

**On Modes of
Exchange,
Interview with Kojin
Karatani**

**Agon Hamza &
Frank Ruda**

Brief introduction to the interview

We want to give the readers of the following interview a few points of orientation.

The interview with Kojin Karatani, the Japanese philosopher, is another of the rather (in its form) unconventional interviews in the *Crisis and Critique* interview section. Karatani chose a distinctive way of answering the questions we had sent to him. Instead of following a linear form, answering each question after the other, he opted for a rather more condensed and displacing form of answering.

The below is therefore 'divided into two': you will first read all our questions, and then Karatani's answers.

Questions:

1) We would like to begin with a general question. What is "class" today? What do we (or ought we) mean when we refer to it today?

2) It might appear that the time of, and for class-based analysis is definitely over. It appears that the concept of "class" is outdated, both in its theoretical and practical potential. Because it seems to come with the danger of a vulgar sociological application – and application that reified the class concept into an objectivist substratum of societies. Given this context, can we still undertake a class-based analysis of present-day society?

3) Leftists often express their frustration when the working class doesn't act the way the left wants, or expects them to act. Communists are often frustrated when they encounter the really existing workers, because they do not fit the idealized conception of the proletariat. One of the main tasks might be to distinguish between a certain fetishization of the working class and a true appreciation of the heterogeneous composition of the proletariat. Is it possible to think or conceive a revolutionary class-agent in our era? If so, how?

4) Althusser proposed a thesis according to which class struggle *precedes* classes. That is to say, class struggle *creates* classes, and not the other way around. This is clearly an anti-positivist stance that more or less characterized his entire work. This can be read alongside Balibar's thesis that *there is no socialist mode of production*. How would you read this from the standpoint of "modes of exchange" (and please do introduce our readers to this magnificent concept)?

- 5) How do you understand class struggle in our era? Is it visible and effective in a time of pandemic, global warming, and ecological catastrophes, digital surveillance of our lives, etc. Would you identify ecology as one (of the main) site(s) of the class struggle today?
- 6) You have also written about architecture from a politico-economic and philosophical perspective. Taking a cue from Marx, you argue that class struggle always existed in the cities and in the form of ideology. Can we say that architectural design represents the class struggle with other means? Is this what reflects and materializes in city planning (or its absence), say in the difference between the natural and artificial cities?
- 7) You have written about the Borromean Knot of contemporary capitalism, which consists of the triple system: Capital-Nation-State. They complement and supplement each other, with the entire system failing if one of the elements is missing. Is class a concept of "mode C" or a concept of the composite of all modes?
- 8) You proposed a different understanding of world history, not based on the modes of production (as classic Marxism would), but on the modes of exchange. You distinguish between four such modes. Could you tell us which ones they are and can you specify for us what role class(es) play in remapping such modes of exchange - if any at all?
- 9) One of the main victories of ruling ideology is to replace class analysis with other forms of cultural analysis (of identities for example). Is there a relation, and if so what is the relation, between intersectionality and the analysis of multiple modes of exchange?
- 10) Is there still a contemporary bourgeoisie? And, does it still have the same characteristic traits that defined it in the last century (ownership of the means of production, for example)?
- 11) At the time of the publication of *Transcritique*, you were very involved with the New Associationist Movement. In the West, we learned that later the movement was dissolved, but we never had much information about its limitations or the ultimate takeaways from the movement and its dissolution. Could you tell us more about NAM's achievements and its impasses and how, or whether, this political experience influenced the later directions of your research?
- 12) Your most recent book, still not translated to English, deals with the issue of power and devotes a long section to a more detailed presentation of "mode D". Why did the issue of power seem like an important concept to take on after the focus on modes of exchange in

Structure of World History? Is it because of the problem of compulsion in free association - that is, the issue of how ethical socialist behaviour could become generalized and form a bedrock for social exchange?

13) "Mode D" functions very differently in *Structure of World History* than do the three other modes: it is presented as a much more heterogeneous mixture of nomadic, religious, philosophical and communist social aspects, it appears mostly at moments of transformation between stable social formations rather than as a stable force of its own, and it is often defined in relation to other modes (for example, as "return of mode A in higher dimension"). Could you speak about this particular diversity of "mode D" - is it a contingent factor, that perhaps a true socialist society would retroactively dispel, or is it a structural aspect of "mode D", to be perhaps more experimental or diffuse, lacking certain clear properties like modes A, B and C?

Answers:

Your questions concern class issues. Class is a Marxist notion based on the language of historical materialism and alienation theory, both of which are based on mode of production theory. I thought that this kind of Marxism was inadequate, and that it would not be possible to understand the state or capital, so I came up with the theory of modes of exchange. In short, I believe that the concept of class was always unclear and misleading. I cannot say much further about class issue and thus found it difficult to answer your questions.

In one of the questions, you asked me to explain the modes of exchange theory. Please refer to the following link for that.

http://www.kojinkaratani.com/en/pdf/An_Introduction_to_Modes_of_Exchange.pdf

After writing this introductory piece, I examined the modes of exchange theory further, which resulted as *Powers and Modes of Exchange* (2022, Iwanami, Tokyo) (The English translation is scheduled to be published early 2025). You asked me why I wrote about "powers". The obvious answer is that while the powers of modes of production (production power) are straightforward, the powers of modes of exchange are not so simple.

These powers are "spiritual" in nature, as opposed to production power which is material. In this piece, rather than answering each of your questions, I will explain about the "powers" that arise from modes of exchange, in the hope that my explanations will be beneficial to think of class issue. Class, the state, and other problems of our society stem from

these perverse powers, which modes of exchange generate. Here, I also address environmental issues, which you mentioned in your question.

When Weber and Freud criticized Marxism, while acknowledging the determining power of economic base, they emphasized different powers which exist in the superstructure. Weber sought it in religion (Protestantism), and Freud sought it in the "unconscious". In other words, they thought that those powers came from a place other than the economic base, that is, from ideational powers which religion and other superstructures carry. However, I believe that such "powers" stem from the economic base, by which I mean modes of exchange, not modes of production.

Weber and Freud failed to recognize that Marx, in *Capital*, focused on the "spiritual power" arising from the exchange of commodities. Marx said, "--the table continues to be that common, every-day thing, wood. But, so soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent. (*Capital*). And he called this power of money a *fetish*. This was only seen as a joke, but there lied an important point that historical materialism lacked.

When Marx came to think of this, he had in his mind one predecessor; Hobbes, who wrote *Leviathan*. Hobbes found the power of the state not in physical force, such as armed force, nor human will but in its "spiritual" power. That comes out of an "exchange" of protection and obedience between the ruler and the ruled. Hobbes called this power the Leviathan, a gigantic sea monster. In *Capital*, Marx called the power arising from mode of exchange C a *fetish*, just as Hobbes called the spiritual power arising from mode of exchange B a Leviathan.

However, nobody paid attention to this. It was dismissed as a mere joke. Meanwhile, after Marx's death, there was a person who has discovered other type of spiritual power; Marcel Mauss focused on the gift exchange in primitive societies. He believed that in this reciprocal exchange a spell (the spirit of *Hau*) is at work. This power accompanies mode of exchange A. However, this too was dismissed as a joke or metaphor. Morse was admired by the Structuralists such as Lévi-Strauss, but at the same time condemned for bringing up such a suspicious power.

I find that these spiritual powers are more prevalent in the world today than ever before. After the nineteenth century, the powers of the capital-nation-state have been dominating the world. It should be noted that each of them (capital, nation, and state) is based on a spiritual power, and we are more than ever under the control of those powers. However, not recognizing or ignoring such "powers" is considered to be "scientific" attitude. It is clear what the consequences of such an attitude would be. A mere look at the current world situation will be enough to recognize this.

I have already discussed these points in *The Structure of World History*. My most recent book *Powers and Modes of Exchange* (2022) is different in the following respects, among others.

First, I reviewed the power of mode D. For example, some readers of *The Structure of World History* saw D as an ideal state that could be conceived and realized by human endeavors. But D is not like that. It is beyond human will. At the same time, many readers understood D as a different name of world religions. Here, let me answer the question 13, which is related to this point.

13) "Mode D" functions very differently in *Structure of World History* than do the three other modes: it is presented as a much more heterogeneous mixture of nomadic, religious, philosophical and communist social aspects, it appears mostly at moments of transformation between stable social formations rather than as a stable force of its own, and it is often defined in relation to other modes (for example, as "return of mode A in higher dimension"). Could you speak about this particular diversity of "mode D" - is it a contingent factor, that perhaps a true socialist society would retroactively dispel, or is it a structural aspect of "mode D", to be perhaps more experimental or diffuse, lacking certain clear properties like modes A, B and C?

A: Mode D is yet to be realized. In D other modes of exchanges will be sublated. I often describe D as "a restoration of A on a higher dimension". D can be said to be a world in which mode A without its negative elements such as exclusiveness, oppression, etc., spreads to every corner of society. There, modes B and C will disappear.

It is often misunderstood, but when I say that universal religion has an orientation towards D, I am not saying that D is inherently religious, or D is a different name of religion. World Religions do have an orientation to D, but they are mostly A (mutual aid or magic in the form of prayer or God-coercion), B (coercion), and C (taking money) in reality.

There is something I would like to note here in relation to environmental issues. I feel that people who think about environmental problems tend to focus on the relationship between nature and humans, but neglect the relationship between humans, while in fact human-to-human relationship is at the core of the environmental issues. To think about this, it would help to discern the difference between "exchange" and "traffic". In fact, the modes of exchange are about "exchanges" between humans. In other words, there is no "exchange" in the relationship between human and nature. This of course does not mean that humans and nature are unrelated. But their relationship is rather a "traffic" (Moses Hess) but not an "exchange". Let me clarify this. "Exchange" brings about spiritual power that compels humans to think and act in certain ways, while "traffic" does not. Exchange between humans generates perverse spiritual powers but traffic between humans and nature is straightforward and simply material.

Finally, there is another "traffic" that I have not dealt with. It is the traffic between humans and nature, that is, the problem of "substance metabolism" (*Capital*). It was Moses Hess who inspired Marx to think of

the problem of traffic. Hess saw "traffic" not only between humans but also between humans and nature. Marx and Engels wrote about this in *German Ideology*.

The first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals. Thus, the first fact to be established is the physical organisation of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature. Of course, we cannot here go either into the actual physical nature of man, or into the natural conditions in which man finds himself – geological, hydrographical, climatic and so on. The writing of history must always set out from these natural bases and their modification in the course of history through the action of men. (*German Ideology*, from Marx-Engels Collected Works, Volume 5.)

In the "formula" of historical materialism, this relationship between humans and nature is largely abstracted. In contrast, Marx in *Capital* saw the relationship between humans and nature as traffic in his consideration of the relationship between humans from the perspective of traffic. Here, however, he distinguished between "traffic" between humans and "traffic" between humans and nature. Rather, he tried to understand the traffic between humans as "exchange". Then he moved on to investigate the ideational power that arises from the exchange and compel humans, or the activity of the fetish and its development.

However, in doing so, he did not overlook the problem of "traffic" between humans and nature. That is why he took up this issue in *Capital*. At this point, he was aware of the difference between "exchange" between humans and "traffic" between humans and nature. That is, while the former generates an ideational power, or spiritual power, the latter does not. In other words, the powers that arise in the human-nature traffic are purely material.

These were not differentiated until some point in human history. For instance, animism assumes an "exchange" between nature and humans, where some spiritual power is at work. It was after the eighteenth century, under the development of the industrial revolution and industrial capitalism, that such a view completely disappeared. Animism was, so to speak, a way of thinking during the period when mode of exchange A was dominant, and such an idea disappeared with the dominance of mode of exchange C. Since then, people seem to have been freed from spiritual powers. But it is only because they have yielded to the spiritual power of capital.

As already mentioned, in *Capital*, Marx delineated the process by which the spirit of money/capital (the fetish) came to rule over human beings. This was a situation that arose from human-to-human exchange. However, at that time, he perceived that unprecedented matters were occurring with industrial capitalism regarding the relationship between humans and nature. It is the disappearance of "traffic", that is, the destruction of the natural environment.

He found a prime example of this in capitalist agriculture. Capitalist agriculture “disturbs the metabolic interaction between man and the earth, *i.e.*, it prevents the return to the soil of its constituent elements to the soil of its constituent element consumed by man in the form of food and clothing; hence it hinders the operation of the eternal natural condition for the lasting fertility of the soil.”

In other words, metabolism is “traffic,” which had been lost under capitalist agriculture. Marx received its theoretical support from the German chemist Justus Liebig (1803-1873), who was the founder of chemical fertilizer-based agriculture and at the same time the first critic of it, who advocated recycling-type agriculture for the first time.

All progress in capitalist agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the working, but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time is a progress towards the more long-lasting sources of that fertility. The more a country proceeds from large-scale industry as the background of its development, as in the case of the United States, the more rapid is this process of destruction. Capitalist production, therefore, only develops the techniques and the degree of combination of the social process of production but simultaneously undermining the original sources of all wealth – the soil and the worker. (*Capital*: volume 1, Penguin p. 638)

Here, Marx points out that capitalist production not only exploits workers, but also exploits nature, that is, destroys the “traffic” between humans and nature. Needless to say, this is not just a matter of agricultural production. Regarding industrial production, he also emphasized that production involves waste.

As the capitalist mode of production extends, so also does the utilization of the refuse left behind by production and consumption. Under the heading of production, we have the waste products of industry and agriculture, under that of consumption we have both the excrement produced by man’s natural metabolism and the form in which useless articles survive after use has been made of them. Refuse of production is, therefore, in the chemical industry, the by-product which gets lost if production is only on a small scale; in the production of machinery, the heap of iron filings that appears to be waste but is then used again as raw material for iron production, etc. The natural human waste products, remains of clothing in the form of rags etc., are the refuse of consumption. The latter are of the greatest importance for agriculture. But there is a colossal wastage in the capitalist economy in proportion to their actual use. In London, for example, they can do nothing better with the

excrement produced by 4.5 million people than pollute the Thames with it, at monstrous expense.

(A Critique of Political Economy, vol. 3. Trans. David Fernbach (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1876) 195.

The situation he pointed out here was not resolved after that. Conversely, today, the survival of the entire planet's environment is in jeopardy. Not just the Thames, but all over the bottom of the Pacific Ocean is filled with plastic waste. And this suggests the arrival of a greater environmental crisis.

However, such observation of *Capital* remained unheeded. In other words, it has been thought that it is not the main point of Marx's critique of economics. However, if the basis of critique of economics is to look at the economy not only in terms of production but also in terms of traffic, naturally it is to be found not only between humans and humans, but also between humans and nature. However, that was absent in the "economics" that began with industrial capitalism. There, nature was not a partner of "traffic", but merely a material object.

It was different in the societies before that. As I mentioned earlier, in hunter-gatherer societies, animism was the predominant way of looking at nature; the natural world was regarded as being imbued with spiritual powers. Therefore, they prayed and made offerings to the nature. In that case, it can be said that "traffic" between humans and nature was taking place, albeit unconsciously. In other words, when the mode of exchange between humans was A, the "traffic" between humans and nature was also regarded as similar to it. That is animism. Even after the predominance of the mode B, or the establishment of the state, it remained in relation to nature. Its complete disappearance took place after the stage when mode of exchange C became dominant in the Industrial Revolution when industrial capital began to use fossil fuels such as coal and oil.

Fossil fuels are precisely the products of natural history. That is, it is a historical imprint of the traffic relationship between humans and nature. When we use such fossils as fuel, we are incinerating the very history of human-nature "traffic" as fossils. The idea of finding gods in nature was dismissed as superstition, and nature became a mere material object. However, it is not because humans have been freed from superstition (ideational and spiritual powers). Thinking and acting according to the capital fetish came to be seen as rational and scientific.

And mass production, mass consumption, and mass disposal, which were unthinkable in the days of animism, have continued as if they were desirable. Human beings, blinded by the power of capital, seems oblivious to such things, despite the obvious destructive consequences. With the repeated industrial revolutions, the notion of "traffic" between

humans and nature had disappeared, but in a sense, it has returned as a physical threat to human survival.

To repeat, the environmental crisis we find today is the result of the permeation of mode of exchange C in human society, which has altered the relationship between humans and nature. As a result, nature, which had hitherto been the "other," became a mere physical object. In this way, fetishism arising from mode of exchange C distorts not only the relationship between humans but also the relationship between humans and nature. Moreover, the problems arising from the latter further distort the relationship between humans. That is, it brings about a conflict between capital-nation-state. That is, the crisis of war is approaching.

11) At the time of the publication of *Transcritique*, you were very involved with the New Associationist Movement. In the West, we learned that later the movement was dissolved, but we never had much information about its limitations or the ultimate takeaways from the movement and its dissolution. Could you tell us more about NAM's achievements and its impasses and how, or whether, this political experience influenced the later directions of your research?

K.K. NAM fell apart in infighting almost before realizing any of its goals. However, even after that, the exchanges between the former members continued. It continues to this day. Through those exchanges, I came to realize something. Many NAM members were engaged with small but meaningful movements, but because they were so quiet that they were invisible. What stood out was a small group of people who were constantly arguing fiercely online. At that time, we were not yet aware of the problems of the Internet, which was in the nascent period in Japan. We should have restricted the usage of Mailing Lists for practical contacts.

As I continued to interact with former members of NAM who are involved with small movements, I realized that small movements, though weak, are the most important counter-movements. Mode A cannot sustain unless it is small, so small is good. And it is necessary not to expect A's association (association of associations) to bring about D or overthrow the current system.

When I started NAM, I was still hopeful that a coalition of transnational associations would have the power to stand up against the state and capital. I wanted to believe in something like the power of "multitude" as Negri and Hart called it, or the power of "anti-system movements" as called by Wallerstein, but then I changed my mind. As I had feared, the situation kept getting worse. Despite the rise of movements such as the Anti-globalization or Occupy movement, another world war seems simply inevitable now.

Q: We want to end our interview with a number of either / or questions (you can certainly explain your choice, but do not have to):

Either / or:

Kant or Hegel?
Kant

Marx or Lenin?
Marx

Kant or Marx?
Marx

Poetry or prose?
Prose

Classical music or pop?
Classical music

Taking power or abolishing power?
Abolishing power

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