⁵. What emerges is the communicative nature of reason, and consequently of the entire Kantian system of knowledge, whose teleological horizon is continually open and postponed. Indeed, the median position that communication occupies, is what constitutes the space of civil society as a space of intersection between the individual and the collective, and which implements the structure of transcendental critique. For Karatani, *synthetic judgment* is the first manifest form of transcritique, because it operates in this suspension without reducing it to totality:

Synthetic judgment is universal only insofar as proof to the contrary is presupposed—not the proof of the other who shares the same system of rules, but of the other who does not share the same system of rules. Kant's radicalism exists in the fact that he pursued the problem of alterity in com-

munication deep into mathematics [...] the transcendental other— as distinct from the transcendental other, the sacred other (God)—is a quintessentially secular other who is everywhere and always in front of us⁶

The gnoseological problem is immediately transposed into political terms: to know, for the philosopher, means to know the other, to educate oneself to difference, to construct a frank space of rational communication. The social structure, at the same time, cannot be a synthesis of differences, but a space of further problematization, in which both the individual and the collective are irreducible. In this sense, society is a linguistic structure, in which common elements are designated as *rigid designators*. With this concept, borrowed from the linguist S. Kripke, Karatani designates the co-participation of individual and community in the same space, just as for the linguist the *rigid designator* is at the same time the product of the social context and, ultimately, a proper name. The space of critique, the Lyotardian space of possibility, is the space of Cartesian doubt, of the radical problematization of time, space, and thought, and the imagination of an interstitial space on which to inscribe potentialities and possibilities of transformation. In other words, the 'parallax' operation of which 'transcritique' is the arm, constantly produces chains of signification and processes of subjectification, inscribing them within a structural space, whose limits are porous and constantly crossed by new cognitive lines. The diagonal and transversal movement of reason, producing otherness that cannot be reabsorbed by the structure, presupposes, fundamentally, the ethical guidance of the Kantian categorical imperative, and, therefore, both the recognition of the other and freedom as conditions of existence. The community, as an agent of collective enunciation, is an ethically oriented and open agent, devoted to responsibility and solidarity.

But the circularity of collective communication hides within it the arcana of bourgeois social formation, which refers, clearly, to the circularity of capitalist production and exchange. The first *vulnus* of Karatani's theoretical argument is precisely the absence of the social division of labor, of which the communication circuit is an integral part. The problem of transcritique is the rejection of the

⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, "Sensus Communis," *Le Cahier*, 3, (1987), 67-87.

⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, *L'Entusiasmo. La critica kantiana della storia* (Milano: Guerini, 1989), 45-51.

⁶ Karatani, *Transcritique*, 70.

subjective imputation of cognitive processes, in the name of the interoperability of critical parallax, and the constant abstraction from real processes: the positive dimension of the theoretical construction risks slipping into the metaphysics of capital, into a sort of ideological exaltation of communication and transversality, in the name of the ethics of Otherness. In this sense, Karatani repeats the mistakes of the great Kantian bourgeois philosophy of history, moreover in the absence of revolutionary enthusiasm, and in the presence of social passions tending towards cynicism. The abstract form of transcendental synthesis is essentially equivalent to the abstract form of exchange. Alfred Sohn-Rethel, in his fundamental text, *Intellectual Labor and Manual Labor: A Critique of Epistemology*, clearly expounds this thesis. For the German philosopher, abstraction is the fundamental characteristic of capitalist societies, their genetic component, which, by synthesizing differences, equalizes them within the social spaces used for communicative and economic exchange: the public sphere, the market, the State. The moment of exchange is the moment in which the fullness of capitalist abstraction manifests itself in all its power, emptying even the spatio-temporal coordinates of cognition. Consequently, gnoseological and scientific research, directed toward the horizon of Reason, turn out to be the product of a specific knowledge, linked to the social division of labor, and able to mediate the different interests. The central medium of this system can only be a mobile object, dynamic and empty, on which to inscribe the specific social relations: language and money, at this point, are the most suitable expressions of the bourgeois and mercantile social synthesis.⁷

These emerging problematics of the transcendental-transcritique synthesis do not in any case hide the merits of Karatani's conceptual apparatus, but allow it to be immediately opened to the relationship with Marx and Marxism's, in media res, through the Marxian analytics of money. The next section will focus on the dimension of exchange and its aporias, comparing Karatani with both Marxian methodology and some segments of contemporary Marxism that have addressed the same issues.

⁷ Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Lavoro intellettuale e lavoro manuale: Per una teoria della sintesi sociale*. (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1977), 73-83; for further discussion see also Alberto Toscano, "Last Philosophy: the Metaphysics of Capital from Sohn-Rethel to Žižek," *Historical Materialism* (2019), 1-18.

2. The Enigma of Money

Karatani's method of critique is, in many ways, contiguous to the Marxian critical edifice. To corroborate this definition, one must make a brief detour through the work of Marx, whose analytics are closely linked to the methodology of *determinate abstraction*. In fact, thinking about the universal totality of a particular phenomenon means simultaneously analyzing its founding premises and tracing the multiple phenomenal determinations that innervate its surface. The most striking example is that of labor, simultaneously the origin of value and its (impossible) collective determination within the laws of production, which can only be recognized as a central and irrepressible element by reading the tendency of capital. The concrete analysis of an element is a synthesis, provisional and situational, of the multiple and widespread causes that characterize its effectiveness⁸.

The shared characteristic of both systems is dynamism, that is, the adaptation of theoretical criticism to variations in material assumptions, using the weapons of transcendental synthesis and abstraction to determine the structural frames of the analyzed phenomena. Furthermore, Karatani elucidates that "The Marxian Transcritique appears only in the awareness of the gap between what one thinks (understanding) and what one really is (sensibility)"⁹ thus, leading us back to the thematic nodes of Marxian methodology: *Forschung* (research) and *Darstellung* (exposition). The dialectic between these two functions of knowledge production is, in fact, the constitutive process of the complexity of social materiality itself, in addition to being open to further innovations of the analyzed system. This method is able, therefore, to interpret the internal discontinuities of the system (both structural and subjective) and to translate them into the theoretical text and praxis¹⁰. In this sense, the Marxian method can be compared to transcritique, both for the liminal position between social phenomena and for the etiology of the problems and the future-oriented perspective. For Karatani, the capitalist system of production is the plastic representation of the constant movement of crisis, just as the subject is a knot of individ-

⁸ On this aspect of Marxian criticism, see: Evald Il'enkov, *La dialettica dell'astratto e del concreto nel Capitale di Marx* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1961).

⁹ Karatani, *Transcritique*, 141

¹⁰ Antonio Negri, *Marx oltre Marx* (Rome: Manifestolibri, 2003), 65-86.

uation within the network of social relations. The space of the crisis is, consequently, that of parallax, that is, the empty space occupied by an element capable of separating and uniting at a further level: this element is money. At this point, money is the 'Thing-in-itself' of Kantian memory, which Karatani uses to deepen his analysis of Marxian texts. What characterizes and makes this analysis important, is the centrality that Karatani accords to circulation as the primary locus of the constitution of the relations of domination and subordination.

The Marxian (and many Marxists') logical-historical 'post' becomes for Karatani the 'prius', the point of origin of capitalism: exchange, and not production, is what constitutes the division of labor and social classes, and what gives value to the different commodities. Money, as the incarnation of the powers of exchange is a real noumenon, because it is the expression of the rationality of the production system, and at the same time, it is able to transform the coordinates of space and time. It acts in the temporal dimension, ensuring the substance that informs the theory of value, and in the spatial version, as a constitutive element of globally extended cycles of accumulation. In this way, Karatani 'Copernicanically' overturns the canonical reading of Marx, giving a centrality—not taken for granted in critical circles—to the monetary dimension of social relations. At the same time, he lays the foundations for the encounter with the theorists of the 'world-system' on the dynamics of the financialization of the economy, correctly read as an extension of productive systems and not as their nemesis. Consequently, capital is endowed with its own psychoanalytic 'drive', its own tendency to accumulate for survival, based on the great 'transcendental illusion' of the multiplying capacities of money, at the same time symbolic sign and substance of value:

Capital is a kind of self-increasing, self-reproductive money. Marx's first formulation of this is M-C-M'. It represents the activity of merchant capital, with which usurers' capital, M-M', is made possible. [...] The formulation of merchants' capital is nevertheless also consistent with industrial capital; the main point of difference is that in industrial capital the content of C is a complex entity, that is C=mp (means of production) +L (labor-power); thus, in Marx's equation, the

movement of industrial capital is M-[mp+L]-M' [...] Crisis is not caused merely by an accumulation of discouraging outcome of commodities not being sold [...] Crisis is caused by the overreaching of credit¹¹.

Capitalism, as a synthesis between the Hegelian system of needs and the Ricardian system of the crisis of overproduction, based therefore on lack and separation, finds its full completion, its 'transubstantiation' in the financial crisis as a founding and dynamic mechanism.

In the wake of Arrighi,¹² Karatani splits the formula of the production cycle into C-M and M-C, characterizing it as a pure circulation process, under the domain of the exchange process. In this sense, the crisis is the disturbing spectre that grips classical political economy, and Marx is the one who highlights it, criticizing the positions of Smith and Ricardo, synthesizing them across two fundamental conceptual fields: the value of labor-power and the role of money. The German revolutionary, in fact, recognizes the central role of labor-power in the constitution of profit and social subversion, and the role of money as a general abstraction, calculation and command. In the first case, he synthesizes Smithian positions of 'commanded labor' and Ricardian positions of 'embedded labor' into a theory of the uniqueness of commodity-labor; in the second, he theoretically and journalistically explores the role of financial crises in determining colonial spheres of influence and in restructuring national production systems¹³. While, however, also fundamentally highlighting the constitutive ambivalence of both conceptual devices: use value and exchange value, of which work and money are syntheses.

The parallax dislocation of Karatani's point of view, from production to circulation, allows him to delve into the circulatory nature of capital, attacking one of the fundamental cores of Marxian and Marxist analyses: the centrality of labor power. For Karatani, in fact, the immediate social nature of work/social-work by definition-needs a monetary system of regulation, a system of equivalence capable

¹¹ Karatani, *Transcritique*, 154-155.

¹² Giovanni Arrighi, *Il Lungo XX Secolo: Denaro, potere e le origini del nostro tempo* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1996).

¹³ Sergio Bologna, "Moneta e Crisi: Marx corrispondente della 'New York Daily Tribune' 1856-57," in *Crisi ed Organizzazione Operaia* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1974) 9-72

of representing the social division of labor and increasing the production of surplus-value. The latter, in fact, is no longer realized simply in extortion and the theft of labor-power, but finds a new space of realization in consumption and circulation, and consequently constantly seeks to expand its spaces of domination. What allows Karatani to interpret the Marxian theory of value as transcritique is the comparison with linguistics, the Saussurian one in particular, which allows him to thematize money as a medium, as an interstitial space between individuals and communities:

Saussure in fact employed a model of political economy when he considered language as synchronic system (i.e., Langue). The transformation of elements in a relational system provokes a shift of the whole system and produces a new system; the diachronic transformation of a language must be grasped as a change of system itself [...] That is to say that, if an analogy between language and money becomes crucial at all, it is only where their foreignness (Fremdheit) is at stake ²⁴.

The enlargement of the production cycle, both spatial and temporal, multiplies the need for systems of equivalence between differentiations, and the parallelism between currency and money translates this need, and at the same time multiplies the spaces of valorization and production of profit through the credit system. In this sense, commodity and money are different branches of the production system which coexist within the sphere of circulation, and which realize the mystery of value, as the value of the commodity, and as the fictitious value of the circulating currency. Surplus value is a direct consequence of the expansion of markets and the expansion of consumption, no longer just from the depletion and exploitation of labor-power.

Labor-power is the great absent in this theoretical framework, because it is reduced to an appendage of consumption. The edifice of transcritique creaks again, even though it fully reads the tendencies of the productive system. While moving in the sphere of 'real subsumption', Karatani focuses only on the sphere of circulation and

remains deaf to that of production, the place where capitalist metamorphoses are generated, whose effects he analyzes. The Marxian concept of 'real subsumption', as opposed to 'formal subsumption', is the turning point that Italian Workerism, U.S. Autonomous Marxism, and French 'Regulation Theory' have used to interrogate the transformation of production paradigms, the financialization of the economy, and the mutation of the subjective composition of labor²⁵. The passage from Fordist regulation, namely the state compromise between capital and labor of Keynesian and reformist types, to the paradigm of 'post-Fordism', has been interpreted as the passage from the centrality of the factory workforce to that of the mobile and diffused workforce in the 'social factory'. What emerges is a new cycle of regulation based on the absolute volatility of credit and the reduction of currency in circulation.

Consequently, the financial dimension has reappeared in all its political force, and, following Karatani's reasoning, philosophical, because it has transformed 'need' into an illusion of enrichment and into a religious faith in money, the only means of salvation. But, principally, real subsumption concerns the capitalist accumulation produced by the intensification of the extraction of relative surplus value, obtained by perfecting the devices for capturing labor time, and extending them beyond mere labor performance. The social dimension of the substance of labor-value is expressed at the maximum power of the concept, transforming the set of social relations into a huge surface of wealth production²⁶. Going further, authors such as Antonio Negri, integrating Marxian themes with Foucauldian ones, have spoken of 'biopolitics' to indicate how life, both in its biological and productive characteristics, has been subsumed within the meshes of control and accumulation of wealth²⁷. In this case, the language is no longer a simple system of equivalences but a production resource. The works of F. Rossi Landi and Paolo Virno further deepen these hypotheses, returning the image of language 'as work and as market'. Language is not only a metaphor for the system, but itself a productive system composed of different cap-

²⁴ Karatani, *Transcritique*, 229-230. To explore these issues, consider, by the same author, *Marx-Towards the Centre of Possibility* (London-New York: Verso Books, 2020).

²⁵ Michel Aglietta, *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation: The Us Experience* (London- New York: Verso, 2001).

²⁶ Harry Cleaver, *Reading Capital Politically* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979); Harry Cleaver, *Rupturing the Dialectic: The Struggle Against Work*. (Chico: Ak Press, 2017) 71-86.

²⁷ Antonio Negri, "Twenty Theses on Marx: Interpretation of Class Today," in *Marxism Beyond Marxism*, Ed by S.Makdisi, C.Casarino and R.E.Karl (New York-London: Routledge, 1996) 149-180

itals, whose realization is bound to both circulation and repetitive use. Like labor-power, language is 'purchased' and 'used' as a generating power, as a force capable of realizing a specific value. Moreover, as a biological function, it is directly inserted into the dynamics of capitalist production, no longer as a means of circulation but as a productive force, a widespread inventive force. The subjective dimension of biopolitical production realizes, according to these authors, the Marxian intuition of the General Intellect¹⁸ contained in a fragment of the *Grundrisse*, that is, the primacy of social production based on abstract knowledge, therefore on knowledge, skills and relational attitudes¹⁹. The subsumption of the sphere of circulation affects not only financial and consumption dynamics, but directly involves forms of life and the working class. Even if inserted in a contiguous theoretical horizon, Karatani's analyses pay the price of the absence of antagonistic subjectivity, which can become the very engine of the crisis.

Reading the genetic financialization of the economy as a meta-linguistic process, with a Lyotardian flavor²⁰, as pure transcendental speculation, again prevents Karatani from delving into the social dynamics of this same set of differential processes, of which indebtedness is an obvious telltale. Among many, Randy Martin has highlighted the linguistic logic of finance as the social logic of financial derivatives. For the American author, financial dynamics are 'kinesthetic' dynamics, based on intersubjective movements and the imaginative force of subjectivity, capable of involving social individuals in the vicious circle of debt and sacrifice²¹, of inscribing them in new dynamics of domination and dispossession.

In any case, the intertwining of savings, accumulation, and consumption highlighted by Karatani, by displacing the focus from production to circulation, shows its innovative power in the analysis of global dynamics, and in the attempt to rewrite the history of the structure of the world from exchange relations. The next section will focus on this theoretical project.

¹⁸ Karl Marx, *Lineamenti Fondamentali della Critica dell'Economia Politica* (Rome-Florence: la Nuova Italia, 1969-1971) 2.

¹⁹ Ferruccio Rossi-Landi, *Il Linguaggio come Lavoro e come Mercato: Una Teoria della Produzione e dell'Alienazione Linguistiche* (Milan: Bompiani, 2003) 61-89; Paolo Virno, *Grammatica della Multitudine* (Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2002).

²⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, *Economie Libidinale* (Paris: Minuit, 1974) 266-286.

²¹ Randy Martin, *Knowledge LTD: Toward a Social Logic of Derivative* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015).

3. World History as a History of Exchanges

The realization of surplus value finds its highest expression, as total social capital, in the global dimension of exchange and circulation²². Karatani's theoretical ambition is embodied in rewriting the history of globalization, or, rather, the progressive historical expansion of capitalism across the centuries. Capitalism, even more so in this context, means market economy, and thus the set of historical, anthropological and political relations generated from exchange. He condenses all of these reflections—present at the same time in other studies—in *The Structure of World History: From Modes of Production to Modes of Exchange*, in which the methodological system developed in the study of Kantian and Marxian philosophy finds a longue durée outflow, both as regards the historical dimension analyzed and the themes raised.

In the opinion of the writer, there are two elements of great originality of the work, even in the face of the critical elements that will be subsequently taken into consideration. The first is the attempt to fill the Marxian void with respect to the analysis of the global market; although present in the *Grundrisse* and in the preparatory manuscripts of *Das Kapital*²³, as well as in numerous articles resulting from his journalistic collaborations, there is no organic development of this theme by Marx himself. Karatani, taking his cue from the analyses of 'total reproduction' and financial dynamics in volume III of *Das Kapital*, shifts the point of view on the overall development of economic processes from the plane of production to that of exchange. For Karatani, exchange is the original core of social relations, as a set of molecular dynamics that bring separate individuals together in communities, right up to the most complex social structures of modernity.

Starting from this choice, the second element of originality is precisely the Weberian breath of Karatani's study, that is, the integration of the philosophical framework with anthropology, economics and sociology. Clearly, it is not only a matter of interdisciplinarity and the co-presence of different fields of knowledge in the definition of the analytical object market. In this sense, the dynamics of

²² Karatani, *Transcritique*, 292.

²³ Roman Rozdolsky, *Genesi e Struttura del 'Capitale' di Marx* (Bari-Rome: Laterza, 1971).

exchange are not resolved only in the economic activity, but spreads over the entire social structure, constituting itself in different forms: status and prestige at the political level (what differentiates and enriches the Marxian description of social classes), salvation at the religious level, and military force as regards the relationship between states at the international level²⁴. Consequently, the analysis of these kinds of relationships allows Karatani to operate in the interstices of the dichotomy between structure and superstructure, and thus to be able to hold together the micropolitics of everyday exchanges and the macropolitics of overall social structures²⁵. The general explanatory scheme, modeled on the Kantian triad Understanding-Sensibility-Imagination, is based on two interdependent schemes that link the dynamics of exchange to the formation of political institutions. In the first case, he distinguishes three matrices of social formations: Mode A, based on reciprocity and represented by the gift; Mode B, plunder and redistribution, represented by relationships of domination and protection; Mode C, that of commodity exchange, exemplified by money. To these social formations there correspond three structures: for A it is the Nation, for B it is the State, and for C it is the Capital. This scheme allows the scholar to synchronize the movements and the reciprocal interactions between social formations and overall structures during the different historical phases, and in this sense it represents a productive deviation within the field of historical materialism.

First, Karatani leans on the anthropological studies of Malinowski and Mauss on the centrality of *gift* to the constitution of the human community. In this sense, the scholar's approach is clearly influenced by Karl Polanyi: by placing the gift at the center of relations, he, de facto, opposes *exchange* and *market*, namely the fundamental contradiction between mutual dependence between subjects and the generalization of mercantile relations²⁶. The *double movement* of the economy is what allows him to engage with the theorists of the *world-economy* and the theorization of unequal exchange in the global system, namely the center-periphery structure of the world economy analyzed by Wallerstein, Emmanuel, Frank and Amin. The

transition between the phases of the capitalist economy is marked by attempts to centralize the monopoly of trade, and therefore on the predominance of monetary circulation over material production. The centralization of resources, in Weberian terms again, is the genetic moment of the state, offering protection in exchange for security and redistribution in exchange for participation in the production of wealth.

The Nation-State-Capital *Borromean Knot* is supported by the ability to accumulate and centralize financial flows and to find new spaces for emerging markets:

The State had to regulate trade that fell outside official channels [...] Yet the State was motivated by the desire for profits, as were the bureaucrats in its service who received compensation in the form of treasure or land [...] When long-distance trade expands beyond the level of the state's demand, the state is forced to permit a variety of merchants to engage in trade and the transportation of goods. As compensations for permitting and patronizing this trade, the state starts to levy custom duties and tools²⁷.

Evidently, the State plays a pivotal role in Karatani's system, under a twofold aspect: as a vector of trade intensification, implementing political choices corresponding to the phases of world development, and as a surrogate of the previous idea of community, implementing the construction of ties between different individuals. What guarantees the supremacy of the different state powers on the global scene is the strength of the monetary command, the ability to impose a monetary hegemony on trade. To return to the analogy of the previous paragraph, money is the spatial dislocation of exchange as a transcendental synthesis. Thus, Karatani accepts Arrighi's thesis on the centrality of finance in the history of global hegemonic cycles, and Wallerstein's thesis on the active protagonism of the state in the construction of the world-system, and uses both in the construction of his model²⁸. In this historical sequence, the 'mini world system' of antiquity is succeeded by the 'world empires' at the turn of modernity, up to the 'modern world system' of

²⁴ Max Weber, *Economia e Società I-IV* (Turin: Edizioni di Comunità, 1995); Eds. G. Arrighi, T.H. Hopkins, I. Wallerstein, *Antisystemic Movements* (Rome: Manifestolibri, 1992)

²⁵ Kojin Karatani, *The Structure of World History. From Modes of Production to Modes of Exchange* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014) 3.

²⁶ Karl Polanyi, *La Grande Trasformazione* (Turin: Einaudi, 2010).

²⁷ Karatani, *The Structure of World History*, 99.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 271-272.

mature capitalism. The repetition of dominant dynamics²⁹ is broken by the difference brought by new emerging actors, or innovations in the exchange system. The difference between 'empire' and 'imperialism', is, in fact, located in the gap between the different models to which both typologies are ascribed: if the first, which falls under model B, tends to partially redistribute the products among the different communities, the second model, which falls under model C, tends to expropriate the resources of others, and to emancipate the interests of the capitalist bourgeoisie from those of the state. In Luxembourgian terms, imperialism constitutes a phase of the extended reproduction of capital outside its borders, the search for external spaces on which to inscribe both the mercantile dynamics and dislocate the social tensions present in the motherland. The State Machine clearly occupies a central place in Karatani's model, in historical and philosophical-political terms. First, in the direct relationship that exists between power politics and the extension of the role of the state through command over exchange flows. For example, neoliberalism, for Karatani, is an extension of state imperialist policies, an expression of the link between state powers and multinational corporations, and thus the pursuit of hegemonic superiority in the commercial and financial sectors. The new global division of labor, consequently, is founded on monetary command and on the verticalization of the division of international powers³⁰. What is missing from this description is the territorial dimension of international governance, i.e. the material space where circulation flows are registered. It is possible to integrate Karatani's interpretation with the most recent studies on the dynamics of wealth accumulation and extraction, and on the pivotal role played by logistics. Logistics, in fact, is one of the most tangible expressions of the politics of operation of capitalism, of the active dimension that logistical infrastructures have in the transformation of territorial spaces through borders, corridors and hubs, and their impact on the concrete division of labor, and, therefore, also on production processes³¹. From this perspective, we can highlight the organizational role of the state in the dialectic between local and national spaces, and

the policies implemented to increasingly extend its spatial nature, and, therefore, the policy of command over the borders and the monopoly of force, military and diplomatic, in specific areas³². Furthermore, one can speak, concretely, of the 'revolution from above' in terms of the further characteristics that Karatani himself assigns to the imperialist evolution of Mode-C, with an ever-increasing process of differentiation in the accumulation of resources, in the creation of scarcity, and in the dynamics of appropriation and destruction of environmental resources. Consequently, the condition of existence of the state is, in fact, the *fictio iuris* par excellence in Western political thought: sovereignty is the theological-political matrix capable of linking religious ideology and the mechanisms of legitimacy. The presupposition of state sovereignty is the presence of a state of nature, prone to war, to be pacified and shaped, through the 'realist' path that leads from Hobbes to Carl Schmitt: "For Hobbes, the existence of the sovereign (i.e., the state) who monopolizes violence signifies the establishment of the state of peace. In the relations between states, however, a state of nature continues. The existence of the state was in itself sufficient, and Hobbes never consider its abolition"³³. The progressive slide from community to state, clearly, is the product of the territorial sedimentation of communities, the domestication of inhabitants, and the establishment of a social contract that alienates power from citizenship³⁴. Therefore, in Schmittian terms, state sovereignty is constituted through the series appropriation-production-division, which we find, in different words, in the interpretation of Karatani, as single moments of the ideal bond between social formations and modes of exchange. The artificiality of the natural community, in this frame, pairs with monetary abstraction and normative and legislative equivalence between subjectivities. In this sense, Karatani, hybridizing Kant and Freud, speaks of the sublimation of aggression and reabsorption of excess in the constitution of a state Super-Ego, and, therefore, in the work of the neutralization of widespread aggression. Moreover, the nation-state itself is based on homogeneity, on the production of a closed structure, which is also articulated through the production of a national language, which Karatani himself, in Derridean terms,

²⁹ Rosa Luxemburg, *L'accumulazione del Capitale e Anticritica* (Turin: Einaudi, 1960).

³⁰ Kojin Karatani, "Neoliberalism as a Historical Stage," in *Global Discourse*, 8:2 (214), 191-207. For a deepening of the differences between Empire and Imperialism consider Giovanni Arrighi, *Geometria dell'Imperialismo* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1978).

³¹ Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, eds., *The Politics of Operation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

³² Carlo Galli, *Spazi Politici. L'età Moderna e l'età Globale* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2001).

³³ Karatani, *The Structure of World History*, 298.

³⁴ James C. Scott, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2017).

equates to phonocentrism, to the metaphysical illusion of the constant presence of state domination over social life³⁵. The opposition between community and state will return in the next section, where Karatani's policy proposal will be discussed.

4. The Utopia of the World Community

The disjunctive synthesis between Kant and Marx, between the ethical dimension of the philosophy of the former, and the social and conflictual dimension of the latter, find fertile ground in Karatani's political project. The political translation of transcritique is the search for practices that move in the interstices of state and global powers, a politics of 'within and without' in search of spaces of visibility within the meshes of the structure. The community is the fundamental subject of Karatani's political research, the point of inscription of republican ethics, and of the relational and egalitarian dimension of association between different subjectivities. As mentioned in the previous section, the gift is the starting point of anthropological relationships between community members, because it is based on reciprocity, mutual recognition and the horizontality of interactions. Indeed, it is a total social fact that can determine significant changes in the political and economic structure. In this sense, Karatani traces the basis of social equality not in the possession of the means of production (in the political case, of the means of coercion), but in the circularity produced by exchange without equivalents, and thus, in a return to the living community not separated from its own force. He, in fact, advances the hypothesis of a further mode of exchange, D, which represents the transition to a social formation freed from the burden of exchange value:

Mode of exchange D represents the return of mode of exchange A in a higher dimension [...] Mode of exchange D and the social formation that originates in it can be called by many names- for example, socialism, communism, anarchism, council communism, associationism. But because historically a variety of meanings have been attached to these concepts [...] I will simply call it X [...] what is important here is to understand the phase to which it belongs³⁶.

³⁵ Karatani, *Nation and Aesthetics: On Kant and Freud* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

³⁶ Karatani, *The Structure of World History*, 8-9.

Karatani finds a foothold in Marxian historical-anthropological writings of the last phase, in which Marx famously deals with the theorizing of a revolutionary way forward for non-capitalist societies. Both in a dense section of the *Grundrisse*, and in his writings on Russia, China and India, Marx analyzes the structure of peasant communities and the central role in it of forms of common property, commons that use contemporary terminology, such as the Russian *obščina*. These forms, in addition to constituting a clear opposition to the processes of centralization and capitalist separation, represent the community's predisposition to relations based on recognition, and, therefore, envisage new and different forms of subjectification³⁷. Karatani, however, turns his critical gaze on pre-capitalist societies, in order to actualize the conditions of their existence: the community is what translates the intrinsic sociality of individuals and limits their destructive tendencies. Leaning on the fundamental study of Benedict Anderson³⁸, Karatani highlights the imaginative nature of social ties inscribed in the community space: *communitas* is the historical-anthropological substrate that determines the sense of belonging and social cohesion. Further, this dimension brings Karatani's thought closer to contemporary theorizations on the *commun* as a matrix of new democratic forms alternative to the state. Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, in their fundamental work, focus on this element of discontinuity in the formulation of radical policies, postulating the *commun* as a principle of collective political action, released from the limits of the decision and implemented through practices defined as 'instituting,' that is, able to produce new decision-making structures based on social cooperation and federalism. These *politiques du commun* may be able to produce new horizontal decision-making structures based on social cooperation and federalism³⁹. The *commun*, as well as the gift, is based on a different approach to the problem of revolutionary transition, because it replaces the moment of appropriation of power and economic means with the moment of the distribution of a substance that innervates social relations. Both of these approaches resolve into an ontology of reciprocity, which undoes social divisions and

³⁷ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *India, Cina, Russia: Le premesse di tre rivoluzioni* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1970); Kevin B. Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016).

³⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London-New York: Verso, 2006).

³⁹ Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, eds., *Commun: Essai sur la Révolution au XX Siècle* (Paris: La Découverte, 2014).

focuses on the concept of use as an alternative to exchange. The alternative, concretely, is based on the deconstruction of modern political grammar, on the enhancement of community ethics as a prerequisite for individual freedom. In this sense, Karatani's political philosophy distances itself from historical materialism because it expels, from the material dynamics, class as the agent of the historical movement. Moreover, he theorizes communism as a pure associative movement that opposes the primacy of political decision, displacing the realism of revolutionary politics on the moral and metaphysical plane of the search for the principle of coexistence and neutralization of the 'unbearable sociability' of Kantian memory. In fact, Karatani fully falls within the theoretical fields of radical democracy and Post-Marxism, of which he shares the following common characteristics: the absence of subjectivity, a decision-making vacuum, the search for alternative foundations for political action, and the search for pluralism. In the words of Karatani himself

The association of associations is far from the organization of the tree structure(.) So it needs a center, but the center should exist as a function just like transcendental apperception X and not something substantial. The association of associations should be equipped with a mechanism that avoids the reification of a substantial center⁴⁰

The central void of the state political system cannot be occupied by an antagonistic political machine, but must be distributed among the different nodal points of the social fabric. The community, like the people, is a Laclausian empty signifier to be filled⁴¹, or rather, with which to hypostatize social power. Radical democracy, in the wake of Arendt and Lefort, presupposes the agonism of political relations, that is, a non-dialectical dynamic whose political effects remain internal to the boundaries of the political structure, in an infra-structural dimension. In Gramscian terms, Karatani thinks of politics in terms of a 'war of positions', that is, the search for consensus and the opening of political and cultural spaces by subverting common sense and the hegemony of mercantile abstraction. In this case, the alternative foundation of this counter-hegemonic

project is found in Greek materialism, in the works of Democritus and Epicurus, a kinetic⁴² and fundamentally democratic and libertarian materialism. As Marx had already done in his doctoral dissertation, Karatani traces in this minor canon, atomist, naturalist, and atheist, a parallelism between the constant recombination of matter, the free fluctuation of atoms, and democratic invention. The opposition to the Athenian political model is, fundamentally, an opposition to Platonic cognitive and political mechanics, and to Aristotelian political typologies, which are founded on mythologies of origin that concealed the warlike dimensions of city democracy, and the slave nature of the wealth of the city-state. The rejection of appearance-truth dualism, a metaphysical translation of the political primacy of the philosopher-king, allows Karatani to focus on *isonomy* as a political form based on equality and freedom. Isonomy, in fact, is the phantom that lives and develops transversally to the association between democracy and state, and that translates into a critique of tyranny and the hypostasis of law, exalting, instead, the freedom of movement and the random and contingent encounters-contrasts between singularities⁴³. Historical time, at this point, is the time of the event, the Epicurean *Aion* opposed to the flow of *Chronos*, the time of association and encounter and not that of subsumption. *Isonomy* finds space and strength outside of its own historical field of emergence, in the practices of Nineteenth- and Twentieth-century workers' associationism and mutualism. Karatani elects these struggles tout court as a means of relation and isonomic organization within and against the relations of production, as institutions of the democracy to come. His position clearly embraces pre-Marxian socialism and Proudhonism, political projects related to the improvement of workers' conditions and not to the subversion of the system. The aporia of the politics of in-against, displaced on the plane of reformism, nevertheless shows some potential, including the delineation of a dual political strategy for moving between the different planes of capitalist social formation: the refusal to exchange one's labor-power and the construction of alternative circuits of exchange:

That is to say that in these moments workers can counter capital [...] both of them can occur in the topos where workers can be the subjects. These are the countermovements

⁴⁰ Karatani, *Transcritique*, 306.

⁴¹ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Egemonia e strategia socialista: Verso una Politica Democratica Radicale* (Genoa: Il Melangolo, 2011).

⁴² Thomas Nail, *Marx in Motion: A New Materialism Marxism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁴³ Karatani, *Isonomia and the Origins of Philosophy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

within. But in order for workers-consumers to be able to 'not to work' and 'not to buy', there must be a safety net whereupon they can still work and buy to live[...]The 'don't sell/ don't buy' boycott movements within capitalist production would accelerate the reorganization of capitalist corporation into cooperative entity⁴⁴.

Karatani's revolutionary reformism is set out here with the utmost clarity. The philosopher's Polanyan institutionalism, namely the impossibility of thinking of a complete subversion of capitalist structures, allows him to shift the political purpose of the struggles from the destruction to the positive transformation of the systemic structures themselves. The mode of exchange D finds its fulfillment in the imagination of a cooperative republic based on equal exchange and the recognition of the Other as the absolute and supreme end⁴⁵. Of course, the project of 'Perpetual Peace' is the logical global extension of this thought device. The Kantian utopia of the Kingdom of Ends cannot be limited to the state dimension alone, but must necessarily be cosmopolitan and equally diffuse. The relational mechanics of associationism hypothesized by Karatani, in fact, allows the realization of this hypothesis. How so? Firstly, by acting as a cosmopolitan avant-garde, as mutual institutions that act at the national level to facilitate the distribution of justice and rights, supporting cosmopolitan transformations⁴⁶. In this sense, the cosmopolitan project coincides with the project of democracy to come, because it assumes the responsibility for present and future generations as an irreducible and founding fact. At this point, the D mode of exchange replaces the previous explanatory models with the triad Mutualism-Republic-Cosmopolitanism, which encompasses the set of democratic processes ranging from local relations to mutualism and the global cosmopolitanism of freedom and solidarity. Moreover, the republican articulation of this moral responsibility finds its place in Karatani's reflections as a synthesis between the Kantian categorical imperative and Marxian-derived social struggles. The World Republic, in conclusion, indissolubly links the search for freedom with the need for relationships freed from equivalence and restored to

full human 'nature', that is, founded on friendship as the political horizon of human sociality.

The eschatological dimension of this philosophy of otherness, based on reciprocity, stands as an antidote to nationalism, racism and imperialism, and illustrates a suggestive hypothesis of cosmopolitanism focused on the immediate social needs of communities. The weak force of this utopia can certainly contribute to reviving the global political imagination, but can do so only by recalibrating those analytical gaps that, so far, we have tried to highlight.

Conclusion:

The brief and schematic reflections, presented here, on some passages of Karatani's work, allow us to make a synthetic evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the work of the Japanese philosopher, and try to indicate some directions to implement and strengthen this theoretical work. Primarily, Karatani's philosophical work links the ethical and conflictual dimensions in a non-dialectical key, making the relationship between these two poles dynamic and adaptable to changes in material conditions. The Kantian realm of ends and the Marxian realm of means unfold their theoretical effects on the different planes of Karatani's analysis, which highlights their transversal force of critique and proposal. The term 'transcritique', as an element of synthesis between these two theoretical poles, opens the way to a renewed vision of the relationship between philosophy and politics, which are not resolved in the enunciation of a new ideology, but actively contribute to the production of practices and institutional forms, able to realize the ethical idea of Justice. The absence of subjectivity, the recovery of production in circulation and the utopian dimension that results in a new philosophy of history, are the major *vulnus* of the work of the Karatani. The schematic and formal relationship between social formations and modes of exchange, and the absence of social conflicts transform structural dynamics into epiphenomena and historical progress into simple and empty repetition of the identical, namely into a moral philosophy of history, in which the same events are constantly repeated⁴⁷. In any case, Karatani's project, rather than showing a 'new

⁴⁴ Karatani, *Transcritique*, 300-301.

⁴⁵ Karatani, *The Structure of World History*, 302; also see: William Clare Roberts, *Marx's Inferno: The Political Theory of Capital* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

⁴⁶ Lea Ypi, *Global Justice and Avant-Garde Political Agency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁴⁷ Harry Harootunian, "Philosophy of History's Return. History and Theory," 54:1, (2015), 96-105; Joel Wainwright, "Capitalism, Imperialism, and Modes of Exchange: A Reply to Karatani," *Global Discourse*, 8:2 (2018), 208-214.

Marx', shows a flawed version, deprived of the focal points of the argument: the uniqueness of labor-power and the revolutionary outcome of class struggles.

The insistence on mutualism and infra-state associationism, at the same time, makes Karatani's work highly topical. For this reason, struggles for the redistribution of socially produced wealth, privately accumulated and subsumed in the dynamics of industrial and financial capital, can integrate struggles for distribution with those within the vast world of production. Within and Against, at this height, means using the tools prepared by capital to achieve forms of distributive material justice. The democratization of finance, as well as the need for an income decoupled from work performance, can constitute spaces of interstitial freedom between production and circulation⁴⁸.

Rejecting ideological themes and orthodox terminology, Karatani constructed a theory of democracy for the present, capable of extending into the future. The social synthesis he proposes, with its strengths and weaknesses, and the themes raised - justice, democracy and cosmopolitanism - make the Japanese philosopher one of the most interesting voices on the contemporary critical scene. Between the (missing) class and the moral imperative, he has produced an ethic of possible social transformation that is closely relevant today, especially in a historical phase in which war and social and ecological destruction have returned with ferocity to the everyday.

If the author has indicated the still-alive specters of Marx and the democratic and cosmopolitan horizon in his reflections, it is the task of social movements to revive these indications in their practices of conflictual transformation.

⁴⁸ Brian Massumi, *99 Theses on the Revaluation of Value: A Postcapitalist Manifesto* (St Paul: Minnesota University Press, 2018); Robert Meister, *Justice is an Option. A Democratic Theory of Finance for the Twenty-First Century* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2021).