THE SPATIAL STRUCTURE OF WORLD HISTORY

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Abstract

This article examines Karatani’s 2014 book, The Structure of World History, aiming to clarify its sweeping philosophical argument in one respect. Among the many ways that we can appreciate Structure is to read it as the elaboration of a profoundly spatial interpretation of our world’s history. In making this claim I am not suggesting that Karatani simply emphasizes space over time, which is not so. Rather, I contend that many of the book’s achievements are best grasped by reading the book as a work of geography. To be sure, geography, as typically understood by academic geographers, is largely absent from Structure: there are no maps and the word “geography” is only used once. Moreover, Karatani never claims to have found the spatial structure of history. Rather, my claim is that the analysis of world history in Structure is acutely spatially sensitive—particularly with regard to the repetition of sociospatial forms through modes of exchange (which effectively comprise the “structure” of the book’s title)—and that this sensitivity grounds Karatani’s radical reinterpretation of Marxism. Structure thereby provides a spatially informed theory of the historical processes that have made this world as such, one that refuses the telos of capital-nation-state. The result is a revolutionary, geographical philosophy of world history.

I

Karatani Kōjin has written over twenty books on a wide range of topics. Among Anglophone readers, he is best known for his 2003 book, Transcritique: On Kant and Marx (hereafter, Transcritique), a study producing a radical new interpretation of the philosophy and politics of Marxism. Since completing Transcritique, Karatani has written numerous works on philosophy, history, capitalism, politics, and the
prospects for a better world. His 2014 book, *The Structure of World History* (hereafter, *Structure*), could be glossed as a historical elaboration of the political conclusions of *Transcritique*. Taken together, I believe these two books comprise one of the greatest theoretical contributions to Marxist scholarship since Marx and also provide critical insights for our present challenges. I seek to clarify the sweeping philosophical argument of *Structure* in one limited but important respect.

I will read *Structure* as the elaboration of a profoundly *spatial* interpretation of our world's history. With this reading, I do not claim that Karatani simply emphasizes space over time, geography over history. That is not so. Rather, I contend that many of the book's achievements are best grasped by reading the book as a work of geography. To be sure, geography, as typically understood by academic geographers, is largely absent from *Structure*: there are no maps, no spatial analyses proper, and the word “geography” is only used once (to discuss Islam). Moreover, Karatani never claims to have found the spatial structure of history. I do not think there is such a thing, and I strongly doubt Karatani does either. Rather, my claim is that the analysis of world history in *Structure* is acutely spatially sensitive—particularly with regard to the repetition of sociospatial *forms* (which comprise the “structure” of the book’s title)—and that this sensitivity grounds Karatani’s radical reinterpretation of Marxism and the critical conception of the world it engenders. *Structure* provides a spatially informed theory of the historical processes that have made this world as such, one that refuses the *telos* of capital-nation-state. The result is a revolutionary, geographical philosophy of world history.

This article extends an earlier exchange I shared with Karatani:

**WAINWRIGHT:** … about the geography [of] this world system, that is, the spatiality of capital-nation-state and its possible transcendence. In recent years many Marxist geographers, myself included, have examined the spatiality of the power of the capitalist nation-state.... in *Transcritique*, I did not find a clear statement on the spatiality of capital-nation-state. This seems to be something that you have taken up in your more recent work. Could you clarify …?

**KARATANI:** I did not overlook the issue of spatiality in *Transcritique*. I examined several philosophers through
the lens of spatial difference—not only Kant and Marx, but even Descartes. He traveled to different places and through the past by reading books. From the differences he found in his moves, the “I doubt” or cogito arose. Unlike mere self-consciousness, this cogito is geographical and anthropological. The concept “transcritique” implies being transcendental and transversal at the same time. It means crossing spatial differences and different exchanges. But as you say, I did not give enough thought to actual spaces. I came to think about this more after writing Transcritique, and began thinking about the world system. This shift is related to what happened around the world after September 2001.

Our interview occurred in 2010, shortly after Karatani had completed writing Structure (in Japanese). At the time, like other Anglophone readers of Transcritique, I was unaware of the elaborations in Karatani’s thought after September 2001 and its culmination in Structure, where Karatani more than answered my question. The book should bring about a reevaluation of contemporary geographical thought; yet given the discipline’s lingering commitment to empiricism, a close engagement with Structure seems unlikely. What is more likely and more urgent is that Marxists follow Karatani in reexamining the world through the lens of spatial difference. By this I refer to a practice of reading centered on the ways that spatial relations produce social difference and in which forms of difference always already presuppose a given spatiality. Structure, I contend, elaborates a theory of forms of exchange through such a reading, where spatial difference is fundamental.

Structure’s central argument is that Marxists must shift our object of historical analysis and study world history by focusing on relational exchange (hence, Structure’s subtitle is From Modes of Production to Modes of Exchange). This implies finishing the critique of Marx’s base-superstructure metaphor and recentering Marxism on the modes of exchange that underlie historical social formations. This claim is inherently geographical; it presupposes a theory of spatial form and has implications for the Marxist theory of world history. More narrowly, the argument is geographical because it shifts our focus from the points of production to the spaces of exchange relations.
Karatani’s concept of exchange—an interpretation of Marx’s use of *Verkehr* in his texts of the 1840s to mean “traffic, exchange, intercourse”—refers to the totality of social relations bound up in exchange. It is not, therefore, strictly an economic term to be counterpoised with commodity production. Economic geographers insist that production always occurs in a particular place and that this geography of production shapes economic life. Karatani is not simply repeating this lesson. Rather, he shows that all exchange relations are fundamentally spatial insofar as they emerge out of sociospatial differences that assume certain distinct forms and give rise to the dominant political, geographical, and ideological expressions of power that define our world: nation, state, and capital. To discover the possibility of transcending this triad will require an explanation of their existence.

II

Exchange always occurs between people: in space between one and an other. Exchange therefore presupposes and formalizes particular spaces of difference. By my reading, the four modes of exchange postulated by Karatani’s theory are forms of adequating sociospatial differences. That is to say, each of the four modes make commensurability possible, at once sustaining and reproducing sociospatial difference. Consider how the shift from modes of production to exchange enters in the book’s introduction. We read that “mode of exchange A is not a principle that arises from within the interior of a community,” that “Mode of exchange B also arises between communities,” and “Marx repeatedly stresses that … mode of exchange C … begins with exchanges between two communities…. Even if it appears that these exchanges take place between individuals, those individuals are acting as representatives of families or tribes.”

Karatani repeats this point; we cannot miss it: “we must not forget that the … [modes] of exchange … arose in exchanges between communities.”

To generalize, most interpretations of Marxism have overemphasized the site of production at the expense of spaces of exchange and flows of circulation. This is partly an effect of Marx’s failure to complete volumes 2 and 3 of *Capital.* As is well known, volume 1 centers on the production of surplus value in the production process.
and therefore abstracts from circulation and the world market. Consequently, the political strategy of most Marxists centers upon the site of production, production relations, and organizing the worker, via the communist party, to win control of the state. Transcritique uproots this position philosophically. By replacing modes of production with modes of exchange, Structure proposes an alternative theory—one that is “centered,” paradoxically, neither on a point nor subject but on spaces between, spatial difference, and combinations of sociospatial relations that produce the forms of power that shape our world: nation, state, and capital. Let us unfold this argument, moving alphabetically through Karatani’s four modes of exchange.

A

Mode of exchange A is gift/reciprocity. Chapter 1 of Structure begins to lay the argument by showing how mode of exchange A emerges in the shift from nomadism to sedentary settlement. Whereas nomadism produces relatively free and equal social relations, fixed settlements and clan society produce equality without freedom. This shift emerges because the gift, while exchanged reciprocally, is no longer exchanged freely. Karatani explains:

Since Marcel Mauss, it has been generally accepted that mode of exchange A (the reciprocity of the gift) is the dominant principle governing archaic societies. But this principle did not exist in the band societies of nomadic hunter-gatherers that had existed since the earliest times. In these societies, it was not possible to stockpile goods, and so they were pooled, distributed equally. This was a pure gift, one that did not require a reciprocal countergift…. In sum, it was a society characterized by an equality that derived from the free mobility of its individual members. Clan society, grounded in the principle of reciprocity, arose only after nomadic bands took up fixed settlement. Fixed settlement made possible an increased population [also with regular expectation of a surplus]; it also gave rise to conflict with outsiders.9

This argument is elaborated through chapters 1 and 2, where the spatial dynamics of the argument further complicate the
nomadic/settled dyad. To simplify, Karatani argues that the gift-reciprocity relation forms the basis of clan society but concludes that this “reciprocity has different functions depending on its spatial deployment.”

The fundamental break occurs with permanent or regular settlement, but even before this there are variations in the relative mobility of clan societies. Thus, “the space of tribal society is not simply a space that spreads out horizontally from its core.”

Rather, the spaces of tribal society are comprised of three layers of reciprocal exchange:

1. core, with generalized reciprocity;
2. within-settlement, with balanced reciprocity;
3. between tribes, with negative reciprocity.

If Karatani is correct, it follows that the production of the inside/outside distinction, the rending of spatial difference so fundamental to the nation, is rooted in mode of exchange A. Perhaps the earliest stage of this tendency can be seen in the emplacement of burial rites. As Karatani writes:

[M]agic was rarely practiced in the society of nomadic hunter-gatherer peoples, precisely because they were nomadic. They had little need, for example, to fear the spirits of the dead: all they had to do was bury them and move on. The same was true for the victims of their hunting. One of the difficulties that arose with fixed settlement was the need to coexist not only with other people but also with the dead. People offered gifts in order to keep the spirits of the dead in check. This took the form of funeral rites, as well as ancestor worship. The dead became the ancestral gods who were responsible for unifying clan society.

In short, sedentary settlement stimulated clan societies that venerate ancestors. The challenge of living with the dead thus produces a form of proto-territorialization, or clearing of a space for a nation.

Karatani’s spatial conception of gift-reciprocity has important political implications, for instance, concerning subjective identification via nationalism and religion. Most Marxists have focused their attention on capital and the state, and the relation between these two, leaving the nation and religion underemphasized. To cite one
pertinent example, in 1968, at the height of social resistance in the United States, Professor Noam Chomsky was approached by students who asked him to lecture on the world’s political prospects. In response, Chomsky outlined four possible future social formations, using a Punnett square derived from two variables: state and economy. For Chomsky, future social-political life will be (1) either capitalist or socialist and (2) either unfree/authoritarian or free/libertarian. This gives the following four possible political-economic social formations (see figure 1).

Decades later, Chomsky’s scheme inspired Karatani, who also uses a Punnett square to describe our prospects. Notably, both of these left critics identify politically with the bottom-right corner (what Chomsky calls “democratic socialism” and Karatani “X”). The brilliance of Chomsky’s and Karatani’s arguments lies in their analytic-heuristic clarity about possible social formations. Yet their

Figure 1. Chomsky (1968) and Karatani (2014) on Possible Social Formations

Chomsky’s matrix of possible political-economic social formations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State Capitalism</th>
<th>State Socialism</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Capitalism</td>
<td>Libertarian Socialism</td>
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Karatani’s matrices*

Table 1. Modes-of-Exchange Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>B: plunder and redistribution (domination and protection)</th>
<th>A: reciprocity (gift and countergift)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C: commodity exchange (money and commodities)</td>
<td>D: x</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. The Modern-Social-Formation Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>B</th>
<th>A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>Nation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capital</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Karatani, Structure, 9.
squares differ fundamentally, and I find Karatani’s superior to Chomsky’s in several respects. Chomsky posits state and capital but does not explain their existence. By contrast, Karatani roots them in modes of exchange; moreover, Karatani introduces the nation to his frame, as the oldest of the three dominant forms of power at work in the world. To be sure, capital is hegemonic vis-à-vis the state and nation today; yet state and nation contribute fundamentally to the reproduction of capitalist social relations.

B

Mode of exchange B is plunder and redistribution, the basis for the formation of the state. For present purposes I draw out two spatial dimensions of his theory of plunder and the state. Let us begin by considering Karatani’s account of the origins of the state in *Structure*:

[The] shift from a prestate condition to a state cannot be understood if we confine our considerations to the interior of a single community…. the state could not possibly emerge through the development of a single community: a community grounded in the principle of reciprocity is capable of resolving whatever contradictions arise within it through the gift and redistribution…. This leads us naturally to consider the following possibility: that this kind of sovereign is not born from *within* the community through a process of self-alienation, but rather originally comes from the *outside*—in other words, that *the sovereign arrives as a conqueror*.15

The origin of the state lies, therefore, in the spatial difference between communities: one community conquers another.

But where does this “outside” come from? Paradoxically, it does not really come from outside at all, but from within and without at once. For as Karatani explains, the existence of an “external” threat—the recognition of the possibility of being plundered—is mirrored “internally” by a need to protect the community. Hence fear of the “outside” justifies protection “inside,” and this “protection” takes the form of plunder. So while Karatani’s statement “the sovereign arrives as a conqueror” suggests that the outside is a given geographical position, the state does not emerge from a definite positive space (still less
from the “state of nature”) but rather through the folding of the “fear of outside” into an “inside.” Territorial distinctions—there and here—are internalized. Think of the Great Wall of China, built to defend the realm but also to contain unruly peasants “within.” Yet this is not to suggest that the sovereign conqueror only emerges from “inside,” which is not so.16 Karatani elaborates:

If conquest is not able to bring about the state, then it seems that the state must come “from within.” But the sovereign cannot be produced internally. Internal conflicts between clans belonging to a single community will not lead to the rise of an independent public power. In sum, we have a thesis that the state arises from within the community and an antithesis that the state does not arise from within the community. But this antimony can be resolved when we see that the origin of the state lies in a kind of exchange carried out between ruling and ruled communities. This exchange takes the form of the conquering side offering protection to the vanquished in return for their subservience, as well as redistribution in return for the offered tribute. When this happens, the reality of conquest is disavowed by both parties.17

This “exchange carried out between ruling and ruled communities” implies spatial difference of a form that cannot be mapped as strictly occurring “here” and “there,” inside or outside; rather, this exchange emerges from the parallax gap of these dyads.

Sovereignty is definitely not transhistorical (the same in all times, thus incapable of being historicized), but it often seems impossible to see it otherwise. Karatani offers a novel approach, proposing that our conception of “sovereign” should be patterned on Marx’s treatment of value as a relational system that must take a specific form in capitalist society that is, the value form. Consider money. The essence of money is not inherent (and therefore cannot be found in the paper we carry in our wallets), but only an effect of its having been placed in the position of the general equivalent; in a capitalist society, money is whatever thing (commodity) assumes the space of adequation of the value form.18 In the same formal sense, the essence of sovereignty does not reside in the king or state; rather, “sovereign’ indicates a position that anyone can occupy.”19
But what compels the making of this sovereign position? Karatani shows that the state relation emerges neither from caprice nor the “state of nature” but in every society where plunder—unfree and nonreciprocal exchange—predominates. This creates not only the state but also empire (which Karatani subdivides into four types). What is essential here is not—as is often the case for geographers—mapping the particularities of specific political, environmental, and cultural spaces in relation to state types, but rather grasping the abstract form of state/empire relations. The purely formal quality of Karatani’s spatial analysis is clearest when he discusses a geographical instance where we might expect him to appeal to particularity or uniqueness, that is, Japan. Karatani explains Japan’s selective adaptation of elements of Chinese empire as an effect of the distance between China and Japan. He writes: “The capacity for adopting only selectively the civilization of the empire is not some quality unique to Japan, but rather a characteristic shared by all submargins.” In other words, there is nothing particularly unusual about the Japanese historical experience, once we understand its position in the spatial structure of China’s empire.

If Karatani only sought to describe the spatial form of world-empire through his fourfold theory—core, margin, submargin, and out of sphere—and to map this fourfold pattern onto world history, his approach would not be particularly novel. But Karatani’s approach is unique because of his explanation for this form, an explanatory approach grounded in his theory of modes of exchange. The crucial point here is that the forms of world-empire are caused by distinct geographical qualities inherent in the two modes of exchange from which they derive (B, or plunder, and C, commercial exchange). Karatani draws a distinction between world-empire and contemporary world-economy:

In a world-empire, the spatial structure of core and periphery is primarily established in accordance to the character of political and military power.... If one wants to not simply conquer territory but also permanently control it, there are limits to how far one can extend oneself.... the size of an empire is determined by the ratio between the wealth it can obtain by expanding its boundaries and the cost of the army and bureaucratic structures needed to accomplish...
this. A world-economy, on the other hand, has no limit, because commodity exchanges can be expanded spatially without limit.\(^23\)

Thus, the distinction between world-empire and world-economy is essentially geographical: the former is limited, the latter is not. The best-known world-empires, such as the Roman, “arose from situations where modes of exchange B and C had expanded spatially.”\(^24\)

It is partly for this reason that *Structure* provides a powerful Marxist critique of Eurocentrism. Karatani resolves the old problem of Marx’s teleological description of modes of precapitalist social life\(^25\) by reframing his series as spatial forms rather than historical stages. As we read in *Structure*: “If we can say that Greece and Rome arose on the submargins of the Asiatic empires, then we can likewise say that … the feudal social formation … arose on the submargins of the Roman Empire—with, that is, Germanic tribal society. Looking at the question in this way, we come to see that Marx’s distinctions between Asiatic, classical, and feudal do not mark successive diachronic stages but rather positional relationships within a space of a world-empire.”\(^26\)

Most Marxists who have examined capitalism’s provenance have sought to explain capitalism’s emergence “internally” by reference to some special quality of European social life. Against this, Karatani argues that the peculiar form of mode of exchange B that gave rise to capitalism—that is, feudalism in Western Europe—cannot be explained by anything distinctive about Europe (which in fact only became “Europe” *ex post facto*) but rather arose because this space (i.e., what came to be Europe) was “situated on the submargins of the Roman and Islamic Empires.”\(^27\) To simplify somewhat, Karatani’s argument is that, while market exchange (mode of exchange C) has a long history in societies around the world, it only became the dominant mode of exchange with the emergence of capitalism, a process facilitated by the plunder of the Americas, plunder that was enabled and encouraged by Western Europe’s position on the submargins of these empires. This historical combination—imperial submargins and continental plunder—drove the shift from mode of exchange B to C while forging the world-historical union of capital and state in Western Europe. What we typically refer to as “modernity” is an effect of this capricious, historical-geographical conjuncture and the nation-state-capital trinity it constituted.
Mode of exchange C, commodity exchange, forms the basis of our modern capitalist society. Here Karatani hews closely to Marx’s *Capital.* Although his analysis expands Marx’s conception of modes of production, he applies the method and findings of *Capital.* And like Marx, Karatani recognizes the ancient existence of markets yet stresses the historical novelty of organizing society around commodity exchange. The emergence of capitalist social relations utterly transformed social life, including its geography. Capitalism is frequently identified with globalization, but its spatiality is not simply all-enveloping and expansionary. Capital connects and separates, unites and divides. In his study of *Capital,* Frederic Jameson writes: “The secret of capital’s spatiality, for Marx, is also the secret of spatiality itself, namely separation.” This insight is fundamental to Karatani’s analysis of capitalist exchange.

In *Capital,* vol. 1, Marx abstracted from the world-economy to examine the dynamics of an imagined fully capitalist society, drawing his historical illustrations from England, the most advanced capitalist society of his time. Although Marx discusses the historical emergence of capital in England in the final section of *Capital,* vol. 1, he does so only after analyzing the production of surplus value. In other words, Marx’s criticism in *Capital,* vol. 1, is intended to show the contradictions immanent to capital itself, irrespective of its concrete geographical and historical dynamics. This strategy has an undeniable power but deemphasizes the complexity of capitalism’s emergence. The puzzle here is that capital is a definite social relation (the generalized sale of the labor power and the purchase of commodities by the workers who produce them) that did not exist before capitalist societies emerged in Europe in the 1700s. But how could capitalist social relations emerge from noncapitalist ones? To put this question otherwise: the existence of capitalism presumes the existence of capitalists, a social class who profit from owning the means of production (commonly by purchasing labor power as a commodity to produce and sell a commodity)—but from where did these capitalists come before capitalism? Karatani locates the origin of capitalist exchange in inter-community differences in value systems: “How then is profit obtained through equal exchanges? The problem is solved when we posit circulation or commodity exchanges as taking place between different systems of value. As Marx noted, the value of one thing is determined
by the system of its value relationships with all other commodities. For this reason, the same item will have different values when placed in different systems. Large surplus values (margins) are produced when the two systems are spatially distant from one another—in, that is, long-distance trade. This argument complements the tradition of Marxist analysis of unequal development and unequal exchange from Rosa Luxemburg to Samir Amin, a tradition that (to simplify) links capital’s contradictions to its need to expand spatially via imperialism, thereby transforming precapitalist societies. But Karatani’s explanation is more indebted to Uno Kōzō (宇野 弘蔵, 1980) and introduces novelties to Marxist analysis of imperialism.

One of capital’s contradictions lies in the gap between production and consumption, a gap that Marxists typically describe temporally: first a capitalist produces a commodity (M-C), then sells it to earn a profit (C-M'). A contradiction arises when competition drives capitalists to reduce wages (lowering the cost of labor power). This causes periodic crises, where wage laborers cannot afford to buy the commodities that they produce, reducing the realization of surplus value? A key implication Karatani draws out is that the fundamental source of capital’s crises is the worker/consumer class, which capital cannot create but relies on for its profit and perpetuation. This dynamic is discussed in detail in part 2 of Transcritique. In part 3 of Structure, Karatani returns to this theme, emphasizing the spatiality of the gap between production and consumption and its consequences for world history. Allow me to quote the key passage:

[As Marx explains in Capital I,] relative surplus value is generated within the value system of a single country or region by creating a new value system through technological innovation that increases productivity. A difference arises in the value of labor power between the moment when workers sell it by being hired and the moment when the products they make are sold. Industrial capital obtains its margin by carrying out exchanges (equal exchanges) across the value systems it has differentiated in this way. In that sense, it resembles merchant capital. But industrial capital encounters a difficulty unknown to merchant capital because of the way it achieves self-valorization
by selling back to workers their own products. To put this in terms of [Adam] Smith’s example [of the pin factory, in *Wealth of Nations*:] once you’ve achieved a tenfold increase in production through coordination and division of labor, who is going to buy all of those pins? No matter how low the price drops, the workers aren’t going to be able to buy ten times as many pins. In order for capital to generate surplus value here, it must go outside to find consumers to buy the pins. These locations … are found in foreign markets or among newly risen laborer-consumers emerging from previously self-sufficient communities—in other words, the proletariat…. In order to secure the self-valorization of capital, it is not sufficient to simply raise productivity; one must also ceaselessly integrate increasing numbers of new proletarians (laborer-consumers) into the system…. Capital consists of the accumulation process M-C-M'. If capital cannot grow, it ceases to exist. Unlike merchant capital, which had only a limited surface impact on society, industrial capital by necessity has to dismember the existing community down to its deepest strata, completely reorganizing the community in order to integrate it into the commodity economy.32

We are now living through an era characterized by neoliberal imperialism, where capital is hegemonic (supported by nation and state) while community life is persistently reorganized “in order to integrate it into the commodity economy.” But, according to Karatani, there is an alternative.

**D**

Mode of exchange D is free and reciprocal exchange. It is the most difficult mode to grasp because, unlike the other three, it has never become the general basis for a social-historical formation. But this is not to say that it does not exist historically. As Karatani explains:

There is a fourth mode of exchange[, D,] that arises out of resistance against the other three…. It has several defining characteristics…. it forms the polar
opposite of mode of exchange B—that is, of the principle of the state. In the way that mode D liberates individual people from the constraining bonds of the community, it resembles a market society—in other words, mode of exchange C. And yet at the same time mode D also resembles mode of exchange A in the way that, countering the competition and class divisions of the market economy, it aims at reciprocal (mutual-aid style) exchanges.33

In effect, D shares with C the existence of market exchange but in a form that is radically open (free) and reciprocal, conditions that capitalism can never produce. Mode of exchange D reflects a historical attempt to realize the promise of universal relation, albeit without the unfree, repressive, and theocratic qualities inherent to mode of exchange A.34 Thus, “mode of exchange D marks the attempt to restore the reciprocal community (A) … on top of the market economy (C)…. In this situation, mode of exchange A is restored—and yet it no longer has the power to bind individuals to the community.”35

Many will ask how we might realize mode of exchange D or a society of type “X.” Let me summarize Karatani’s answer, highlighting its spatial dimensions.36 The first point concerns scale: Karatani calls for simultaneous world revolution. Recall that the central strategy of the twentieth century for the left—to create militant movements and parties that aim to seize the state and then build communism—failed to create communism. In chapter 12 of Structure, Karatani examines this problem (specifically in a discussion of the impossibility of socialism in one country) to show the antinomy at the heart of the challenge of transcending the capitalist state today:

If by chance the revolution should occur in one country, it would immediately encounter interference and sanctions from other countries.…. a socialist revolution that really aimed to abolish capital and state would inevitably face interference and sanctions. A successful revolution that wants to preserve itself has only one option: to transform itself into a powerful state. In other words, it is impossible to abolish the state from within a single country.
The state can only be abolished from within, and yet at the same time it cannot be abolished from within. Marx was not troubled by this antinomy, because it was self-evident to him that the socialist revolution was “only possible as the act of the dominant peoples ‘all at once’ and simultaneously.”

But, to say the least, “It is difficult … to unite movements from various countries” where political and economic relations “exist at different stages of development.” Karatani concludes that Marxism must dislodge itself from the militant-party strategy that has dominated its political theory since the 1910s. The core problem arises from a conception of capitalist society rooted in Marx’s metaphor in which the economy constitutes an autonomous base upon which various superstructural elements (state, law, religion, nation) stand. It follows from this conception that if one could turn the state against capital and smash the economic base, a new superstructure would arise.

Karatani’s explanation for the failure of this strategy is that the nation, religion, and the state arise from and are driven by distinct modes of exchange that predate the generalization of capitalist social relations. Ergo, nation and state are endowed with their own reason for existing; they form autonomous powers that will support capital when capital is attacked. The difficulty we face in overcoming global capitalism lies in this mutuality of nation, state, and capital, a triadic structure that Karatani likens to Borromean rings. An attack on any one fails to break the whole because of the strength provided by the other rings. We can see this in the way that the influences of nation and state resurged in the wake of the 2007 global economic crisis. In his essay “Beyond Capital-Nation-State,” Karatani explains: “One frequently hears today that the nation-state will be gradually decomposed by the globalization of capitalism (neo-liberalism). That is impossible. When individual national economies are threatened by the global market, they demand the protection (redistribution) of the state and/or bloc economy, at the same time as appealing to national cultural identity [as indeed has occurred throughout the world since the onset of the current crisis]. So it is that any counteraction to capital must be one targeted against the state and nation (community).” Under these circumstances, it may well appear that we are stuck. However,
Karatani finds a solution in simultaneous movement “from above and below,” that is, immanent and ex-scendent struggle, for simultaneous world revolutions.

Let us consider the immanent movement from “below,” or associationism. Here the fundamental task is “to create a form of production and consumption that exists outside the circuit of M-C-M’,” and the model is of the combined consumers/producers’ cooperative. The aim is to organize society around such cooperatives in an “association of free and equal producers,” to repeat one of Marx’s expressions for communism, without treating labor power as a commodity. Building such relations requires uprooting capital’s value form and money. Thus to build the association of free and equal producers, Karatani reasons, we must “establish a financial system (or a system of payment/settlement) based on a currency that does not turn to capital, namely, that does not involve interest.”40 In other words, we must be able to conduct exchange with a means other than money as we know it. Yet this is unlikely to occur soon. So where does this leave us?

As I understand Karatani, for simultaneous world revolution to occur two conditions must be met, returning us to the two other spatial qualities of his theory of revolution. First, we would need to see the generalization of a mode of exchange D, which, for Karatani, implies the return of nomadism—or more precisely the return of the capacity for the free and reciprocal gift exchange that he finds in nomadic societies. Indeed, Karatani writes that “communism depends less on shared ownership of the means of production than on the return of nomadism.”41 Yet again, if we were to successfully reorganize numerous communities on the basis of exchange relation D and nomadism—through movements from below for dignity and autonomy—the capitalist nation-state would attack.

This leads to the necessity of the second condition, namely, the creation of an entirely reformed United Nations through a revolutionary movement “from above” that would facilitate the consolidation and generalization of the movements “from below.” Such a movement would mean the realization of Kant’s argument for a World Republic. “Kant located the way to perpetual peace not in a world state but in a federation of nations.”42 Perhaps we could say that only movements from below—where many nomadic communities organized on the basis of mode of exchange D, or ‘X’—could
provide a basis for the World Republic; yet only a World Republic would protect the many “Xs” from being destroyed by state and capital. Hence the two elements of the Kingdom of Ends, the “above” of a radically reformed UN and the “below” of a multitude of free and reciprocal communities, must emerge “simultaneously.” Ergo, simultaneous world revolution.

III

Karatani’s modes of exchange are not simply spatial forms, nor are the spatial forms underlying the modes of exchange equivalent. Rather, I have argued that his conception of modes of exchange is rooted in an analysis of spatial difference (unlike an orthodox Marxist conception of modes of production); that his explanation of how these modes of exchange have been elaborated and realized as the structure of our modern world, the capitalist nation-state, hinges upon spatial form; and that, taken together, this amounts to a geographical philosophy of world history.

Karatani is hardly the first thinker to emphasize spatial form in world history. Among others, he credits Max Weber’s approach to economic history, Karl Wittfogel’s theory of oriental despotism, and Immanuel Wallerstein’s world-system framework for inspiring aspects of his argument. Yet Karatani’s approach to world history is arguably more capacious than even these thinkers. In some respects his book calls to mind the work of Jared Diamond. Structure provides a strong antidote to Diamond’s considerable influence as a popular theorist of geographical world history. This is because it raises three questions commanding enormous popular interest, addressed by Diamond’s books: “What can we learn from pre-modern peoples?” (Diamond’s The World Until Yesterday); “Why is the West on top?” (Guns, Germs, and Steel); and “Will our civilization collapse?” (Collapse). Yet their politics are utterly divergent: whereas Diamond’s narratives hinge on geographical determinism, Structure provides radical answers (Karatani is also more demanding of the reader than Diamond). Nevertheless, both thinkers respond to a widespread—and, I think, legitimate—desire to account for the strange and difficult condition we find ourselves in with an encompassing, spatially sensitive theory of world history.
I make this point in part to respond to Frederic Jameson’s provocation that *Structure* revisits “the scandal of geography,” namely: that all narratives of world history ultimately regress into attempts to philosophize geography.\(^47\) I think Jameson accurately captures something essential about *Structure* but portrays the situation too ironically or negatively. Geography’s willingness to serve as accomplice for crimes of historical distortion should make us suspicious. Any time geography is treated as the (implicit and if often hidden) explanatory frame of world history we are at risk of lapsing into geographical determinism—this is the rational kernel of Jameson’s critique. If philosophizing about history in a geographical spirit seems archaic, shameful, or scandalous (Jameson’s word) it is the fault of the Eurocentrists—from Hegel to Diamond—who have defended their teleology with the old line “it’s not my fault the world is organized like this.” And yet we still live on Earth and must think through our political impasse on its ground. *Structure* is indeed an attempt to philosophize geography—which explains its power and its *unheimliche* quality.

And so the final word belongs to another philosopher and geographer: Immanuel Kant. Earlier I implied that *Transcritique* could be seen as more philosophical and *Structure* as more geographical-historical, and in a way that is true. But we should not separate these books too cleanly; they form a logical pair. To conclude, I will briefly draw out one intersection: Karatani’s emphasis on the “space between” or spatial difference in *Structure*, from which modes of exchange derive, is essentially the reiteration of Kant’s parallax gap, brilliantly theorized in *Transcritique*.\(^48\) In this respect and others, *Structure* is a deeply Kantian work.

Consider Karatani’s theory of world history. The fundamental form repeated through modes of exchange A, B, and C is that of the betweenness of the exchange relation in space: the parallax gap of spatial difference. This is an ontology that refuses reducing history and social life to primary connections of space and being. That is to say, it is an ontology that at once problematizes subjectivity and historicizes being and the world. In this sense, I suppose Karatani could be compared to Heidegger (or the Kyoto School, as per Harootunian\(^49\)), but his approach is different: lacking nostalgia for lost belonging and oriented toward the political left. What, then, are the philosophical coordinates of Karatani’s spatial structure of world history?
The short answer is that the spatial structure of each of the modes of exchange in *Structure* reiterates Kant’s parallax gap as implied by his philosophy of space in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (hereafter, *Critique* I). For Kant, space is inherent to human reason but not merely objectively *there*. When Kant defines space as “the form of all appearances of outer sense,” he neither presupposes a fixed recipient-subject of that form, nor a static quality of human sensation of objects in space (“outer sense”). Space is the fundamental parallax of human subjectivity, a spacing into which human reason is thrown and the form within which it emerges. Karatani’s reconstruction of Marxism in *Structure* essentially maps human history on the basis of four modes of exchange, each of which is fundamentally defined by its spacing, its “betweenness.” In doing so, he faithfully reiterates Kant’s philosophy of space in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. In this respect, *Structure* elaborates upon the project of *Transcritique*, which reads *Capital I* in light of the parallax of Kant’s first *Critique*. Reading Kant and Marx in parallax to reconstruct a philosophy of world geography is not so farfetched. As Karatani observes, “what [Kant] taught at university was not philosophy, but geography and anthropology…. It will be useful to re-read Kant as a geographer.” With this in mind, consider this claim from *Structure*’s preface: “According to Hegel, the essence of something only becomes apparent in its effects. That is, he viewed things *ex post facto*, ‘after the fact.’ Kant, on the other hand, viewed things *ex ante facto*, ‘before the fact.’ With regard to the future, we can only make predictions, not draw positive conclusions…. When he turned Hegel on his head, Marx saw history not as something that had ended, but as something that must be realized in the future. This represents a switch from an after-the-fact to a before-the-fact standpoint.”

I have argued that *The Structure of World History* is a brilliant expression of *ex ante facto* reason, one that, despite the word “history” in the title, is just as spatial as it is temporal. The view it enables is indeed one “before-the-fact” but a “before” of our world becoming a world republic. This is a vantage we must return to and bring forth, again and again. For this challenge nothing is more valuable than this book, the product of radical thought moving freely. If there are pure gifts, this is surely one.
NOTES

A version of this article was presented as a paper at the 2014 conference on *Structure* at Duke University: thanks to Fredric Jameson for the privilege. For critical comments on these arguments, I thank Majed Akhter, Kanishka Goonewardena, Frederic Jameson, Will Jones, Köjin Karatani, Lynn Karatani, Lee Soo Tian, Mazen Labban, and two anonymous referees.

1. Briefly, Karatani claims that Islam reflects a singular instance where “a nomadic people built a world empire” (*The Structure of World History*, 109). Islam’s emergence as a world religion was intertwined with the rise of the Islamic Empire: “created through an alliance between nomadic peoples and urban merchants—more specifically, an alliance between the city merchants of Mecca and Medina and the nomadic Bedouins. This [alliance] required the unifying force of the Islamic religion. Islam is an urban religion, one that affirms the value of commerce. Accordingly, the Islamic Empire was a commercial empire that extended across both desert and seas. In terms of its geography and degree of civilization, it was for all practical purposes the heir to the Roman Empire. At the peak of the Islamic Empire, western Europe was merely a submargin of the Islamic sphere” (ibid.). To be sure, Karatani’s argument about Islam could be criticized, but that is not my aim. Rather than get bogged down in empirical (anthropological and historical) debates about evidence, in this article I seek to make a philosophical argument by drawing out the book’s spatial qualities.

2. Karatani and Wainwright, “‘Critique is impossible without moves,’” 42, my emphasis.


4. Space does not permit me to summarize Karatani’s exchange theory: for a summary, see *Structure*, 1–28; also sources in note 3. Most reviewers of *Structure* discuss this aspect of the book: see, for example, Cassegard, “Exteriority and Transcritique”; Harootunian, “Philosophy of History’s Return”; Lucas, “Socialism as a Regulative Ideal?” Karatani’s “Architecture and Association” provides the earliest version of the theory I have found. At this stage, modes of exchange were not historical categories, but already Karatani emphasized their spatial forms.

5. I thank Kanishka Goonewardena for this point. See also Goonewardena and Orzech, “X Marks the Spot.”

7. Ibid., 5, my emphasis.


10. Ibid., 37.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.


15. Karatani, Structure, 69, my emphasis.

16. Karatani’s argument thus finds a parallel in Agamben’s description of “the state of exception as zone of indistinction between outside and inside” (Agamben, Homo Sacer, 181).

17. Karatani, Structure, 70, my emphasis.

18. On money, see Karatani, Architecture as Metaphor, chapter 8; Transcritique, §5.4; and Structure, §II.4.


20. Karatani proposes a fourfold spatial classification of world-empires: irrigation type, maritime type, nomadic type, and merchant type (Structure, 106). These four types modulate with a fourfold structure of world-empires: core—margins—submargins—out-of-sphere (ibid., 107). This produces sixteen possible positions vis-à-vis world-empires.


22. This is equivalent to saying that the selective adoption of imperial practices is not unique to Japan but an effect of Japan’s position in a geographical structure. This argument is consistent with a long-standing theme of Karatani’s thought, that is, the critique of Japan essentialism (see, e.g., Karatani, Japan Is Interesting because Japan Is Not Interesting).
23. Karatani, *Structure*, 161. My ellipses simplify a more complicated argument. On the distinction between world-empire and contemporary world-economy, compare *Structure* §II and 160–163. Note that “the state is formed in tandem with the practice of trade” (*Structure*, 82). In other words, trade (an effect of spatial difference in value systems) is a condition for both modes of exchange B and C. “Under the centralized state, in return (exchange) for its payment of taxes (tribute and forced labor), each community secures its rights of ownership. With this it becomes possible to carry out commodity exchanges—that is, the mutual transference of possessions” (ibid.).

24. Ibid., 134.


26. Ibid., 124.

27. Ibid.


30. Marx intended to complete multiple additional volumes of *Capital* that would elaborate on other dimensions and contradictions, but he failed to complete them. Volumes 2 and 3 were compiled and translated by Engels, introducing many complications to subsequent Marxist analysis.


33. Ibid., 127.


36. In an early presentation of some of these ideas to architects in Singapore, Karatani, “Architecture and Association,” suggests that the designs of Bauhaus reflect an attempt to spatially realize mode of exchange D: “What does this fourth term D mean in terms of architecture? It should be something to supersede metropolis or something to truly overcome modernity. Postmodernists have criticized modernists, but they did not face the real question of modernity, that is, the trinity of capitalist-nation-state. They only flirted with capitalism. The paradox is that in order to overcome modernity, we need to go back
to the modernist attempts, especially Bauhaus, and need to reexamine their socialism, which now should be called associationism. I am certain that only associationism can show a way out of ... modernity, and architects have much to contribute to it” (31).

By my reading, Structure designates no clear role for architects in the project of building D.

37. Ibid., 292.

38. Ibid.


40. Karatani, Transcritique, 207.


42. Ibid., 302.

43. See Weber, Economy and Society; Wittfogel, Oriental Despotism; and Wallerstein, The Modern World System II.

44. Lucas, “Socialism as a Regulative Ideal?” (121), also draws this connection, albeit to criticize Karatani for failing to engage Diamond. More generally, Lucas criticizes Structure for contributing to a “pessimism indifferent to the actual stages of concrete struggles” (119) and an “anti-political orientationless with regard to determinant conditions” (119). While I cannot claim to understand the logic of this vehement critique, I believe it presumes that Karatani’s theory of modes of exchange must provide a directly applicable guide to the analysis of situations. I think this is too much to ask of one project—if accepted, this standard would apply equally to Capital, vol. 1—and, at any rate, I cannot see how Structure inhibits strategic thought. By my reading, Structure provides theory at two levels: in terms of Uno’s triad (Principles of Political Economy), it moves between the first level of the principle, that is, the purely theoretical ideal form of a social formation, and the second level of the actually existing but still general historical stages. This leaves us to work out the third level, that is, specific situations. Structure in no way forecloses such conjunctural thinking.

45. See Diamond, Guns, Germs, and Steel; Diamond, Collapse, 2011; and Diamond, The World Until Yesterday.

46. For criticisms of Diamond, see, for example, McAnany and Yoffee, Questioning Collapse; Correia, “F**k Jared Diamond.”

47. My transcription of Jameson, “Introductory Remarks.” By “philosophize geography” I take Jameson to mean “to make a philosophical problem of geography.”
48. This claim is buttressed by Karatani’s treatment of the interior/exterior relation, a central theme of Karatani’s earlier writings, in his more recent political-historical works. In his insightful commentary on the 2006 Japanese book that evolved into *The Structure of World History*, Cassegard in “Exteriority and Transcritique” argues that Karatani treats associations as potential “sources of exteriority.” Cassegard points to “one of the few passages in which the word ‘exteriority’ reappears in Karatani’s recent writings: ‘what we should do is to search for a place for resisting the capitalist nation-state in the “exterior” (gaibu) of the trinity or, in other words, in associationism.’ This passage is revealing because it shows that when the word ‘exteriority’ reappears, it does so as a placeholder for something eminently effable and conceptually identifiable, namely, associations. Exteriority is now not simply something ‘absent,’ but something which we, as acting subjects, have the possibility of accessing by engaging in associations” (14–15). At the time of writing *Transcritique*, Cassegard implies, Karatani hoped that the New Associationist Movement would introduce exteriority into Japan. After the demise of NAM, in *Structure*, Karatani’s mode D is theorized in relation to universal religions as well as the associations of producer-consumers. I thank Lee Soo Tian for this insight.

49. Harootunian, “Philosophy of History’s Return,” 100–105. While Harootunian’s review of *Structure* has merits, I disagree with his essay’s central claims, including his assertion that *Structure* recapitulates the Kyoto School’s philosophy of history.

50. Kant introduces the first section of *Critique* I, the transcendental aesthetic, with a concise exposition on space in which he posits that “space is a necessary a priori representation,” a pure intuition, not empirically derived. From this it might be imagined that, for Kant, space is purely relational. But, he argues: “space does not represent any property of things in themselves, nor does it represent them in their relation to one another. That is to say, space does not represent any determination that attaches to the objects themselves, and which remains even when abstraction has been made of all the subjective conditions of intuition.” Space is neither in the object, nor is space merely an effect of relations between objects. Those who have read *Transcritique* will recognize this as a reflection of what Karatani characterizes as Kant’s parallax gap: as space.

51. Karatani and Wainwright, “‘Critique is impossible without moves,’” 36.


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