

Karatani's Marxian parallax

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One of the rarely noticed historical ironies of the twentieth century was the effort of societies located on the capitalist periphery – outside of Euro-America – to resort to a philosophy which had no place for them in order to explain their entry into and experience of capitalist modernization. Japan led the way in this search for meaning, owing to its good fortune in avoiding outright colonization, but even colonized regions drawn into the capitalist desiring machine invariably turned to philosophy – usually neo-Kantianism, phenomenological existentialism and Marxism – as the privileged optic through which to refract their experience and grasp its ultimate meaning; societies which only yesterday, so to speak, obeyed the rhythms of vastly different social and cultural referents.

It is well known that Edmund Husserl, on the eve of World War II, gave explicit expression to the idea that only the West knew philosophy. This was a lasting cultural conceit inherited and willingly but paradoxically continued by 'Western Marxism' down to the present day. But this reminder of exclusion failed to discourage and inhibit the several attempts by Japanese and other 'latecomers' to utilize a philosophy that could not conceptualize its outside in order to explain to themselves the nature of both the history and society they were made to live under the new regime of capitalist modernization and colonization. With Marxism, thinkers were early induced to rethink it as philosophy. What this repressed history showed was precisely the recognition that since philosophy held no place for their societies, and no accounting of the difference they represented, in spite of its universalizing claims, it was vital to see in this absence philosophy's vulnerable centre, the point at which its universalistic presumptions collapsed like a house of cards. Long before the poststructuralist assault on metaphysics, Japanese thinkers and others outside of Euro-America had already begun the task of identifying the scandal of its claims.

With the publication of Kojin Karatani's *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx*,* we are reminded of both the

neglected history of the attempt to recruit the resources of philosophy to explain the experience of modernity and philosophy's unexpected move, embracing a deconstructive impulse before the letter, to save it from itself. Long known as one of contemporary Japan's principal literary and cultural thinkers, Karatani, who now spends part of the year teaching in an American university, has in many ways continued this great tradition, bringing it back from its shadowed exile, to recall for us the importance of all those attempts formulated on the margin to contest the claims of the centre with its own 'weapons', what Chinese in the nineteenth century advised in the formula 'using barbarian tools to manage the barbarians'. But, as Karatani shows, it's not as simple as it sounds and his book is no derivative imitation.

Towards the end of this long, dense, complex and original book, Karatani explains that his goal 'in writing [it] ... is a return to *Capital* once more to read the potential that has been overlooked' (265). With this announcement he is clearly referring to a tradition of misrecognitions bound to an 'ideology of industrial capitalism' sanctioning all those efforts by Marxists to 'renovate its creativity'. The promise of extracting this overlooked potential is to be achieved by reading Kant through Marx and Marx through Kant in order to recover their shared ground of critique. Karatani warns early that his reading has nothing to do with the neo-Kantianism that dominated prewar academic philosophy in Japan, even though there were thinkers like Tosaka Jun, whose Marxism was mediated by Kant rather than Hegel and whose conception of dialectic comes close to Karatani's choice of the notion of parallax. The strategy of pairing reveals two different but mutually complementary positions and allows Karatani to resort to Kant apparently to make up for what he sees missing in Marx's materialism by adding a subjective/ethical dimension. Kant and Marx shared a critical perspective based on 'the pronounced parallax' that took the form of the antinomy. Here Karatani risks recuperating the figure of those very

* Kojin Karatani, *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx*, trans. Sabu Kohso, MIT Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2003. 366 pp., £24.95 hb., 0 262 11274 4.

bourgeois antinomies that both Lukács and Sohn-Rethel, in their own ways, held up as instances of idealist contradictions. In Karatani's reckoning there occurs a constant 'transposition' between the two thinkers, as they move to different discursive positions that produce the parallax. This migration between positions is what also characterizes, for Karatani, the oscillations observed when workers change their location from selling labour-power to occupying the place where they consume the goods they have produced. I will return later to this point, which is central to the articulation of a new strategy of association against capital, state and nation. But it should also be noted that the parallax resembles all of those early attempts by thinkers outside Euro-America to envisage an arrangement whereby the polarities representing decisive differences between West and East functioned as antinomies whose transposition was necessary to make each other whole.

According to Karatani, Marxists have failed to recognize this transverse moment, whether it is in Kant, Marx or the worker, where opposite truths – antinomies – intersect to provide a transcritical perspective. What Karatani is pointing to is a transcendental critique capable of leading not to a third position, as such, but to the opening of transversal and transpositional movement. In fact, this theoretical movement enables him to reread *Capital* in such a way as to reveal the silhouette of association which, he believes, manifests a 'possible communism', an ethico-economic form of exchange that owes as much to Proudhon as it does to Marx, a geological shift from the movement of labour to consumption (295). Although this movement involves seeing how Marx grasped the worker occupying both the place of abstract labour and consumption, as if temporal and spatial difference made the transfer negotiable and natural, the resulting transposition resembles more a shift from proletarianization to embourgeoisement. But before I turn to this parallax it is useful to see what transcritique yields for a rereading of *Capital*.

The worker as consumer

Karatani's primary purpose is to contest a productionist or workerist account of *Capital*. This is what he means when he disparagingly calls attention to the ideology of industrial capitalism in order to dismiss it. But this, by no means original, intention is also driven by a desire to discredit the 'cultural turn' in Marxism (and possibly a cultural studies no longer Marxian) and its debilitating dependence on base/superstructure causality and its privileging of representation, as ideological reproduc-

tion. While commendable that Karatani wishes to avoid the entrapments of the base/superstructure dyad that has dogged traditional Marxian hermeneutics, and to move beyond the pervasive culturalism authorized by the turn to consumption, his own programme to politicize or, better yet, to ethicize the worker as consumer risks recuperating the discourses he is seeking to correct, along with their own propensity for locating subjective agency. The decision to orchestrate a confrontation of Kant and Marx in order to restore a parallax perspective, demanding both the recognition of difference and constant relocations from one antinomy to another, without resorting to the resolutions promised by the operation of sublation, enables a reading of Marx's *Capital* for its account of systems of exchange. The result of this 'history' is the inauguration of the commodity exchange that still dominates contemporary society. (Here Sohn-Rethel would have been invaluable to his project but would have altered Karatani's views of Kant.)

Before the installation of commodity exchange there were two prior historical forms: 'exchange within a community – a reciprocity of gift and return', followed by 'plunder' and 'redistribution'. This superimposition of history on the logical order of economic categories opens the way to a future fourth form of exchange, which Karatani calls 'association', that calls for the establishment of mutual aid bound by neither a principle of exclusion nor coercion identified with community. In Karatani's thinking this fourth moment was envisaged first by Kant in his ethics, rather than Proudhon, and requires passing through capitalist market society. The 'trinity' of capital, nation and state are necessarily embedded in these forms of human exchange and fail to conceal their limits of inclusion and reliance on force by fixing a pattern of circular repetition impossible to overcome. But in rereading Marx's *Capital* from the perspective of the 'pronounced parallax', Karatani manages to discern an exit and the possibility of a new modality of exchange. The real thrust of transcritique is to get to this fourth type of human exchange – association – based on mutual aid and assistance realized by the subjective agency of the global worker. In this respect, when Karatani relocates the worker to the place of consumption where, he proposes, surplus value is finally realized and where it can be stopped through boycotts and other strategies, he has joined a swelling chorus of contemporary writers calling for a return to ethics as a more than adequate substitute for politics.

Karatani bases his reading on the crucial separation of the process of production from circulation and thus

consumption. To make this manoeuvre he proposes that the movement of capital in the formula $M-C-M'$ – referring to the realization of surplus value – actually means that the operation ultimately depends upon whether or not products are sold. ‘And surplus value is realized in principle only by workers in totality buying back what they produce’ (20). Acknowledging that in the production process the worker must sell his/her labour-power, he recognizes that the resulting relationship between capitalist and worker will resemble the one between master and slave. Since commodities must be sold in the place of consumption, presumably temporally and spatially distinct from the time and site of production, Karatani reasons that this is the only location wherein the worker possesses buying power and is in a position to purchase, almost as if the chronotopic shift permitted them to shed their identity with abstract labour and slide into the space of a subject when before they were only personifications of capital. Accordingly, Marx recognized that since the worker possesses exchange value and acts as a consumer, owning money, acquiring ‘the form of money’ thrusts him/her into ‘a simple centre of circulation’, ‘one of its infinitely many centres, in which his[her] specificity as a worker is extinguished’ (*Grundrisse*; Karatani, 20). But Marx also saw here the great illusion of every capitalist who wished only that other workers, not his own, confront him as consumers. In *Capital*, then, consumption stands as the place where surplus value is finally realized. For Karatani, this means that understanding what Marx proposed requires we shift our perspective from the production process to the circuit of circulation, as if, in fact, they constituted qualitatively different spheres. It is, of course, within the space between different systems – the line separating the parallaxics of production and circulation, the boundary between communities, that the ‘doubting subject’ appears (134). In Karatani’s explanation, Marx himself looms as the paradigmatic figure of a subject who doubts, whose materialism stands between idealism and empiricism (141).

At the heart of Karatani’s rereading is the conviction that classical economists, unlike Marx, overlooked the ‘magic of money’. For them, money functioned only as a secondary consideration and as barometer of labour time embodied in the commodity or its role in facilitating circulation. If they thus failed to see capital as the self-reproduction of money, the principal motive driving it, they also lost sight of the relationship between wage workers as sellers of labour-power – the primary form of commodification – and capitalists as its buyers. The most crucial instance of blindness was

the inability to perceive that at least on one occasion capital must occupy the position of seller owing to its law of self-production. By making this move Karatani transfers the problematic from production, as such, to the realm of circulation, which he summarizes in the following way: $C-M$ (selling) and $M-C$ (buying) constitute separate spheres in such a measure as to permit exchange’s capacity for infinite expansion. At the same time he manages to recognize the propensity for generating crises in the ‘fatal leap’ (*salto mortale*) implicit in $C-M$. Even though the circulation process is reversed in the circuit $M-C-M'$, Karatani nevertheless sees the formulas as two separate processes rather than simply two sides of the same coin, because the impulse for circulation is prompted by the possessor of money. Hence Marx saw capital as a process of social chrysalis and metamorphosis – from the larval stage to the butterfly – inasmuch as the movement proceeded from production to products and back to money again. But, according to Karatani, the metamorphosis must be completed if capital is to realize its own self-production. Hidden in the circulation of commodities is the movement of money.

What this meant for Marx was the persistence of the figure of the fetish of commodity (as against the ‘commodity fetish’), the guarantor of endless self-production and the reproduction of social relations of production, indeed the social itself. The primacy of the value form as a structuring agent – what Marx called the ‘germinal cell’ – mandates that circulation, far from representing a different value system as Karatani supposes, must be seen as simply one of the moments of production, just as price, which he subsequently attributes to an evolutionary process within the interstices of different value systems, was always one of the forms of appearance of value itself, since the latter had no ‘empirical’ reality. As for the putative power of the worker as consumer, Karatani seems to have overlooked Marx’s own strictures that even though labour capacity is posited at the centre of exchange, it is ‘just as essential to it ... to restrict the worker’s consumption to the amount necessary to reproduce his labour capacity’ (*Grundrisse*).

The crucial question or aporia that Karatani confronts is not merely the relationship between the production process and sphere of circulation but where surplus value is finally realized. Recognizing that Marx threw up mixed signals concerning the capacity and incapacity of circulation to generate surplus value in the last instance, as well as the ambiguities surrounding the role played by production, Karatani clings to the observation that ‘mass commodities’

must be sold in order to replace constant and variable capital. Failing to do so will result in a lessening of exploitation by the capitalist and the diminution of surplus capital or only its 'partial extraction'. Karatani seizes upon this uncertainty, which Marx put in the form of a contradiction, to propose that 'regardless of what happens in the process of production, surplus value is finally realized in ... circulation.' But what Marx was proposing was that the condition of immediate exploitation – production inaugurating the process of realizing surplus value – is not identical with the 'realization of that exploitation' (*Capital 3*; Karatani, 224). The former is restricted to the productive forces, the latter by 'the proportionality between different branches of production and by society's power of consumption' (my stress). The import of this passage fails to diminish the power of the production process at the expense of augmenting circulation as the sphere of surplus value. Rather, it calls attention to the structural links that dramatize how the latter (circulation) is both a moment of the former (production) and subordinate to it, as 'interdependent branches of the collective production of society' (*Capital 1*; Karatani, 225). What Marx was referring to here was the development of the division of labour arising from



those spheres of exchange and production which were originally distinct and independent from one another, but which in industrial capitalism are converted by exchange into 'interdependent branches'. Karatani's own 'leap of faith' is to see this global interaction as the site for multiple and different systems capable of setting the stage for the worker's entry into circulation to become the consumer subject. This leap is propelled by two convictions: that surplus value is invariably produced by and within an arena of different value systems (presumably the globe) and that industrial capitalism actually derives from merchant capital and

is a variation of this authorizing moment, differentiated only by its commitment to ceaseless technological development.

This emphasis on circulation prepares the way for Karatani to propose how the (global) worker becomes the active agent who possesses the capacity to realize a 'possible communism'. Here he loops back to Kant's ethics to assert that association must be rooted in 'an economy that is ethical and an ethics that must be economic'. He is convinced that once the worker occupies the place of consumption – where surplus value is finally realized – circulation is 'subordinated to the will of the other', that is, 'workers qua consumers' (288). Production is only the place where workers sell their labour-power and seek to improve their conditions of work. Real proletarian subjectivity corresponds to the moment when the worker moves to the position of consumer in the process of circulation (290). In contrast to Antonio Negri, who actively located the possibility of political subjectivity in the production process, Karatani needs to reposition the worker in relation to consumption in order to reach his destination, which is the fourth mode of exchange represented by association. This was what his own, now failed, New Association Movement was supposed to

constitute, as a vanguard producers' and consumers' cooperative aiming to equip itself with a Local Exchange Trading System, LETS (see Harry Harootunian, 'Out of Japan: The New Associationist Movement', *Radical Philosophy* 108, July/August 2001, pp. 2–6). On a global scale, this non-capitalist cooperative association would put the worker in a position of agency outside of the circuits of M–C–M', and presumably outside the place that they become 'money en masse that buys commodities'. Here, they are poised to control the circuits of surplus value. But this is to describe nothing more than how the

worker becomes a bourgeois subject who is no more capable of blocking the realization of surplus than the seller of labour-power in the production process.

Karatani's epic effort to rethink the ground of proletarian subjectivity risks simply hastening the full development of the commodity relation on a global scale. While he plainly overstates the role played by the circulation process by following historical chronology too closely, his preference stems from the fact that historically capital developed in the sphere of circulation and only later passed on to the production process. If capital seemed to have been born in the

sphere of circulation (commercial profit, interest, rent etc.) it was solely a deduction of the profit subsequently realized later in production. In other words, the genesis of the historical categories do not correspond to the actual origins of capital logic. Marx's analysis of the basic categories of capitalism presupposed the historical existence of the relations that had unfolded and which he had already deduced logically. Hence, he could write:

We have not yet dealt with the historic passage of circulation to capital. To the contrary simple circulation is an abstract sphere of the process of bourgeois production, which, by its own determination, presents itself as an element, a simple manifestation of a deeper process situated behind it, at the same time its' result and product. (From a fragment of an early version of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1858), quoted in Anselm Jappe, *Les Aventures de la Marchandise*, Denoel, Paris, 2003, p. 93)

In *Capital* Marx steadfastly maintained that the misunderstanding between production and circulation was the consequence of the 'confusion which identified the social process of production with the surplus process of labour', the operation of a simple metabolism with nature (Jappe, 102). When Marx began with the most simple element – the commodity – he already presupposed the existence of the entire social structure. Abstract labour historically was less a presupposition than a consequence of the capitalist development of the forces of production. But Marx consistently upheld the priority of the logic of economic categories over historical development. In the analysis of social relations, the categories capitalist society has developed cannot be based on their chronology. It would thus be erroneous to arrange economic categories according to the order they have historically developed. In *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* he acknowledged that he was advancing general and abstract categories that did not necessarily correspond to history. The order of these categories must always be determined by the relations that exist between them in modern bourgeois society and will appear as the inverse of that which seems to be their natural (historical) sequence or conforms to the order of succession of historical evolution. Hence, the succession of categories in the analysis of the mature system, as Marx found it in mid-nineteenth-century England, does not correspond to the historical reality which, in any case, they presuppose. In this connection, it seems that Karatani may have played fast and loose with Marx's method by privileging the historical order

(as exemplified by the paradigmatic role accorded to merchant capital) over the logical succession of economic categories implicated in the analysis of the developed system.

Ethical subject, or subject of capital?

Yet Karatani's account is not only methodologically wobbly. In seeking to rescue the worker's subjectivity by situating it in the place of consumption (circulation) he comes close to recuperating the traditional Marxism he has promised to overcome. What he manages to do is rescue an account that has envisioned capitalist and worker as owners of money who therefore possessed the capacity to act (buy), making them creators rather than creatures. Marx, it might be recalled, once famously remarked that 'money and commodity cannot take themselves to the market; they cannot exchange themselves' (*Capital* 1). Too often, traditional Marxism has reversed the catalogue, so to speak, to find value concealing behind it the veritable essence of capitalism, which was the exploitation of one class by another. For Marx, the classes existed only as 'guardians' and executors of the logic of the organic composition of capital. Hence the capitalist functioned as the 'personification' of capital, its 'bearer', in the same way that the worker personifies labour. The domination of the capitalist over the worker is the domination of the thing over humans, of 'dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour', of the production process over the labour process whereby product becomes a commodity. There is also the category of the fetish as the real inversion wherein the capitalist is transmuted into the place-holder of power as its personification.

In the production process, then, there are only 'masks' and 'personifications' of economic categories. While Marx had few illusions that these place-holders were not simply innocent victims but willing and enthusiastic participants, he also never doubted that they were incapable of controlling a system motored by the internal contradictions of a society founded on the commodity form. In *Capital*, Marx identified value and its capacity for splitting as the 'subject of a process' that assumes the form of money and commodities, but still manages to change its 'magnitude' to valorize itself. 'It differentiates itself', he remarked, 'just as God the father differentiates himself from the son, although both are of the same age and for, in fact one single person' (*Capital* 1). Consistently rejecting a theory of 'delusional' subjectivity that recalled earlier eighteenth-century theories seeking to explain religion as simply an 'imposture' organized by priests, he

rarely described capitalism as an ensemble of personal relationships of domination, directed better to deceive the exploited and dominated, lurking behind an appearance of objective circumstances, such as value, while making their subjective machinations disappear into a natural process (Jappe, 98). For that to have happened, it would have been necessary for men, or groups of them, to constitute themselves as the veritable subject of commodity society and creatively devise the categories of this form of socialization. But that would now mean we could only attribute such categories to reflections of the very inversion that has organized the subject's mind and cognitive capacities. At the same time, he announced that 'value is ... the subject ... that valorizes itself independently'. Sociality and subjectivity become manifest in humans as reflexes of the automatic movement of commodities and the self-valorization of value.

Under these circumstances it is surprising to see Karatani turn to investing Marx with a Kantian 'ethical subject' capable of acting according to the protocols of transcritique, which would mean possessing the faculty of a singular consciousness empowered to dispose itself spontaneously, a subject setting into motion the objects surrounding it. Yet the theory of the fetish permits only a subject that is neither an individual human nor collectivity but their objective social relationships. To be sure, humans, according to Anselm Jappe, are in the final analysis the creators of the commodity but they make it in a way Marx described: 'They don't know it but they do it' (Jappe, 99). Value never expresses other, more essential relations, found lurking behind it, but is itself the fundamental relationship informing capitalism. In this regard the fetish acquires the status of a universality that is not the sum of its parts, acting like Karatani's 'transcendental *x*', an involuntary effect created by the conscious actions of particular subjects. In this sense the value form assumes the appearance of an 'unconscious' of society; indeed it acts as its unconscious, reproducing itself through an automatic self-valorization it has generated without knowing it. 'Individuals are subsumed under social production; social production exists outside them as their fate; but social production is not subsumed under individuals, manageable by them as their common wealth' (*Grundrisse*).

At this point, Karatani could have turned to and utilized an earlier argument that appears to be based on the recognition of partial or formal subsumption and the persistence of unevenness throughout the world. This observation was consistent with the experience of the periphery especially, where it was lived

more intensely than in the self-universalized centre still strangely valorized by the Western Marxism that Karatani seeks to contest. If he had held fast to the recognition that in the future all production will never be completely capitalist (252) and that there will always be 'semi-proletarians' (a venerable term from the lexical treasury of Japanese Marxism), that premodern productive practices will continue to persist and forms of unevenness will be reproduced in new registers, Karatani, like others before him, might have found the site for a subject-position free from the taints of the commodity relation. At the very least he would have been alerted to those persisting regimes of formal subsumption (which Hardt and Negri reject, seeing only real subsumption) and the forms of historical unevenness they continually generate – the difference he aspires to reach – as a condition of attending to how labour-power, both individually and collectively, manages to resist and elude its assigned role as pure commodity proposed by capital's logic. But this insight, like so many in this book, remains one of many unrealized throwaway lines.

If Karatani has departed somewhat from Marx's method in *Capital* it is because he has not been able to shake free from a residual poststructuralism based on the linguistic model. For not only is his conception of capitalism made to serve the accomplishment of surplus value 'attained by the production of difference' (265), his enthusiasm for identifying a subject that will act ethically as consumer (Kant) actually occupies a position already prepared for it by the linguistic model of the subject that speaks (79–80). Years ago I read an earlier book in Japanese by Karatani, 'The Possibility of Marx', which I liked even though it was embedded in a deconstructionist strategy. Not too long ago I mentioned this to him and he replied that his new work was an immensely different undertaking. Yet this is only in so far as *Transcritique* has tried to provide the theoretical grounding for a new form of exchange and the guiding principles for a new practice and movement devoted to realizing its delayed promise.

Finally, it is rare to see a work of such philosophical complexity and sophistication in Japanese so well translated into English. Readers need not fear they are losing something of Karatani's rich exposition of complex ideas by relying on Sabu Kohso's translation. The ideas are, in every respect, rendered clearly and precisely, fulfilling Benjamin's task of the translator to give 'voice to the *intentio* of the original not as reproduction but as harmony, as a supplement to the language in which it expresses itself, as its own kind of *intentio*'.