

## THE PARALLAX VIEW

**I**N TODAY'S ENGLISH, 'pig' refers to the animals with which farmers deal, while 'pork' is the meat we consume. The class dimension is clear here: 'pig' is the old Saxon word, since Saxons were the underprivileged farmers, while 'pork' comes from the French *porque*, used by the privileged Norman conquerors who mostly consumed the pigs raised by farmers. This duality, signalling the gap that separates production from consumption, is a case of what, in his formidable *Transcritique. On Kant and Marx*, Kojin Karatani refers to as the 'parallax' dimension.<sup>1</sup> Best known as the most striking Japanese literary critic of his generation—his *Origins of Japanese Literature* presented to the English-speaking world by Fredric Jameson—Karatani has moved from subsequent reflections on *Architecture as Metaphor* to one of the most original attempts to recast the philosophical and political bases of opposition to the empire of capital of the current period.<sup>2</sup> In its heterodox theoretical ambition and concern with alternative revolutionary traditions—here principally anarchist—*Transcritique* might be compared with Roberto Unger's trilogy *Politics*, a work out of Brazil. But Karatani's thought-world is closer to that of Marx, and behind him to the heritage of classical German philosophy.

Karatani starts with the question: what is the appropriate response when we are confronted with an antinomy in the precise Kantian sense of the term? His answer is that we should renounce all attempts to reduce one aspect of it to the other (or, even more, to enact a kind of 'dialectical synthesis' of the opposites). One should, on the contrary, assert antinomy as irreducible, and conceive the point of radical critique not as a determinate position as opposed to another position, but as the irreducible gap between the positions—the purely structural interstice between them. Kant's stance is thus to see things 'neither from his own viewpoint, nor from the viewpoint of others, but to face the reality that is exposed

through difference (parallax).<sup>3</sup> Karatani reads the Kantian notion of the *Ding an sich* (the Thing-in-itself, beyond phenomena) not so much as a transcendental entity beyond our grasp, but as what is discernible only via the irreducibly antinomic character of our experience of reality.

### *Theories of value*

According to Karatani, when Marx was faced with the opposition between classical political economy (Ricardo and his labour theory of value—the counterpart to philosophical rationalism) and the neo-classical reduction of value to a purely relational entity without substance (Bailey—the counterpart to philosophical empiricism), his ‘critique of political economy’ accomplished exactly the same breakthrough towards the parallax view. Marx treated this opposition as a Kantian antinomy—that is, value has to originate both outside circulation, in production, and *within circulation*. ‘Marxism’ after Marx—in both its Social Democratic and Communist versions—lost this parallax perspective and regressed to a unilateral elevation of production as the site of truth, as against the ‘illusory’ spheres of exchange and consumption. As Karatani emphasizes, even the most sophisticated theory of reification—that of commodity fetishism—falls into this trap, from the young Lukács through Adorno up to Jameson. The way these thinkers accounted for the lack of a revolutionary movement was to argue that the consciousness of workers was obfuscated by the seductions of consumerist society and/or manipulation by the ideological forces of cultural hegemony. Hence the shift in the focus of their critical work to cultural criticism (the so-called ‘cultural turn’)—in others, the disclosure of the ideological (or libidinal: here lies the key role of psychoanalysis in Western Marxism) mechanisms that keep workers under the spell of bourgeois ideology. In a close reading of Marx’s analysis of the commodity-form, Karatani grounds the insurmountable persistence of the parallax gap in the *salto mortale* that a product has to accomplish in order to assert itself as a commodity:

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<sup>1</sup> See Kojin Karatani, *Transcritique. On Kant and Marx*, Cambridge, MA 2003. Henceforth ТКМ.

<sup>2</sup> *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature*, Durham, NC 1993; *Architecture as Metaphor: Language, Number, Money*, Cambridge, MA 1995. For Karatani’s position within the Japanese critical field, see Asada Akira, ‘A Left within the Place of Nothingness’, NLR 5, September–October 2000, pp. 24, 35–36.

<sup>3</sup> ТКМ, p. 3.

The price [of iron expressed in gold], while on the one hand indicating the amount of labour-time contained in the iron, namely its value, at the same time signifies the pious wish to convert the iron into gold, that is to give the labour-time contained in the iron the form of universal social labour-time. If this transformation fails to take place, then the ton of iron ceases to be not only a commodity but also a product; since it is a commodity only because it is not a use-value for its owner, that is to say his labour is only really labour if it is useful labour for others, and it is useful for him only if it is abstract general labour. It is therefore the task of the iron or of its owner to find that location in the world of commodities where iron attracts gold. But if the sale actually takes place, as we assume in this analysis of simple circulation, then this difficulty, the *salto mortale* of the commodity, is surmounted. As a result of this alienation—that is its transfer from the person for whom it is a non-use-value to the person for whom it is a use-value—the ton of iron proves to be in fact a use-value and its price is simultaneously realized, and merely imaginary gold is converted into real gold.<sup>4</sup>

This jump by means of which a commodity is sold and thus effectively constituted as a commodity is not the result of an immanent self-development of (the concept of) Value, but a *salto mortale* comparable to a Kierkegaardian leap of faith, a temporary and fragile ‘synthesis’ between use-value and exchange-value comparable to the Kantian synthesis between sensibility and understanding: in both cases, two levels irreducibly external to each other are brought together. For this precise reason, Marx abandoned his original project (discernible in the *Grundrisse* manuscripts) of ‘deducing’ in a Hegelian way the split between exchange-value and use-value from the very concept of Value. In *Capital*, the split of these two dimensions, the ‘dual character of a merchandise’, is the starting point. The synthesis has to rely on an irreducibly external element, as in Kant where being is not a predicate (i.e., cannot be reduced to a conceptual predicate of an entity), or as in Saul Kripke’s *Naming and Necessity*, in which the reference of a name to an object cannot be grounded in the content of this name, in the properties it designates.

The very tension between the processes of production and circulation is thus once again that of a parallax. Yes, value is created in the production process; however, it is created there as it were only potentially, since it is only *actualized* as value when the produced commodity is sold and the circle m-c-m is thus completed. The temporal gap between the

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<sup>4</sup> Karl Marx, ‘A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy’, in *Collected Works*, vol. 29, New York 1976, p. 390.

production of value and its realization is crucial here: even if value is created in production, without the successful completion of the process of circulation, there *stricto sensu* is no value—the temporality is here that of the *futur antérieur*, i.e., value ‘is’ not immediately, it only ‘will have been’. It is retroactively actualized, performatively enacted. In production, value is generated ‘in itself’, while only through the completed circulation process does it become ‘for itself’. This is how Karatani resolves the Kantian antinomy of value which is *and is not* generated in the process of production. It is because of this gap between in- and for-itself that capitalism needs formal democracy and equality:

What precisely distinguishes capital from the master–slave relation is that the worker confronts him as consumer and possessor of exchange values, and that in the form of the possessor of money, in the form of money he becomes a simple centre of circulation—one of its infinitely many centres, in which his specificity as worker is extinguished.<sup>5</sup>

What this means is that, in order to complete the circle of its reproduction, capital has to pass through this critical point at which roles are inverted: ‘surplus value is realized in principle only by workers *in totality* buying back what they produce’.<sup>6</sup> This point is crucial for Karatani: it provides the essential leverage from which to oppose the rule of capital today. Is it not natural that proletarians should focus their attack on that unique point at which they approach capital from the position of a buyer, and, consequently, at which it is capital that is forced to court them? ‘If workers can become subjects at all, it is only as consumers.’<sup>7</sup> It is perhaps the ultimate case of the parallax situation: the position of worker-producer and that of consumer should be sustained as irreducible in their divergence, without privileging one as the ‘deeper truth’ of the other. (Did not the planned economy of state socialism pay a terrible price for the privilege it accorded production over consumption, and hence its failure to provide consumers with goods they needed, instead of products nobody wanted?)

This is one of Karatani’s key motifs: his rejection of the—if anything, proto-fascist—opposition between financial speculation and the ‘real’ economy of capitalists engaged in productive activity. For in capitalism, the production process is only a detour in the speculative process of money engendering more money. The logic of ‘profiteering’ is

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<sup>5</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, Harmondsworth 1993, pp. 420–1.

<sup>6</sup> TKM, p. 20.

<sup>7</sup> TKM, p. 290.

ultimately also what sustains the incessant drive to revolutionize and expand production:

The majority of economists warn today that the speculation of global financial capital is detached from the ‘substantial’ economy. What they overlook, however, is that the substantial economy as such is also driven by illusion, and that such is the nature of the capitalist economy.<sup>8</sup>

There are, consequently, four basic positions *à propos* money: (1) the mercantilist belief—a naïvely direct fetishism—that money is a ‘special thing’; (2) the ‘classical bourgeois political economy’ represented by Ricardo, which dismissed such fetishism as a mere illusion and perceived money as no more than a sign of the quantity of socially useful labour—conceiving value as inherent to a commodity; (3) the ‘neo-classical’ school which rejected not only the labour theory of value, but any ‘substantial’ notion of value—the price of a commodity becoming simply the result of the interplay between the supply and demand for it, or the utility of a commodity for other commodities. Karatani is right to emphasize how, paradoxically, Marx broke out of the confines of the ‘classical’ Ricardian labour theory of value through his reading of Bailey, the first ‘vulgar’ economist who emphasized the purely *relational* status of value—its expression of the way this commodity relates to all other commodities. It was Bailey who thus opened up the path towards the formal approach of Marx, which insists on the gap between an object and the structural place it occupies: in the same way that a king is a king not because of his inherent properties, but because people treat him as one (Marx’s own example), a commodity is money because it occupies the formal place of the general equivalent of all commodities, not because say, gold, is ‘naturally’ money.

But it is crucial to take note of how both mercantilists and their Ricardian critics remained ‘substantialist’. Ricardo was, of course, aware that the object which serves as money is not ‘naturally’ money, and laughed at the naïve superstition of money, dismissing mercantilists as primitive believers in magic properties. However, by reducing money to a secondary external sign of the value inherent in a commodity, he nonetheless again naturalized value, conceiving it as a direct ‘substantial’ property of a commodity. It was this illusion that generated the ingenious early-Socialist and Proudhonian proposals to overcome money

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<sup>8</sup> TKM, p. 241.

fetishism by introducing a direct 'labour money' which would just designate the amount each individual contributed to social labour. Which is why, although Marx's *Darstellung* of the self-deployment of capital is full of Hegelian references, the self-movement of capital is far from the circular self-movement of the Hegelian Notion (or Spirit).<sup>9</sup> The point of Marx is that this movement never catches up with itself, that it never recovers its credit, for its resolution is postponed forever, and crisis is its innermost constituent (the sign that the Whole of Capital is the non-True, as Adorno would have put it). In other words, its movement is a 'bad infinity', forever reproducing itself:

Notwithstanding the Hegelian descriptive style . . . *Capital* distinguishes itself from Hegel's philosophy in its motivation. The end of *Capital* is never the 'absolute Spirit'. *Capital* reveals the fact that capital, though organizing the world, can never go beyond its own limit. It is a Kantian critique of the ill-contained drive of capital/reason to self-realize beyond its limit.<sup>10</sup>

It is interesting to note that it was already Adorno, who in *Three Studies on Hegel*, critically characterized Hegel's system in the same 'financial' terms as a system which lives on credit that it can never pay off. The same 'financial' metaphor is often used for language itself. Brian Rotman, among others, has defined meaning as that which is always 'borrowed from the future', relying on its forever-postponed fulfilment-to-come.<sup>11</sup> For how do shared meanings emerge? Through what Alfred Schuetz called 'mutual idealization': the subject cuts the impasse of an endless probing into the question 'do we all mean the same thing by the term "bird"?' by simply presupposing and acting *as if* we do mean the same thing. There is no language without this 'leap of faith'. This presupposition, this 'leap of faith', should not be conceived in Habermasian vein as a normativity built into the functioning of language, the ideal all speakers (should) strive for. On the contrary, so far from being an ideal, it is a fiction that has to be undermined again and again if knowledge is to progress. So, if anything, this presupposed 'as if' is profoundly anti-normative. A Habermasian would, of course, reply that the ideal, the norm inscribed into language, is nonetheless the state in which this fiction would no longer be a fiction, but smooth communication in which subjects would reach a frictionless agreement. But such a defence

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<sup>9</sup> See, among others, Helmut Reichelt, *Zur logischen Struktur des Kapitalbegriffs*, Frankfurt 1969.

<sup>10</sup> ТКМ, p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> See Brian Rotman, *Signifying Nothing: the Semiotics of Zero*, London 1975.

misses the point, which is not only and simply that such a state is inaccessible (and also undesirable), but that the ‘leap of faith’ not only has no normative content, but can even block further elaboration—why strive for something that we allegedly already have? In other words, what the reading of this ‘as if’ as normativity fails to grasp is that the ‘leap of faith’ is necessary and productive (enabling communication) precisely insofar as it is a counterfactual fiction. Its ‘truth effect’, its positive role of enabling communication, hinges precisely on the fact that it is *not* true, that it jumps ahead into fiction—its status is not normative because it cuts the debilitating deadlock of language, its ultimate lack of guarantee, by way of *presenting what we should strive for as already accomplished*.

The same logic of living on credit borrowed from the future also goes for Stalinism. The standard evolutionary version is that, while Stalinist socialism did play a certain role in enabling the rapid industrialization of Russia, by the mid-60s the system had exhausted its potential. However, what this judgement fails to take into account is that the entire epoch of Soviet Communism from 1917—or more precisely from Stalin’s proclamation of the goal of ‘building socialism in one country’ in 1924 onwards—lived on borrowed time, was ‘indebted to its own future’, so that the final failure retroactively disqualified the earlier epochs themselves.

### *Economy and politics*

Is, however, the ultimate Marxian parallax not that between economy and politics—between the ‘critique of political economy’ with its logic of commodities, and the political struggle with its logic of class antagonisms? Both logics are ‘transcendental’, not merely ontico-empirical; and each is irreducible to the other. Of course they point towards each other—class struggle is inscribed into the very heart of economy, yet it has to remain absent, non-thematized (recall how the manuscript of *Capital* III abruptly breaks off with classes). But this very mutual implication is twisted so that it prevents any direct contact between them. Any direct translation of political struggle into a mere mirroring of economic ‘interests’ is doomed to fail, just as is any reduction of the economic sphere into a secondary ‘reified’ sedimentation of an underlying founding political process.

In this sense, the ‘pure politics’ of Badiou, Rancière or Balibar, more Jacobin than Marxist, shares with its great opponent, Anglo-Saxon Cultural Studies, a degradation of the sphere of economy. That is to say, what all the new French (or French-oriented) theories of the Political, from Balibar through Rancière and Badiou to Laclau and Mouffe, aim at is—to put it in the traditional philosophical terms—the reduction of the sphere of economy (of material production) to an ‘ontic’ sphere deprived of ‘ontological’ dignity. Within this horizon, there is simply no place for the Marxian ‘critique of political economy’: the structure of the universe of commodities and capital in Marx’s *Capital* is *not* just that of a limited empirical sphere, but a kind of socio-transcendental *a priori*, the matrix which generates the totality of social and political relations. The relationship between economy and politics is ultimately that of the well-known visual paradox of the ‘two faces or a vase’: one either sees the two faces or a vase, never both of them—one has to make a choice. In the same way, we can either focus on the political, reducing the domain of the economy to the empirical ‘servicing of goods’, or on the economic, reducing politics to a theatre of appearances, a passing phenomenon that will vanish with the arrival of a developed communist (or technocratic) society, in which, as Saint-Simon and Engels put it, the ‘administration of people’ gives way to the ‘administration of things’.

The ‘political’ critique of Marxism—the claim that, when one reduces politics to a ‘formal’ expression of some underlying ‘objective’ socio-economic process, one loses the openness and contingency constitutive of the political field proper—should thus be supplemented by its obverse: the field of economy is *in its very form* irreducible to politics. It is this reality, of the economic as the determining *form* of the social, that French ‘political post-Marxists’ miss when they reduce the economy to one of the positive social spheres.

The basic idea of the parallax view is thus that bracketing itself produces its object. ‘Democracy’ as a form emerges only when one brackets the texture of economic relations as well as the inherent logic of the political state apparatus—both have to be abstracted, for people who are effectively embedded in economic processes and subjected to state apparatuses to be reduced to individual electoral agents. The same goes also for the ‘logic of domination’, of the way people are controlled or manipulated by the apparatuses of subjection: in order to discern these mechanisms of power, one has to abstract not only from the democratic

imaginary (as Foucault does in his analyses of the micro-physics of power, and Lacan in his analysis of power in ‘Seminar XVIII’), but also from the process of economic (re)production. Finally, the sphere of economic (re)production, too, only emerges if one methodologically brackets the concrete existence of state and political ideology; it is no surprise that so many critics of Marx have complained that his ‘critique of political economy’ lacks a theory of power and the state. The trap to be avoided here, of course, is the naïve idea that one should keep in view the social totality, of which democratic ideology, the exercise of power and the process of economic (re)production are merely parts. If one tries to keep all these in view simultaneously, one ends up seeing nothing—their contours disappear. This bracketing is not a mere epistemological procedure, it answers to what Marx called ‘real abstraction’—an abstraction from power and economic relations that is inscribed into the very actuality of the democratic process, and so on.

### *Philosophy and homelessness*

More radically still, should we not assert the parallax status of philosophy as such? From its very beginning with the Ionian Presocratics, philosophy emerged in the interstices of substantial social communities, as the thought of those who were caught in a ‘parallax’ position, unable fully to identify with any positive social identities. This is what is missing in Heidegger’s account: how, from his beloved Presocratics onwards, philosophizing has involved an ‘impossible’ position of displacement from any communal identity, be it in the ‘economy’, as the organization of the household, or the *polis*. Like exchange according to Marx, philosophy emerges in the interstices *between* different communities, in a fragile space of circulation which lacks any positive identity. Is this not especially clear in the case of Descartes? The grounding experience of his manifesto of universal doubt is precisely the ‘multicultural’ revelation that one’s own tradition is no better than what appear to us the ‘eccentric’ traditions of others:

I had been taught, even in my College days, that there is nothing imaginable so strange or so little credible that it has not been maintained by one philosopher or other, and I further recognized in the course of my travels that all those whose sentiments are very contrary to ours are yet not necessarily barbarians or savages, but may be possessed of reason in as great or even a greater degree than ourselves. I also considered how very different the self-same man, identical in mind and spirit, may become, according as

he is brought up from childhood amongst the French or Germans, or has passed his whole life amongst Chinese or cannibals. I likewise noticed how even in the fashions of one's clothing the same thing that pleased us ten years ago, and which will perhaps please us once again before ten years are passed, seems at the present time extravagant and ridiculous. I thus concluded that it is much more custom and example that persuade us than any certain knowledge, and yet in spite of this the voice of the majority does not afford a proof of any value in truths a little difficult to discover, because such truths are much more likely to have been discovered by one man than by a nation. I could not, however, put my finger on a single person whose opinions seemed preferable to those of others, and I found that I was, so to speak, constrained myself to undertake the direction of my procedure.<sup>12</sup>

Karatani is thus justified in emphasizing the insubstantial character of the *cogito*: 'It cannot be spoken of positively; no sooner than it is, its function is lost'.<sup>13</sup> The *cogito* is not a substantial entity, but a pure structural function, an empty place (Lacan: \$)—which as such can only emerge in the interstices of substantial communal systems. There is thus an intrinsic link between the emergence of the *cogito* and the disintegration and loss of substantive communal identities, which holds even more for Spinoza than for Descartes. Although Spinoza criticized the Cartesian *cogito* as a positive ontological entity, he implicitly endorsed it as the 'position of the enunciated', of a radical self-doubt, since even more than Descartes, Spinoza spoke from an interstitial social space, as neither a Jew nor a Christian.

It would be easy to reply that this Cartesian multiculturalist opening and relativizing of one's own position is just a first step, the abandoning of inherited opinions, on the road to arrival at absolutely certain philosophic knowledge—the abandoning of the false shaky home in order to reach our true home. Did not Hegel himself compare Descartes's discovery of the *cogito* to a sailor who, after long drifting on the sea, finally catches sight of firm ground? Is Cartesian homelessness thus not just a deceptive tactical move—a precursive 'negation of negation', the *Aufhebung* of the false traditional home in the finally discovered conceptual true home? Was in this sense Heidegger not justified in his approving quotation of Novalis's definition of philosophy as a longing for the true lost home? We may be allowed to doubt it. After all, Kant himself stands as contrary witness: in his transcendental philosophy, homelessness remains irreducible—we remain forever split, condemned

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<sup>12</sup> *Discourse on Method*, Notre Dame, IN 1994, p. 33.

<sup>13</sup> TKM, p. 134.

to a fragile position between the two dimensions and to a 'leap of faith' without any guarantee. Even with Hegel, are matters really so clear? Is it not that, for Hegel, this new 'home' is in a way *homelessness itself*, the very open movement of negativity?

Along these lines of the constitutive 'homelessness' of philosophy, Karatani asserts—against Hegel—Kant's idea of a cosmopolitan 'world-civil-society' [*Weltbürgergesellschaft*], which would not be a simple expansion of citizenship within a nation-state to citizenship of a global transnational state. For Karatani it involves a shift from identification with one's 'organic' ethnic substance, actualized in a particular cultural tradition, to a radically different principle of identification—he refers to Deleuze's notion of a 'universal singularity' as opposed to the triad of individuality–particularity–generality. This opposition is the contrast between Kant and Hegel. For Hegel, 'world-civil-society' is an abstract notion without substantial content, lacking the mediation of the particular and thus the force of full actuality. For the only way an individual can participate effectively in universal humanity is via full identification with a particular nation-state—I am 'human' only as a German, an Englishman, a Frenchman, and so on.

For Kant, on the contrary, 'world-civil-society' designates the paradox of a universal singularity—that is, of a singular subject who, in a kind of short-circuit, bypasses the mediation of the particular to participate directly in the universal. This identification with the universal is not an identification with an encompassing global substance ('humanity'), but with a universal ethico-political principle—a universal religious collective, a scientific collective, a global revolutionary organization, all of which are in principle accessible to everyone. Just this, as Karatani points out, is what Kant meant, in a famous passage of 'What is Enlightenment?', by 'public' as opposed to 'private'. For him what was 'private' was not the individual as opposed to the community, but the very communal–institutional order of one's particular identification, while what was 'public' was the transnational universality of the exercise of one's reason. The paradox is thus that one participates in the universal dimension of the 'public' sphere precisely as a singular individual, extracted from or even opposed to one's substantive communal identification—one is truly universal only as radically singular, in the interstices of communal identities.

This, however, brings us to our first critical remark. Does Karatani really 'give Hegel a chance', or does he transform Hegel into a convenient straw man (as is often the case with critics of Hegel)? A negative proof of this insufficiency is a feature of Karatani's book which cannot but strike the eye: the conspicuous absence of any reference to Alfred Sohn-Rethel, who also directly deployed the parallel between Kant's transcendental critique and Marx's critique of political economy, but in the opposite critical direction (the structure of the commodity universe *is* that of the Kantian transcendental space).<sup>14</sup> Karatani can only rely uncritically on Kant if he ignores the demonstration that Kant's logic itself is already 'contaminated' by the structure of commodity fetishism, and that it is only Hegel's dialectic which provides the tools to break out of the antinomies of the universe of commodities.

### *Lotteries of power*

Furthermore, some of the details of Karatani's reading of Kant are questionable. When Karatani proposes his 'transcendental' solution to the antinomy of money—we need an  $x$  which will be money and not-money—and then reapplies this solution to power—we need some centralized power, but not fetishized into a substance which is 'in itself' power—he explicitly evokes a structural homology with Duchamp, where an object becomes art not because of its inherent properties, but simply by occupying a certain place in the aesthetic system. But does not all this exactly fit Claude Lefort's theorization of democracy as a political order in which the place of power is originally empty, and is only temporarily filled in by elected representatives? Along these lines, even Karatani's apparently eccentric notion of combining elections with lotteries in the procedure of determining who will rule us is more traditional than it may appear. He himself mentions examples from Ancient Greece, but his proposal paradoxically fulfils the same task as Hegel's theory of monarchy.

At this juncture Karatani takes the heroic risk of a crazy-sounding definition of the difference between the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie and the dictatorship of the proletariat: 'If universal suffrage by secret ballot, namely, parliamentary democracy, is the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, the introduction of a lottery should be deemed the dictatorship of the

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<sup>14</sup> Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: a Critique of Epistemology*, London 1978.

proletariat'.<sup>15</sup> In this way, '*the centre exists and does not exist at the same time*'<sup>16</sup>: it exists as an empty place, a transcendental  $x$ , and it does not exist as a substantial positive entity. But would this really be enough to undermine the 'fetishism of power'? A contingent individual is allowed to occupy the place of power temporarily, and the charisma of power briefly bestowed on him, following the well-known logic of fetishist disavowal: 'I know very well that this is an ordinary person like me, *but nonetheless . . .* (while in power, he becomes an instrument of a transcendent force, power speaks and acts through him)'. Consequently, would not the true task be precisely to get rid of the very mystique of the *place* of power, in keeping with the general matrix of Kant's solutions, where metaphysical propositions (God, immortality of the soul, etc) are asserted 'under erasure', as postulates?

Lastly, Karatani's account of Marx's notions of surplus-value and of exploitation has a strange lacuna: it completely ignores the key element in his critique of the standard labour theory of value. For Marx, workers are not exploited by being denied the full value of their work—their wages are in principle 'just', they are paid the entire value of the commodity they are selling, their labour power. Rather they are exploited because the use-value of this commodity is unique—for it produces new value greater than its own value, and it is this surplus that is appropriated by the capitalists. Karatani, on the contrary, reduces exploitation to just another case of a difference in price between value systems: because of incessant technological innovation, capitalists can earn from selling the products of labour more than they have to pay their workers. Here capitalist exploitation is posited as structurally similar to the activity of merchants who buy

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<sup>15</sup> ТКМ, p. 183. Karatani invokes the practice of sortition in Athenian democracy. But is not the combination of balloting and drawing by lots that he advocates close to the oligarchic procedure for electing the Doge in Venice, established in 1268, after an incumbent tried to obtain hereditary monarchic powers? There was first a vote for 30 members of a council, then another to select 9 of them. These 9 then nominated 40 provisional electors who in turn chose 12 by lot who then elected 25. These were reduced to 9, who then each nominated 5. The 45 so nominated were reduced by casting lots to 11; 9 of the 11 votes were needed to choose the final 41 who, meeting in conclave, would elect the Doge. The aim of this labyrinthine procedure was, of course, to prevent any group or family from exercising undue influence on the outcome. Furthermore, in order to prevent the Doge himself from getting too much power, there was a list of duties he could not undertake (his sons or daughters could not marry outside the Republic, he was only allowed to open official letters in the presence of others, etc.).

<sup>16</sup> ТКМ, p. 183.

and sell at different locations, exploiting the fact that the same product is cheaper here (where they buy it) than there (where they sell it):

Only where there is a difference in price between value systems: A (when they sell their labour power) and B (when they buy the commodities), is surplus value realized. This is so-called relative surplus value. And this is attained only by incessant technological innovation. Hence one finds that industrial capital too earns surplus value from the interstice between two different systems.<sup>17</sup>

Karatani ends by recommending the experiment of LETS (a Local Exchange Trading System based on a non-marketed currency) as an economic model of ‘counteraction’ to capital. But it is difficult to see how this avoids the very trap to which Karatani otherwise points—the trap of a medium of exchange that would no longer be a fetish, but would serve just as a ‘labour-money’, a transparent instrument designating each individual’s contribution to the social product. Yet, however weak it may seem at these joints, Karatani’s book is a must for everyone who wants to break the deadlock of ‘cultural’ resistance to capitalism, and reassert the actuality of Marx’s critique of political economy. The objective irony of Karatani’s theory is that it can also be read as an allegory of the parallax split that has determined his own subjective position: he is geographically split between Osaka and the world of the East Coast us academia where he is now employed; his writing is split between literary-cultural analyses and engaged socio-political work; this work itself is yet again split between a ‘deconstructionist’ reading of Marxian political economy and a practical engagement in the New Associationist Movement in Japan. Far from signalling a critical failure, this parallax position of Karatani serves as the index of truth: in today’s globalized universe, marked by irreconcilable gaps between different levels of our life, such a fidelity to parallax views, to unresolved antagonisms, is the only way to approach the totality of our experience.

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<sup>17</sup> TKM, p. 239.