

Comments on Karatani: 13/07/2020

§1

Some thoughts on the Universal Religion aspect of the readings. Karatani seems to have a certain interest in Religion as an enigmatic and potentially emancipatory force, if just for his reference to Weber's *The Protestant Ethic* in a few different places.

1) At the start of Chapter 6, Karatani remarks that "mode D liberates individual people from the constraining bonds of the community." I wonder how this might change the basis of inclusion/exclusion within the reciprocal mode of exchange in the sense of a breakdown of the Schmittian Friend/Enemy distinction.

2) Karatani mentions that religions become Universal through an "incessant awareness of the contradiction between universality and particularity," what might this concretely look like?

3) Karatani also mentions the place of idolatry is prohibited in Judaism and Buddhism, would it have a place in Mode D and similarly, what form might fetishism take in this mode?

§2

It seems that, according to Karatani, the world empire is the limit point of the logic of mode B. Plunder and redistribution is here taken as a system of tributes over conquered territories, but in such a way that the conquered territories remain relatively autonomous. Because of this relative autonomy especially in what Karatani refers to as the "sub-margins", we can get a "preview" of the social forms to come. For example, feudalism is a social form that arises in the wake of the Roman empire, and its roots are to be found in the Germanic tribes in the sub-margins of that empire. It's especially interesting that, with feudalism, reciprocity seemed to stage a comeback, but this was actually a step towards the new dominance of mode C. Karatani characterizes feudalism this way:

"Put simply, feudalism was a pluralistic situation in which no one party was able to acquire absolute superiority. Monarchs, the nobility, the church, and the cities all existed in ceaseless conflict and alliance. Accordingly, feudalism also meant an endless state of war." (124)

But to avoid a simple linear narrative - that C always follows the decline of B - we should see mode B as always wavering between the centralized system of tributes going to the imperial center, and the feudal fragmentation of the center into multiple warring states (reverting back to mode A in some sense). For example, it's possible that, within a feudal society, we get a concentration of power again (for example, in the Tokugawa period in Japan). However, this wavering of mode B hides a more important shift that happens at the sub-margins.

Karatani seems to always locate the creative forces of society in the "in-between", so close enough to benefit from guarantees of centralized power, but far away enough that it can bypass some constraints. This is evinced by the following:

"Even as submargins imported the civilization of the core, they did not completely submit to it and were able to develop it independently on their own terms. In them too there was little state control over exchange and redistribution, and economic matters were entrusted to the market. This is why world-economy would develop from the submargins." (110)

"If we can say that Greece and Rome rose on the submargin of the Asiatic empires, then we can also say that feudalism (the feudal social formation) rose on the submargin of the Roman Empire, namely in Germanic tribal society." (121)

"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." (126)

Feudalism, while seemingly a step towards mode A, actually paved the way for the dominance of mode C, i.e. the rise of "free states" of Europe which followed the logic of mercantilism. I'm interested in what a weakening of mode C would look like then. Would it look like a return to mode B in some sense? Another important question is: where do we locate the sub-margin when, as Gabriel claimed in the previous meeting, everything becomes peripheral in capitalism?

§3

Karatani's account of the emergence of the state traces this as originating out of the intercourse between two 'communities', 'when the vanquished community actively consents to being governed' in exchange for the ruler's obligation to 'to guarantee the community's safety' (p.68).

I see that this follows from Karatani's conviction that 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 sovereign 'comes from the outside' (p.70). I also get that this connects to the spirit of his reading Marx as someone who theorises the ways in which 'commodity exchange began with exchanges between different communities' (p.82).

Doesn't this framework rely on a conception of each community as homogeneous in nature and prior to any form of constitution? Is analysis of the processes whereby communities are held together in the shift to, and under, mode of exchange B, incompatible with Karatani's analysis of the emergence of the state? Or is the story of the emergence of mode of exchange B that narrates the constitution of a (new) community?

§4

I'm afraid I am seriously out of sync, and still to begin this week's reading. I hope that you won't mind me sending what may seem to be messages from the past, and will instead embrace them as one form of the non-linear persistence of Mode A questions through and beneath your discussion this evening of Mode B:-)

1. My big thing at the moment is that I don't understand why there are 4 modes and not 5. K says that the shift from pooling to reciprocity is as big a leap if not bigger than the shift from reciprocity to the state, and spends a lot of time distinguishing these two forms of relationship in the first part of the book. But pooling is not identified as a "mode". Is this simply because it is not, by his definition, a mode of exchange i.e. it occurs only within a small group? Is that another way of saying that pooling, in effect, defines / is equivalent to "homogeneity", and so is a mode of absence of relationship, rather than of relationship? This might make sense, but it also seems to me a bit like pre-empting questions of possible difference by dictat, rather than actually working them through. (As if pooling abolishes the differences of the actors who engage in it - and so, in a sense, is not an act, as everything is, on some level, always already pooled...).

If this seems problematic to me, it is also because the more I read, the more I have the feeling that mode D should actually be described as the return of pooling (which I will now, for convenience, call mode 0), not the return of mode A (since mode A is actually mode 0 under a regime of obligation, and obligation is the main thing that is missing in Mode D).

So why not five modes instead of four? I am tempted to wonder if part of the problem is that if we

recognise pooling as Mode 0, then mode D might not seem so impressive:-) I.e. it would not necessarily require the shift to another level as it does now (or at least, not the same kind of shift), and this might mean that K has to give up or water down his Kantian interest in / commitment to a world republic as the only possible (if also perhaps provisional) outcome of world history - and so the possibility of a retrospectively singular world history itself.

Or to put it slightly differently, if Mode D is just the return of Mode 0 (and not Mode A minus obligation plus the internet), then this might have lifestyle implications that K and many of his readers might shy away from - for good or for bad reasons - as it might imply that the future is one of fragmentation, voluntary simplicity, local (but non-guaranteed) abundance, and reciprocal conflict, not hi-tech communism and universal peace.

To put it another way: I can see the attraction of thinking of Mode D as Mode A on a higher plane. But I can't yet see (or sense) the necessity of it from within K's own argument.

2. I wonder about how compatible K's interpretation of mode A (and mode 0) is with Viveiros de Castro's idea of a culture as, not a repertoire of practices and beliefs, but a machine for producing new practices and new beliefs. And if we do see VdC and K's visions of "primitive society" as incompatible, is this simply a detail of interpretation (what were mode 0 / mode A really like)? Or is it a fundamental challenge to the whole ontological basis of K's history? Does it support the model of perspectival incommensurability which K elaborates at the macro level? Or does it actually undermine it, from within, by proposing a fundamentally different relationship to alterity as the point of departure for any attempt to construct more-than-local and more-than-human stories about pasts and futures? And if so, can this argument between them be reduced to saying yes or no to post-modernism in the shape of Deleuze (and thus to Deleuze and Guattari's interpretation of Clastres)? Or is there a genuine problem here, for which the reifying of open-ended and unpredictable practices to produce a discrete number of possible modes of exchange arranged in developmental sequence functions as a symptom, and not simply the consequence of a conscious shift in scale?

3. Practical suggestion: if you are still looking for guests for the final plenary, it might be interesting to invite Michel Bauwens, who apparently sees SWH as one of the most important influences on his own work with the P2P Foundation: e.g.

<https://www.uwestminsterpress.co.uk/site/chapters/10.16997/book33.d/>

§5

Interested in "status motive" and questions of honor and dishonor. When profit takes on an immoral shape .. where interest is hated, with Aristotle, but also witnessed in early Italian banking, for its unnaturalness, even its perversity. (99,100)

The difference between precious and base metals, a more general critique of the mint, including attempts at defacement through Stoicism, Diogenes,

There's been recurring mention of "warrior-farmers" (102,115, ..) that scorn industry and market. Who are they to Karatani? Would this type also include river-basin communities (see Wittfogel and hydraulics) or "confederations" - see the colony overflow process described by Morgan on 112, and the "holdovers from clan society" but *returned* in a "higher dimension." How do we negotiate this with Ionian isonomy?

repetition of armor supply - who has to supply their own armor and why? questions of immunity and how to access it

§6

Reading Freud, Karatani writes that "It is as if clan society perpetually killed off in advance the ur-

father that would inevitably appear if matters were left to their own devices" (56). I am not quite sure myself what this would entail but I wonder what a psychoanalytic reading of his concept of modes of exchange could develop and how it could possibly integrate desire and drives into what seems to be a more political-economic analysis.

§7

What are we to make of the relationship between immanence and transcendence in relation to how the modes of exchange contain each other at all points but vary due to the dominance they hold as well as in relation to the changes in religious and magical practices?