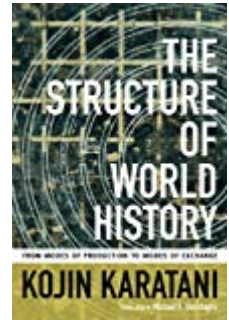


Kojin Karatani. *The Structure of World History: From Modes of Production to Modes of Exchange.* Translated by Michael K. Bourdaghs. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014. xxi + 352 pp. \$94.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8223-5665-3.



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Published on H-Asia (April, 2015)

Commissioned by Douglas Slaymaker (University of Kentucky)

In the introduction to *The Structure of World History* Kojin Karatani points out that so far he had been developing and presenting his views based on texts of other thinkers and their reinterpretations. However, “in taking up the problem of the structure of world history, I felt the need to construct my own theoretical system.... This is because the problem I am wrestling with here can only be explicated systematically” (p. xvi). The work under consideration here may thus certainly be regarded as a break. Yet, to appreciate it adequately, it should be put into the context of a longer period of time, starting in the 1990s and lasting beyond 2010, the year in which the Japanese version of *The Structure of World History* (*Sekaishi no kōzō*) was published.

On the one hand, Karatani already articulated several ideas central to *The Structure of World History* in his study *Transcritique: On Marx and Kant*, published in 2003 (*Toransu kuritiku: Kanto to Marukusu* [2004]). He had been developing his original concept of “transcritique” (*trans* in the twofold sense: *trans*-cendental and *trans*-versal)

in several articles in Japanese since 1998. With the English translation, he then also became well known as a philosopher of history far beyond Japan. Importantly, this theoretical critique of capitalism was at the same time the basis for the practical-political equivalent called New Associationist Movement (NAM). Karatani founded NAM (2000-2003) with like-minded intellectuals and activists, like the author Murakami Ryū and the musician Sakamoto Ryūichi, who aimed to generate producer and consumer associations based on their own local currency and credit systems. In 2006, Karatani published the paperback *Sekai kyōwakoku e* (Toward the world republic), which he described as the “prolegomena” to the *The Structure of World History*.^[1]

On the other hand, Karatani has continued to write his text since the publication of *Sekaishi no kōzō* in 2010. Korean, Chinese, or Taiwanese readers of the respective translations encounter different versions. The English translation under review here is amended and refined as well. In addition, numerous interviews, lectures, discus-

sions, and even conferences dedicated to the book in Japan and elsewhere constantly prompted Karatani to work on the text. For example, “*Sekaishi no kōzō*” o yomu (Reading “The Structure of World History”) from 2011 contains a number of discussions about the book as well as a long article in which Karatani reflects on his central ideas in the context of the 3.11 triple disaster. Three other publications between 2012 and 2014, namely, *Tetsugaku no kigen* (2012) (Origins of philosophy), *Yūdōron: Yanagita Kunio to yamabito* (2012) (Nomadism: Yanagita Kunio and the mountain people), and *Teikoku no kōzō* (2014) (The structure of empire), continue in the trajectory of *The Structure of World History*. All three adhere to a practice of thinking that Karatani describes as follows: “In order to maintain the balance in the composition of the book [*The Structure of World History*], I had to condense many things I wanted to think about. Therefore, I felt the need to speak about what I couldn’t deal with properly there in discussions and lectures.”[2] One might add that this is also the case in the works following *The Structure of World History*. The Publisher Iwanami Shoten has already announced a paperback version of this book for early 2015. Most likely, the paperback will also be different from the 2010 version, as well as from the version discussed here.

To place Karatani’s *The Structure of World History* within the context of such a culture of discussions and publications is, I believe, helpful and necessary, because it brings something I would like to call a “homology” of life and thinking to light. Karatani’s life—and that of his comrades-in-arms—*between* various *worlds*, whether geographical, academic-disciplinary, or theoretical-practical, is one of “nomadic” *movement*, of searching *repetition*, of *radical critique*, and of an earnest appreciation of and engagement with the *other*. At the same time, these characteristics of his work also constitute central concepts and figures of thought in all the abovementioned works. The fact that they are picked up and *rewritten*

from a different perspective time and again has to do with fundamental worldwide changes starting in the 1990s. That Karatani does not call these changes “globalization” but rather uses the term “neo-imperialism” (*shin-teikokushugi*),[3] meaning state-based attempt of capital to subject the entire world (humanity and nature) to its logic of exploitation, is related to a political concern that drives all his theoretical and practical efforts since: overcoming the modern world system of capital-nation-state by means of a world revolution and its sublation in a system dominated by justice based in exchange.

Karatani enunciates this concern in *The Structure of World History* as well, both in the preface and at the end of the book. On the pages in between he unfolds a materialistic philosophy of human history that refers to Karl Marx’s concept of social formation and at the same time aims to rethink it in two ways. (It is important to note that Karatani’s critique of Marx is not intended to deny his value overall [“Marx is dead”], but on the contrary emphasizes his most important methodological premise, namely, to uncover the hidden general mechanisms and processes underlying history and society by way of abstraction and, as Karatani adds, imagination or thought experiment.) According to Karatani, Marx intended capital as an analysis of the capitalist mode of production shaped by commodity exchange and had to “bracket off” the questions of nation and state as historically autonomous subjects (p. xvii). “I will carry out a similar procedure with regard to the state and nation. This will provide the basis for seeing how state, capital and nation are related to one another—how, in other words, these fundamental modes of exchange are related historically” (p. 28). By substituting the Marxian core concept of “modes of production” with the phrase “modes of exchange,” Karatani avoids the Marxist economism (which emerged after Marx) without having to discard the concept of an economic basis in general. “Economic” in a broad sense covers the modes of exchange as economic basis as well,

which allows for a new articulation of the social formations—and thus the structure of world history.

Karatani distinguishes four autonomous modes of exchange, based on which human beings have intercourse and organize themselves. The mode of exchange A is a gift-counter-gift system of reciprocity *between* clans, “forming larger stratified communities” (p. 5; here Karatani revises his earlier view based on Marcel Mauss, according to which A = reciprocity dominates within the boundaries of [tribal] communities). The mode of exchange B also arises *between* communities through “plunder and redistribution”—the establishment of state representing “a kind of exchange in that the ruled are granted peace and order for their obedience” (p. 6). The mode of exchange C, or commodity exchange, is grounded in mutual consent *between* a person who possesses money and a person who has the commodity, but which does not mean mutual equality and therefore brings about class relations. And the mode of exchange D, called X or associationism, is simultaneously free and mutual, but “does not exist in actuality. It is the imaginary return of the moment of reciprocity (A) that has been repressed under modes of exchange B and C. Accordingly, it originally appeared in the form of religious movements” (p. 7).

From this perspective of four modes of exchange, Karatani turns to the history of Marx’s five social formations, in other words, the clan society, Asiatic despotism/state, ancient classical slave system, feudalism, and capitalist modes of production, which he deems valid still today after two substantial modifications. First, Marx’s geographical attributions have to be rethought, because the “Asiatic” formation can be found outside Asia just as well as feudalism can be found outside of “Germania.” These formations have to be understood in their geographical context, meaning in a spatial-structural interdependence. Second and closely related to this shift of the

thought framework, distinctions *between* them “do not mark successive diachronic stages but rather positional relationships” within the space of a world system (p. 124). So, the Asiatic agrarian community was not “something that developed as an extension of clan society,” nor was the Greek civilization more advanced than the Asiatic state (p. 21). Rather, each social formation constituted a specific constellation of the four modes of exchange; the differences between them are caused by the respective dominant mode of exchange and its influence on the other three modes. Nomadic hunter-gatherer societies are dominated by collective deposition and equal distribution of all products rather than by reciprocal exchange. By contrast, the (first major historical) shift to settled communities (of fishermen) allowed for an accumulation of wealth and the development of class differences. However, the reciprocity of mode of exchange A prevents such hierarchical structure and thus becomes the dominant mode of exchange in the formation of the clan society. At the same time, trade (mode B) and war (mode C) with other clan societies exist, even if these modes of exchange remain marginal. Examining these mechanisms in the book’s first part, “Mini World Systems,” Karatani focuses especially on the role that the fourth mode of exchange, the power of the gift, plays in this context of the “Mini World Systems,” as he calls it.

In part 2, “World-Empire,” Karatani analyzes the three social formations “Asiatic despotic states,” slave society, and feudalism as positional relationships in the context of world-empires, the core of which is dominated by mode of exchange B. State bureaucrats control trade, for example, commodity exchange C, and protect the agrarian communities (A) still existing in the margins in exchange for tributes. In this second transition phase in world history, universal religions emerge. They are ambiguous in nature, supporting the new hierarchical regime but at the same time also posing an opposition to B in that they provide a space for new struggles for equality (D)

and potentially free the individual from the constraints of community. However, B could not dominate the submargins of the world-empires (Greece and later Germania). Rather, here, in the free cities, a third world historical transition was initiated: the transition to the “Modern World System” (part 3), the formation of the capitalistic industrial society, in which the mode of exchange C is dominant. Even here reciprocity and plunder are not superseded entirely but transformed in such a manner that they connect in the capitalism-nation-state trinity.

The fact that this triplex system emerged for the first time in (Western) Europe in the sixteenth century has thus nothing to do with an alleged legacy of the classical antique democracy, which is held to be superior to Asiatic despotism. It took shape in the interaction with other world systems, expanded globally from their margins, and slowly dissolved the world empires. In the following pages, Karatani asks how commodity exchange could become dominant over the other modes of exchange, in other words, how capital could accumulate and become a primary social power within the framework of the inseparable “Borromean Knot” of capitalism-nation-state. The surplus value is originally generated when equal exchanges of commodities are “carried out across different value systems ... through buying low and selling high” (p. 98). This merchant capital is of great importance in the strengthening of the absolutist monarchies of Western Europe as sovereign states characterized by the monopoly to use force and a functioning bureaucracy. It was in their interest to recognize and to support the autonomy of the urban trade capital as social bearer of the commodity exchange principle in order to increase their own power. Yet this capital-state relation could only stabilize with the bourgeois revolution and industrial capitalism. “The epochal nature of industrial capital lies in its establishment of a seemingly auto-poetic system in which commodities produced by the labor power commodity are then purchased by workers in order to reproduce

their own labor power. This is what made it possible for the principle of commodity exchange C to penetrate society across the globe” (p. 188). At the same time, industrialization leads to enormous social inequalities and conflicts, threatening to tear society apart. This is countered by the formation of the nation-state. “The nation [is] something that appears within the social formation as an attempt to recover, through imagination, mode of exchange A and community, which is disintegrating under the rule of capital-state. The nation is formed by capital-state, but it is at the same time a form of protest and resistance to the conditions brought about by capital-state.... The nation instills the sentiment that is lacking in capital-state” (pp. 209, 216).

Karatani’s impressive ability to articulate the ambiguity in these processes and to use it as a basis for pointing to possible ways of overcoming disparities and class conflicts can be observed in two ways, implying two further critiques of Marxism. To explain this, I will turn to the fourth part of *The Structure of World History*, “The Present and the Future.” Here, Karatani focuses on the mysterious X of mode of exchange D, which pervades world history on the whole and all world systems as the *return of the repressed*. His first critique concerns a crude base-superstructure concept, in which nation and nationalism are viewed merely as phenomena of the ideological superstructure, which could be overcome by reason (enlightenment) or would disappear together with the state. But the nation functions autonomously, independent of the state, and as the imaginative return of community or reciprocal mode of exchange A, it is egalitarian in nature. As is the case with universal religions, the nation thus holds a moment of protest, of opposition, of emancipatory imagination. The second critique concerns the conception of the proletariat, which Marxism reduced to the process of production, in which its labor force is turned into a commodity. Production (i.e., consumption of labor power) as a fundamental basis to gain and to increase surplus

value remains unchanged. Nonetheless, according to Karatani surplus value is only achieved by selling commodities, in the process of circulation, which does not generate surplus value itself, but without which there cannot be any surplus value. Understanding the proletariat as producer-consumer opens up new possibilities for resistance against the system. In late capitalism, in which capital and company are often separated, workers (in the broadest sense of wage and salary earners) are usually not able to resist their dependency and inferiority in the production process. By contrast, however, in the site of consumption, capital is dependent on the worker as consumer. Whereas capital can thus control the proletariat in the production process and force them to work, it loses its power over them in the process of circulation. If, says Karatani, we would view consumers as workers in the site of circulation, consumer movements could be seen as proletariat movements. They can, for example, resort to the legal means of boycott, which capital is unable to resist directly.

In the same way in which Karatani points to the possibilities that consumer-producer cooperatives, local currencies, and credit systems offer for creating an economic sphere beyond capitalism in order to transcend it, he also thinks about counter-movements against the state. He pursues the possibility of a simultaneous world revolution and asks about the role a—entirely reformed—United Nations (UN) could play in the establishment of a “federation of nations” based on an all-encompassing renunciation of military force. In other words, he actively searches for ways to realize a world system grounded in the principle of reciprocity—a world republic. Despite problems that the reader may have with this book, in particular where Karatani’s imagination approximates contemporary political debates (when he, for example, overemphasizes the role of critical consumers, or dreams of a reform of the UN), he sketches a fascinating world historical panorama with the intention of stimulating an intellectual

and practical critique of the supposedly inevitable capitalism-nation-state trinity. *The Structure of World History* is a must-read for anybody who is interested in a universal master narrative being in search not only for power of resistance against this system but also for possible ways “to transcend the capitalist social formation from within” (p. 291). Karatani has already announced a study of D (for the time being called “D no kenkyū”),[4] thus further committing himself to a scrutiny of aspects he “couldn’t deal with properly.” Keep your eyes and ears open.

Notes

[1]. The book *Sekai kyōwakoku e* serves as the basis for a later manuscript translated into German under the title *Auf der Suche nach der Weltrepublik: Eine Kritik von Kapital, Nation und Staat*, trans. Martin Roth (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2012). He describes the book under review as “prolegomena” in Karatani Kōjin, “*Sekaishi no kōzō*” o yomu (Tōkyō: Insukuriputo, 2011), 94.

[2]. Karatani, “*Sekaishi no kōzō*” o yomu, 373.

[3]. Karatani Kōjin, “‘Toransukuritōku’ kara ‘Teikoku no kōzō’ e,” *Gendai shisō* vol. 1 (2015), 57.

[4]. *Ibid.*, 53.

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Citation: Steffi Richter. Review of Karatani, Kojin. *The Structure of World History: From Modes of Production to Modes of Exchange*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. April, 2015.

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