

Transcending the nation through transcritique
Karatani Kōjin and the role of the nation in the capitalist world system

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Abstract

This thesis analyzes Karatani Kōjin's conceptualization of the nation, which is understood in his writings as a constitutive part of the capitalist world system. For Karatani, the capitalist world system takes the form of the triadic structure of Capital-Nation-State, in which each part is a manifestation of a different mode of exchange and supports the perpetuation of the whole structure. By seeing the nation as a semi-independent construct that operates according to a different logic of exchange than capital and state, he rejects the base/superstructure dichotomy that many Marxists have accepted and which has relegated problems pertaining to the nation as subordinated to those of capital and state. I begin this thesis with an investigation of Karatani's general approach to theory and thought, which he calls the *transcritique*, and which informs all of his writings. The central place that both the thought of Marx *and* Kant occupy in Karatani's work is emphasized, in hopes that his critique of the world system will not be understood as enclosed within "Marxism". In the first chapter, I also offer a broad description of the Capital-Nation-State triadic structure, which must be understood in order to fully grasp his concept of the nation. In chapter two, I analyze his account of the nation and its link to nationalism in more depths, highlighting how in appearing to offer a return of the community, nationalism deceptively resembles socialism, but in fact only constitutes a banal movement that never challenges the capitalist world system and, on the contrary, contributes to its perpetuation. In the last chapter, I compare Karatani with another prominent writer of the nation, Benedict Anderson, contrasting the two scholars while acknowledging the similitudes between their theories. I emphasize how Karatani perceives the nation not only as an imagined construct, but also as the expression of a real need for community that cannot be dismissed. The dissolution of the nation therefore could only be achieved by a true return of the community that capitalism disintegrates, something that the nation-form cannot achieve. It is my belief that Karatani's account offers new ways for us to look at the nature and the role that the nation occupies within the current world system, showing us that any project that wishes to challenge the capitalist world system must aim at transcending the nation.

Résumé de la thèse

Cette thèse analyse les écrits de Karatani Kōjin afin d'exposer la manière particulière dont il conçoit la nation et comment celle-ci constitue un élément fondamental du système capitaliste mondial. Pour Karatani, le système capitaliste mondial prend la forme de la structure triadique Capital-Nation-État, dans laquelle chaque partie constitue la manifestation d'un mode d'échange différent et supporte la perpétuation de la structure entière. En percevant la nation comme un construit semi-indépendant opérant selon une logique d'échange différente de celles du capital et de l'état, il rejette la dichotomie base/superstructure, adoptée par plusieurs Marxistes et ayant résulté en la subordination des enjeux en lien avec la nation à ceux du capital et de l'état. Cette thèse analyse tout d'abord l'approche globale de Karatani, ce qu'il appelle la *transcritique*, et la façon particulière dont celle-ci perçoit le rôle de la théorie et de la pensée. Je mets l'emphasis sur la place centrale que la pensée de Marx *et* Kant occupe dans l'œuvre de Karatani, dans l'espoir que sa critique du système mondial ne sera pas catégorisée prématurément comme simplement « Marxiste ». Dans le premier chapitre, j'offre également une description sommaire de la structure triadique Capital-Nation-État, puisque celle-ci doit être comprise afin de comprendre le rôle que la nation y occupe. Dans le deuxième chapitre, j'analyse en détails sa conception de la nation et son lien avec le nationalisme, mettant de l'avant comment en semblant offrir un retour de la communauté, le projet nationaliste ressemble à s'y méprendre au projet socialiste, mais constitue en réalité un mouvement banal qui ne remet jamais en question le système capitaliste mondial et, au contraire, contribue à sa perpétuation. Dans le dernier chapitre, je compare Karatani avec un autre auteur important de la nation, Benedict Anderson, contrastant les deux penseurs tout en reconnaissant les similitudes entre leurs théories. J'insiste sur la façon dont Karatani perçoit la nation non-seulement comme un produit de l'imagination, mais aussi comme l'expression d'un désir réel de communauté ne pouvant être ignoré. La dissolution de la nation serait donc possible uniquement à travers un vrai retour de la communauté que le capitalisme désintègre systématiquement, quelque chose que la forme de la nation ne peut pas accomplir. Je crois que la pensée de Karatani nous offre de nouvelles façons de concevoir la nature et le rôle de la nation dans le système mondial actuel et nous montre que tout projet désirant remettre en question le système capitaliste mondial doit viser à transcender la nation.

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Introduction

The nation is a peculiar thing. Although it appears fairly obvious to most, its actual nature seems to suddenly get lost in ambiguities when we try to define it in clear terms. Shared culture, historical legacy, and linguistic community are frequently cited as the foundations of the nation, yet, when investigated in detail, they all fail to define the concept. And when we try to include all these conceptualizations of the nation within one grand definition it appears either still insufficient, or, on the contrary, too precise to aptly grasp the essence of a given nation, ending up rejecting individuals we would consider part of it or including some that we don't consider part of said nation. This frequent absence of a true understanding, or a true definition, of the nation is even more shocking when one looks at how frequently it is used to justify politics and social movements. Calls to protect a given nation appear rather absurd when one cannot even define what this given nation actually is, yet such discourse is encountered almost daily. Here one could argue that this confusion about the nation stems from a simple misunderstanding or lack of knowledge from those who use the concept, and that in intellectual spheres it is grasped more clearly. Yet, when trying to find a clear understanding of the nation in academia, one is surprised by how few attempts have been made to define it. Although the nation is often written about, it is often treated as a superficial and secondary phenomenon and few writers have found it necessary to go beyond a general understanding, however ambiguous said understanding might be.

Of course, this is not to say that no attempts have been made. Benedict Anderson's famous *Imagined Communities* immediately comes to mind, but others like Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein also attempted to thoroughly define the

concept of the nation. Karatani Kōjin is one such thinker and offers a compelling account of the nation.

For Karatani, the nation operates according to its own independent logic and cannot be reduced to a peripheral phenomenon of other supposedly more important realities. The nation does belong to the current capitalist world-system – it did not exist prior to its emergence, although nationalism attempts to convince us that it did – but contrary to others who see it as a coincidental result of the functioning of the capitalist economy or the capitalist relations between states, Karatani sees the nation as equally foundational to the emergence of our contemporary world-system. This understanding emerges from his peculiar approach, which he calls the *transcritique*, an approach in-between Marx and Kant. As the name suggests, it is an approach that is simultaneously critical and transcendental. It is also an approach that is both theoretical and practical, allowing Karatani to look both at the conceptual articulation of the nation, as part of the ideal capitalist machine, and at its practical manifestation, as the concrete existence of communities organized as nations.

The strength of his transcritical understanding of the nation also lies in its understanding of the nation as a global phenomenon. For him, the nation cannot be grasped in isolation, and understanding an individual nation is pointless. A specific nation doesn't emerge from a singular context; it emerges from and within the inter-national dynamics of the world-system. The desire for community is common to every society, and the shape of that community differs from place to place, but the articulation of a given community as a nation is a peculiar phenomenon specific to the capitalist world-system. For Karatani, like for Anderson, the nation is an imagined community, but the

imagination of the nation isn't the independent imaginary creation of human subjectivity; it is the capitalist world-system's re-appropriation of the desire for community, and therefore a specific form of imagination that is molded by the systemic shape of world capitalism: one that is based on the production of surplus-value through the exploitation of isolated labor-power. It is an artificial attempt to fully represent the human experience under one all-encompassing identity, but because it can never produce an actual community that would link individuals to each other as something other than the embodiment of labor-power, it is never complete and never satisfying. For Karatani transcending capitalism requires transcending the nation, and transcending the nation means the true return of the community.

I believe that with the recent re-emergence of violent nationalisms around the world, new critiques of the nation that aren't caught up in cynicism but instead also simultaneously suggest the possibility for alternative ways to conceive of others and to relate to them are desperately needed. Karatani's conceptualization of the nation constitutes such a critique, and it offers us tools to think of community and identity in terms that defy the common capitalist narrative that requires us to think of them through the nation form, a form that will always be doomed to engender violence and division.

Chapter 1 : Karatani's approach

The transcritique

Karatani's work is characterized by a critical approach to the issues and contradictions of the world system. It is an approach that wants to avoid at all cost becoming a fixed and enclosed theory. Karatani refuses both implicitly and explicitly to limit his thought to a specific framework, label, or specific academic tradition. This is why, for instance, despite an undeniable use of concepts and theories developed by Marx and other thinkers associated with so-called "Marxism", I will refrain from categorizing Karatani as a Marxist. Enough thinkers of the world system have been categorizing their thought and the thought of others, willfully or not, into groupings that ought to classify thinkers as if they could be merged together and as if they belonged to traditions or schools that can be opposed to one another. As we discuss the conception of the nation in Karatani's work, it will become apparent that any such classification is a function of the capitalist world system's operations. Karatani seeks to avoid such labels, and I will endeavour to follow suit. In this spirit, I avoid reducing Kartani to a single school of thought and embrace the wide range of texts and scholars that have influenced his writing.

What Karatani establishes clearly in all of his writing is the fact that if one wants to pave the way for the development of a new world system, criticizing the dominant theories and structures of the current capitalist world system isn't sufficient. It is also crucial to remain aware of the positionality that one occupies as a challenger to dominant ideologies. By classifying, opposing and hierarchizing different systems of thought against one another, one ends up stuck in a competitive approach to critical thinking, an approach that asks the thinker to adopt a fixed position and forces him to define his

theories and ideas in relation to others, and perhaps even more importantly, according to the capitalist organization itself. Constantly defining the ‘self’ in opposition or in concordance with the ‘other’, the theorist becomes unable to enact a true break. This said, it doesn’t mean that to produce a break one must ignore the knowledge developed by others. On the contrary, it is crucial to engage with existing thought. The question therefore is as follows: how can one engage with existing knowledge in a meaningful manner without succumbing to the stubborn tendency of competition between thought systems and the accordant tendency towards totalization? For Karatani this is not in “theory” that such engagement is found but in “critique”:

“theory” has lost the quality of exteriority it once had and has been transformed into a mere verbal game; it now constitutes a self-sufficient, self-enclosed world. If this is what “theory” has come to mean, I will simply describe my own writing as “criticism.” For criticism is that which puts itself on the boundaries and thus in jeopardy, as the term “critical space” implies. It is not a fixed location but a ceaseless movement.¹

This shouldn’t be taken as a disavowal of the potential for the thinker to create alternative discourses to the dominant capitalist mode of thought. Whereas many thinkers have had the tendency to develop purely critical approaches and to purely deconstruct without planting the seeds for new thinking to emerge, Karatani’s approach is different in that it is both, and simultaneously, a project of criticism and one of construction. It would be erroneous therefore to see Karatani’s approach as a form of skepticism, which, as Horkeimer correctly points out, necessarily “means a sympathetic stance toward the traditional and mistrust toward all utopias”². There is a crucial belief in the potential for construction in Karatani, a belief in the possibility for the development of an alternative to the current capitalist world system. This belief is best shown by the distinction

¹ Karatani, *Origins of Japanese Modern Literature*, p.188

² Horkeimer, *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, p.270

Karatani makes between transcendent philosophy and transcendental philosophy. While the transcendent philosophy establishes an external Real that exists yet can never be grasped, the transcendental philosophy is characterized not by its belief in the substantial existence of a transcendent, but by its constant movement between discursive system, which exposes the “‘parallax’ between positions that acts”³. It is by looking at the opposition between seemingly irreconcilable positions that a transcendental approach that allows one to see theory from the outside becomes possible. In other words, the transcendental approach is about the philosopher adopting a transcendental *position*. What Karatani is concerned with isn’t to elucidate debates, but to understand how the oppositions that structure debates could emerge in the forms that they did. To put it in his own words:

In examining a debate it is my aim not to point out problems that require solutions, but to decipher the “problem,” commonly perceived to be an opposition between the two parties, as a particular symptom.⁴

To put it rather bluntly, Karatani is disinterested in resolving contradictions and oppositions. Instead, he attempts to posit himself in the transcendental position, to unveil the ground of the opposition, by moving between opposed positions, by being simultaneously within the debate, as the proponent of both sides, and outside, as the opponent to both sides. This is why Karatani’s approach isn’t only critical – it isn’t only about deconstructing theories and discursive systems – but *Transcritical*. In Karatani, it is both the critique of our current system of thought, and the achievement of a transcendental movement that allows him to challenge the ground on which that system of thought is constructed.

³ Karatani, *Transcritique*, p.4

⁴ Karatani, *Origins of Japanese Modern Literature*, p.155

Because the transcritical approach is a constant transposition that refuses to ground itself, it can never become a consistent system of thought. However, because in addition to being groundless, the transcritical approach is constantly moving between and through different fixed positions, superficial readings can often attach the transcritique to the position that it might be temporarily embodying. It is unsurprising therefore that many attempts have been made to reduce Kant and Marx, who are for Karatani the champions of the transcritical approach, to fixed system of thought (or, in other words, to attach them to the ground they seek to supersede):

What is important is the fact that Marx's critique was always born from migration and the pronounced parallax that results from it. Hegel criticized Kant's subjectivism and emphasized objectivity. But in Hegel, the pronounced parallax discovered by Kant is extinguished. Likewise, the pronounced parallax discovered by Marx was extinguished by Engels and other Marxists. As a result, one is left with an image of Kant and Marx as thinkers who constructed solid, immovable systems.⁵

What Karatani shows eloquently here is that both Kant and Marx's approaches were necessarily never "complete", never structured. It is precisely in their fluidity and malleability, in their capacity to constantly be within and without the debates that they were analyzing that they were able to constitute such powerful critiques. Reducing their contribution to "constructed solid, immovable systems" therefore, is always a vulgarization of their thought and a limitation of the potential for meaningful criticism that they support. Perhaps this is why Karatani, while profoundly engaging with Marx and Kant, prefers to distance himself from so-called Marxists and Kantians.

Karatani's writings are characterized by this "transcritical approach", which isn't about opposition between fixed enclosures of thought, but about a flexible movement between thoughts. This peculiar positionality is something that we can see in all of his

⁵ Karatani, *Transcritique*, p.3

writings, and something that is especially manifest in his employment of theories and analyses developed by scholars belonging to completely different academic domains. The mixing together of ideas that are usually assumed to “belong” to different and unrelated fields of thought is part of his approach⁶. Even if one were to disagree with the entirety of the theories and concepts he develops, the capacity of Karatani’s transcritical approach to bring together knowledge in novel ways is an undeniable strength of his work.

Although Karatani does develop a theory of the world system – the triadic structure of Capital-Nation-State, which we will of course be discussing at length – it is crucial to also understand his positionality as a critical thinker if one is to truly understand the theory he develops and, perhaps even more so, if one is to try to initiate actions based on his theories. The Borromean ring of Capital-Nation-State is not a totality, nor a transcendent system. Its shape is never fixed. On that point, Karatani asserts:

actual social formations consists of complex combinations of these modes of exchange. ... historical formations have included all of these modes. The formations differ simply in terms of which mode takes the leading role.⁷

And even then, when comparing different formations in which mode of exchange C is dominant – the capitalist formations – the actual shape and form that each given formation takes will also necessarily differ. For example, Karatani presents Fascism and Stalinism as forms of capitalist societies in which mode C is dominant, but he is totally aware that the concrete reality of living in one or the other differs greatly. In other words, Karatani recognizes the singularity of the concrete manifestation of the capitalist world system in any given temporal or geographical circumstance. Although the Capital-

⁶ *Architecture as Metaphor* is probably the most representative work of Karatani in regards to this mixing of academic fields that are usually deemed unrelated.

⁷ Karatani, *The Structure of World History*, p.9

Nation-State formation might appear as a totalizing interpretation of the current capitalist world order, it appears as such only if one forgets the transcritical approach that informs Karatani. When one understands Karatani's transcritical approach, it becomes hard to believe that his presentation of the capitalist world-system as a Capital-Nation-State system was intended to be a fixed, totalizing, or "real" depiction. It appears more appropriate to perceive it as an interpretative tool, a temporary positionality, that can be modified and from which it is possible to move.

Furthermore, the articulation of the capitalist world system as a Capital-Nation-State structure is a way for Karatani to challenge the excessive place that the concept of base/superstructure takes in Marxist thought. Raymond Williams eloquently points out the problem of the base/superstructure division in many Marxists. A critique, that, I believe, Karatani would agree with:

The analytical categories, as so often in idealist thought, have, almost unnoticed, become substantive descriptions, which then take habitual priority over the whole social process to which, as analytical categories, they are attempting to speak. Orthodox analysts began to think of 'the base' and 'the superstructure' as if they were separable concrete entities. In doing so they lost sight of the very processes – not abstract relations but constitutive processes – which it should have been the special function of historical materialism to emphasize.⁸

Karatani, by creating new analytical categories, by understanding capitalism through a new "structure", attempts to return to the analysis of the constitutive processes of the current world system. Something that the overwhelming presence of the base/superstructure division in Marxist thought has undermined as it came to be treated as a concrete division. There is an undeniable desire in Karatani to connect with the concrete, physical, struggle against capitalism and to provide a theoretical framework that

⁸ Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, p.80-81

can support and guide action⁹. The base/superstructure understanding of capitalism, because it easily leads to an incorrect understanding of “base” and “superstructure” as concrete categories, now appears as an inappropriate tool to support action. The Borromean knot of Capital-Nation-State hence can be seen as a welcome new tool.

If one remains conscious of the transcritical approach and tries to embody it, it appears necessary to remind ourselves that the Borromean knot, like any other analytic tool, like any other theory, should never be treated as a totalizing or fixed entity. Otherwise, it will only end up like the base/superstructure analytical categories for so many Marxists. Karatani expresses reserve toward dogmatic ideologies, hence why he doesn’t develop one. The political application of his theory rests on the displacement of the center, on mobility, and on the capacity for transposition between discursive systems. Seeing the triadic structure of Capital-Nation-State as the definitive structure of world capitalism or as the definitive theoretical tool to understand it would therefore contradict his approach.

The perspective of exchange

While the Capital-Nation-State Borromean knot can be seen as an alternative to the base/superstructure understanding of the capitalist system, its form is not an aleatory result of theoretical niceties. This peculiar triadic structure is the result of a reversal of the common understanding of Marx, which leads to a new understanding of Marx that starts

⁹ Although it is beyond the scope of this text, and hence will not be discussed at length here, it is important to realize that Karatani’s numerous references and discussions of concrete attempts to challenge capitalism (e.g. the LETS currency), as well as his attempts to conceive of ways to reform current institutions (e.g. the United Nations) in a manner that could allow us to think beyond the current logic of the capitalist world-system, are all testimonies of his attempt to link theory and practice. By discussing existing struggles against capitalism and pointing to institutions that could potentially support a transition away from capitalism, he is trying to make this link conceivable to those that perceive the transcendence of capitalism as a mere utopia.

from the *perspective of exchange* rather than *production*. It is in *The Structure of World History* that Karatani most thoroughly exposes the ramifications of his understanding of Marx. In order to push our understanding of Karatani's approach, a brief summary of this interpretation of world history from the perspective of exchange and of the resulting Capital-Nation-State formation is necessary.

For Karatani, all the world systems that existed historically are defined by the coexistence of 3 different modes of exchange: reciprocity (A), plunder and redistribution (B), commodity exchange (C).

Mode of exchange A (reciprocity) is a mode of exchange which emerges from the dynamics of the household, and was dominant within clan societies in the form of gift and return. The following summarizes the functioning of the principle of reciprocity that Karatani borrows from Mauss in *The Structure of World History*:

According to Mauss, reciprocity is sustained by three obligations: the obligation to give, the obligation to accept the gift, and the obligation to make a countergift. It is through these obligations of the gift that strong bonds are born between groups that were originally hostile or distant. It is also through the gift that the principle of equality that originated within the household is expanded to encompass the entirety of a larger community.¹⁰

Because the act of gift-giving implies an eventual return of the gift, it constitutes a mode of exchange which establishes a relation of amicability and mutuality between the parties involved. Reciprocity also prevents the accumulation of power, since it implies that everything that is given will be returned and since one cannot refuse a gift, as well as the consequent obligation to return it, the development of hierarchy and classes is prevented. Finally, while there is an implied equality between the members of a

¹⁰ Karatani, *The Structure of World History*, p.47-48

community where mode A is dominant, there is no freedom, since the belonging to the community requires the obedience to the three obligations, and consequently attaches the members to their specific community.

Mode of exchange B (Plunder and redistribution) emerges when reciprocity between communities is prohibited, which occurs, according to Karatani, through conquest. Because reciprocity prevents the concentration of power, which is necessary for plunder and redistribution (someone needs to have the necessary goods in order to redistribute them), it must emerge from an initial act of reciprocal exchange. This initial exchange that sets up the emergence of mode B appears in conquests and “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.”¹¹ In other words, once the “reality of conquest is disavowed”, the obstacle to hierarchy and classes that mode A constituted is surpassed and the “subservience/tribute for protection/redistribution” exchange becomes a constituent part of the social formation. Thereupon, the State is established. Mode of exchange B is characterized by a lack of freedom, since it is forcefully established through domination, and a lack of equality, since it necessarily implies a hierarchy between dominated and dominant.

Mode of exchange C (commodity exchange) takes place between communities and appears only when both mode of exchange A and B have been established:

What makes commodity exchange between communities possible is the existence of the state, which punishes as legal infringements any acts of theft or failures to uphold contracts. This is grounded in mode of exchange B. There is also the matter of the credit that exists between communities, which is grounded in reciprocal mode

¹¹ Karatani, *The Structure of World History*, p.70

of exchange A. Accordingly, the commodity mode of exchange C between communities can only exist when it appears in tandem with the other modes, A and B.¹²

This mode of exchange refers to the act of buying and selling between two parties who mutually assent to the trade. It is a type of exchange that implies freedom, since all parties are technically free to enter or not the exchange, but not equality, since it allows accumulation of power (the accumulation of wealth) and therefore, the development of hierarchy and classes.

At this point it appears important to point out that the emergence of the different modes of exchange exposed by Karatani doesn't occur in a linear fashion. Karatani explicitly rejects a linear approach to the study of world history. All of the different modes of exchange always coexist in every world system. Karatani states it clearly in the following quote about mode C: "Commodity exchange did not develop out of gift giving; it existed from the start."¹³ Even if mode of exchange C *between communities* can only emerge after mode A and B, it still existed before. In short, even if he talks about the "origins" of the different modes of exchange, we should understand them not so much as successive points in time, but rather as different logics that support the development of each mode of exchange, independently of the society or historical moment in which a specific mode of exchange becomes dominant.

That said, even if the three modes of exchange discussed so far always coexist, it remains a fact that one always dominates. The dominant mode of exchange determines the kind of world system in place, its structure and how it functions. In the contemporary world-system (which Karatani calls "world-economy"), mode of exchange C and B

¹² Karatani, *The Structure of World History*, p.83

¹³ *Idem*, p.81

dominate, which produces a multitude of interconnected Capital-Nation-State formations. Each of the three components of these formations differs in character and has independent goals, but they nonetheless are codependent: the existence of each allows the survival of the other two, even though they often appear in opposition to each other. To put it in Karatani's words : "a single social formation arises as a combination of three different modes of exchange – or the three different forms of power that derive from these, forms that are mutually in conflict yet also mutually interdependent."¹⁴ Once again, there is a clear move away from the traditional Base/Superstructure dichotomy in this interpretation.

For Karatani, the current system of world capitalism is based on the domination of mode of exchange C (Capital) and B (State), but mode of exchange A still exists, even though it is crumbling under the dominance of State and Capital. The form that channels the desire for mode of exchange A is the nation. But in contrast with State and capital, the nation appears as an imaginary restoration of mode A. I will leave aside further description of the nation for now, since it will be discussed in depths in chapter 2.

In short, it is appropriate to think about the Capital-Nation-State triadic structure as a Borromean ring, an intertwined structure composed of three interdependent constitutive parts that create a self-enclosed formation: the capitalist formation¹⁵. Even though interdependent, each part embodies its own logic. This is why Karatani refuses to take the capitalist economy as the base and the state and nation as part of a superstructure determined by said base. To put it in Karatani's words: "we can see the state and the

¹⁴ Karatani, *The Structure of World History*, p.84

¹⁵ Karatani, "Beyond Capital-Nation-State", *Rethinking Marxism*, p.585

nation as historical derivatives of the basic modes of exchange. Neither is a communal fantasy nor ideological image; they have firm and necessary grounds. That is precisely why they cannot be easily dissolved.”¹⁶ Because in every social formation, nation and state are grounded on different modes of exchange that always coexist with mode of exchange C, even when C isn’t the dominant mode, we cannot understand them as apparatuses of Capital, but must understand them as constitutive parts of the triadic structure of our current capitalist system.

To mode of exchange A, B, and C, Karatani adds mode of exchange D, which is a not-yet-realized mode of exchange that would restore the community that is disintegrating under capitalism. However, it would restore it in a higher dimension, by restoring the community through *freedom*, and hence transcending the enclosure (limitation/absence of freedom) of societies where mode of exchange A is dominant. It is arguable that mode of exchange D is fundamentally an ideal type of exchange, and a system in which it would be dominant (System X/associationism), remains a utopia. Whether it is realizable or not, its conceptual articulation is nonetheless essential to Karatani. This is because for him, it is not in Marx that we find a compass for action, but in Kant. Karatani’s political project shares Kant’s cosmopolitanism, but it is really by returning to the Kantian principle of treating others “always at the same time as an end and never merely as a means to an end”¹⁷ that Karatani can go beyond a pure criticism that would only amount to pure deconstruction, to a criticism that can support the building of an alternative to the capitalist world order. There is an immanent awareness that the current system isn’t satisfying or complete, and consequently, an immanent

¹⁶ *Idem*, p.573

¹⁷ Karatani, *The Structure of World History*, p.231

desire to transcend it. But because the abstract capitalist system has been internalized as “real” or “natural”, it has become impossible to articulate the end of capitalism. The transcendental approach, which allows the possibility of an alternative that we cannot yet grasp, is crucial for Karatani because it allows the possibility of struggle. It isn’t about pretending that a transcendent ideal exists, but rather, about the process of reaching for a transcendent ideal, whether it exists or not. This is the *regulative idea*. For Karatani the regulative idea is essential to any approach that seeks to challenge the status-quo and take as possible an alternative system to it: “all theories, if they are to be synthetic and *expansive*, cannot do away with a certain faith.”¹⁸ One shouldn’t be scared by the word “faith” here. Karatani is not talking about blindly following a transcendent ideal. The point he is making is rather that in order to make something possible, there is always a need to first conceive that *it can be possible*. It is a concept of a minimal faith, not a totalizing one. Furthermore, the dangers that this belief in a “necessary faith” entails are consciously neutralized in Karatani’s approach by the repeated insistence on the necessity of transposition and multiplicity in the struggle against capitalism. It is precisely the critical aspect of *transcritique* that prevents the transcendental, and the “faith” it includes, to become utopian and/or totalizing.

Through his transcritical approach, Karatani is concerned with exposing the antinomy at the core of all debates. In the current capitalist system, the antinomy is arguably the fact that the capitalist system, in order to extract surplus value, needs to employ the labor-power of a labor force that it cannot produce itself. Or, in other words, Capital cannot produce the labor power; therefore, it always needs something external to

¹⁸ Karatani, *Transcritique*, p.52

it to ensure the reproduction of labor power. This “externality”, it finds it in the form of the nation. In *The Sublime Perversion of Capital*, Gavin Walker aptly demonstrates how the nation constitutes this external point that allows for the reproduction of labor power:

Capital discovers its globality precisely through the emergence of the labor-power commodity, a commodity whose violent and brutal birth was the hallmark of modernity, but this commodity cannot be ‘produced’, in the indirect way that capital must undertake it, without the form of the nation. ... this is the most perverse and complex problem to explain – the manifestation of capital’s sublime perversion – insofar as the nation-form thus allows for the birth of the labor-power commodity, which in turn furnishes the basic global element of the systematic order of modernity that will become *world capitalism*, the world itself *as the world of capital* is weirdly, therefore, *a product of the nation-form...*¹⁹

In this passage, Walker not only explains with great clarity the antinomy that Karatani exposes, but also how the nation cannot be perceived as a part of a so-called “superstructure”. Indeed, Walker goes in the same direction as Karatani here by recognizing that the nation is a constitutive and essential part of the capitalist world system.

For Karatani, Capitalism does resolve this contradiction with the nation-form through what Walker calls the *sublime perversion* of capital, but for both writers this resolution is *imaginary*. The nation can only be imaginary, because the community that it imagines cannot actually exist if Capital is to dominate the world system. But because the capitalist system cannot exist without this imagined utopian limit – this void –, we are presented with a possible position from which to challenge it. The nation is imaginary, but the need of capitalism for an external support is real. The faith mentioned earlier is a faith in a transcendental ideal that is grounded in that external void, something that would be different from the nation-form and would destabilize rather than support the capitalist

¹⁹ Walker, *The Sublime Perversion of Capital*, p.106

world system. In a sense, it is both within and outside capitalism that Karatani finds his point of attack.

Salvoj Žižek, in *Class struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, please!*, argues the following:

the Real is in fact internal/inherent to the Symbolic, not its external limit, but for that very reason, it cannot be symbolized. In other words, the paradox is that the Real as external, excluded from the Symbolic, is in fact a symbolic determination - what eludes symbolization is precisely the Real as the inherent point of failure of symbolization.²⁰

For Karatani, whether the un-symbolizable can be called the Real or not is irrelevant, what matters is that it cannot be integrated by the symbolization of the system. This is why the nation can only be *imaginary* and empty; it can only pretend that it has no point of failure and that it is a true symbolization of a real external limit to Capital (even though Capital denies that anything “external” can exist). Every true critique that posits itself in this space therefore “eludes symbolization”. For Karatani, in the capitalist system, it is by grounding ourselves in the idea of mode of exchange D, of a real return of community, that we can occupy this critical space.

This is why it is in this point of contradiction inherent to the capitalist system that Karatani grounds his regulative idea, the direction of his transcritique. For Karatani, this regulative idea is expressed by the Kantian moral law of treating others “always at the same time as an end and never merely as a means to an end”. It is the core of world system X. It is the idea of a world community, which, would it be realized, would represent the universalization of the ultimate limit of capitalism. It is also the return to the idea of *free* individuals, and a return to a philosophy that can treat each individual as

²⁰ Žižek, *Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, Please!*, p.121

unique and something more than his position in the social system. Alain Badiou is right when he asserts that every Man has the potential to become an “immortal”, and that “if we equate Man with the simple reality of his existence as living being, we are inevitably pushed to a conclusion quite opposite to the one that the principle of life seems to imply. For this ‘living being’ is in reality contemptible, and he will indeed be held in contempt.”²¹ Karatani’s insistence on Kant’s moral law is doing something similar to Badiou’s recognition of Man as an immortal; it is about recognizing the potential for human beings to be agents able to fight the status quo. It is not a blind hope in individual subjectivity²², but it is a refusal to perceive individuals only as their position in the capitalist world system, something that both capitalist and Marxist ideologies constantly do, consciously or not. Karatani’s transcritique recognizes the individual as determined by the social and, simultaneously, the social as determined by the individual. It is thanks to the move between these two positions enabled by the transcritical approach that Karatani manages to also build the idea of a potential for change, to construct the idea of an alternative to the status quo. The recognition of individuals as singular entities with the capacity for subjectivity is fundamental in this project. Although seeing individuals as able to be subjective beings might require a certain faith, it is also a faith that is necessary for the struggle to be possible. Without this faith, the critique can only be cynical. And a cynical critique ultimately is a critique that does little to the struggle against capitalism. Finally, this return to the individual is also another shield against the tendency for faith in an alternative system to become a totalizing doctrine that reduces individuals as means to

²¹ Badiou, *Ethics – An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, p.12

²² Let’s point out the fact that Karatani is very critical of subjectivity and of “individuality”, as is probably best shown in *The Origin of Modern Japanese Literature*, in which he discusses at length the construction of interiority and the creation of the capitalist individual.

the struggle against capitalism. To use Badiou's words once again, in taking the Kantian moral law of treating others "always at the same time as an end and never merely as a means to an end" as the guiding principle of the transcritical approach and of the struggle against capitalism means that "every 'some-one' is always represented as capable of becoming the Immortal that he is. So we may fight against the judgements and opinions he exchanges with others ... but not against his person – which, under the circumstances, is insignificant, and to which, in any case, every truth is ultimately addressed."²³

Let's conclude this section by pointing out to the fact that in *The Structure of World History*, the culminant point of his critique of the capitalist world system, Karatani doesn't only create an analytical framework allowing us to understand the current world system under a new perspective, he simultaneously attaches this critique to a conception of an alternative system that could ideally replace capitalism. In other words, he also creates a regulative idea. In my opinion, the need that he felt to supplement to his critique of world capitalism and world history such an alternative system isn't based on an absolute belief that it will ever come into existence, but on the transcritical approach: an approach that refuses to be only critical, and instead attempts to also be transcendental. And this need for the transcendental is based on Kant's discovery that a certain faith is necessary to allow for the not-yet realized to become possible. This desire to include transcendence in his critique is fundamental in Karatani, and based on his concern with the concrete struggle against capitalism, which is now what we will turn our investigation towards.

²³ Badiou, *Ethics – An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, P.76

The link between theory and practice

So far we have been mainly concentrating on Karatani's approach to the struggle against world capitalism at the abstract and conceptual level, highlighting the significance of the transcritical approach in his work. However, as was already mentioned, Karatani's approach is not limited to the theoretical level, but is also grounded in his attempt to provide a basis for concrete action that could eventually challenge the status quo. His approach isn't pure critique, or pure deconstruction, but, also, a project of construction that requires action. Of course, Karatani isn't the only thinker that has promoted the reconciliation between theory and practice. Louis Althusser has always been an ardent defender of this idea:

In order really to understand what one 'reads, and studies in these theoretical, political and historical works, one must directly experience oneself the two *realities* which determine them through and through: the reality of theoretical practice (science, philosophy) in its concrete life; the reality of the *practice of revolutionary class struggle* in its concrete life, in close contact with the masses. For if theory enables us to understand the laws of history, it is not intellectuals, nor even theoreticians, it is the *masses* who make history. It is essential to learn with theory – but at the same time and crucially, it is essential to learn with the masses.²⁴

Althusser idea of the reconciliation between theory and practice offers an interesting point of entry into Karatani's own conception of this reconciliation. Althusser criticized heavily theoretical works that only manages to analyze the current world system without engaging in the concrete struggle against it, a critique that is implicit in Karatani. However, Karatani articulates his views of the potentiality of this struggle beyond the traditional concept of class struggle that Althusser embraces.

When it comes to the actual struggle, Karatani refuses to use the vocabulary of a struggle between supposedly substantially existing proletariat (or masses) and capitalists.

²⁴ Althusser, *Philosophy as a Revolutionary Weapon*, p.20

For him the distinction between capitalists and proletariat becomes ambiguous as both appear integrated in the system. Ultimately, neither the worker nor the capitalist has agency in the capitalist system of production, because the capitalist world system, although a human creation, has attained a seemingly transcendent status, it has become a “force that regulates humanity beyond its intentionality, a force that divides and recombines human beings. It is a religio-generic entity.”²⁵ It appears as this transcendent entity, this law of nature, this ultimate system that will never end, as much to the worker as it does to the capitalist. In his refusal to perceive a substantial division between capitalist and workers and in his conception of capitalism as a “religio-generic entity”, he echoes Deleuze and Guattari, who perceive capitalists and workers as equally slaves to the capitalist machine (capitalism):

The bourgeois field of immanence – as delimited by the conjunction of the decoded flows, the negation of any transcendence or exterior limit, and the effusion of antiproduction inside a production itself- institutes an unrivaled slavery, an unprecedented subjugation: there are no longer any need to burden the animal from the outside, it shoulders its own burden. Not that man is ever the slave of technical machines; he is rather the slave of the social machine. The bourgeois sets the example, he absorbs surplus value for ends that, taken as a whole, have nothing to do with his own enjoyment: more utterly enslaved than the lowest of slaves, he is the first servant of the ravenous machine, the beast of the reproduction of capital, internalization of the infinite debt.²⁶

For Deleuze and Guattari, as for Karatani, the bourgeois/capitalist is as much a slave to the system as the worker, even if he lives more comfortably. However, this does not mean that it is impossible for anyone to challenge the current world system. On the contrary Karatani is rather optimistic when it comes to the capacity for action. For him, both capitalists and workers can become active and subjective agents able to challenge the world system. This is because by approaching the capitalist world order from the

²⁵ Karatani, *Transcritique*, p.5

²⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus – Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, p.254

perspective of modes of exchange rather than modes of production, he locates the potential for subjectivity in consumption, rather than in the workers' struggle. The relocation of the struggle in consumption renders the worker/capitalist division irrelevant, as both workers and capitalists can embody the subjective/active position of consumer (owner of money)²⁷. He refuses to take for granted an absolute and irreconcilable division, because ultimately this division is nothing but a construct. As consumer, both capitalists and workers address the capitalist machine in the same subjective position. Karatani isn't denying inequalities, but he is trying to go beyond them. This includes transcending both the capitalist/worker division and the base/superstructure division that has overwhelmed Marxist thought. By overemphasizing the process of production and hence the importance of the capitalist/worker division, Marxists have been struck with the bitter realisation that it is impossible for the workers to rise against the capitalists. For Karatani, this realization has resulted in a certain "despair":

in reality, workers do not stand up at all, because, they believe, the workers consciousness is reified by the commodity economy, and their task as the vanguard is to awaken workers from the daydream. They believe that the reification is caused by the seduction of consumerist society and/or manipulation by cultural hegemony. Thus, to begin with, what they should and can do is to critically elucidate the mechanism. Or to say it outright, that it is the only business left for them today. What Frederic Jameson calls 'the cultural turn' is a form of 'despair' inherent in the Marxist practice. There are various forms of despair, but they are, more or less, all the result of production-process centrism.²⁸

By turning to "reification" and the need to "awaken" workers, they have strayed away from the fundamental reality of capitalism: the fact that Capital is an extra-human entity that consumes both capitalists and workers. By focusing on the perspective of

²⁷ However, this is not to say that worker struggles are concretely useless. In being transcritical, Karatani pushes the interpretation of capitalism from the perspective of modes of production to the points where it crumbles on itself, but transcritique is about displacement/transposition, never about providing a fixed "truth". Moving away from production doesn't mean rejecting the interpretation altogether, it is instead about opening the position to new understandings.

²⁸ Karatani, *Transcritique*, p.21

exchange, rejecting the base/superstructure division and reducing the importance of the capitalist/workers division, Karatani doesn't only bring a breath of fresh air into our understanding of capitalism; he also exposes the true inner workings of capitalism.

The dissolution of the class struggle in Karatani's challenge to the current world system forces him to provide a new ground for the struggle that goes beyond the worker/capitalist dichotomy. Once again, it is in Kant's regulative idea that he finds this foundation. For Karatani, it is the very attempt to transcend the system that will eventually lead to the end of capitalism. However, as previously stated, it does not mean that the transcendental critique has the pretention to know what would come after the end of capitalism. This is perhaps why, in the course of his career, the concrete actions that Karatani praised are not so much revolutions with totalizing pretentions, but rather small initiatives.

I believe that for Karatani, the core of the transcritical approach as a political strategy is to recognize that the struggle against capitalism is always global, and that any action against it must be aware of this fact in developing its strategies, but also refrain from creating doctrines that pretend to know the shape of the system that would transcend capitalism. On this last point, he is very similar to Alain Badiou, who explicitly stated this totalizing pretention as one of the Evils that prevent truths to emerge: "The Good is Good only to the extent that it does not aspire to render the world good. ... Every absolutization of the power of truth organizes an Evil."²⁹. There is definitely a notion in Karatani that the struggle against capitalism has to be multiple and diverse, and that it cannot aspire to render the world good based on a single perception of this "good". This

²⁹ Badiou, *Ethics – An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, p.85

is why Karatani's approach is fundamentally cosmopolitan, refraining from seeking universal truths and instead developing a transcritical positionality that can allow and support the emergence and coexistences of multiple truths. In other words, the struggle is always a combination of partial struggles that will eventually make a break-through possible.

Žižek is critical of any struggles that concentrate their efforts on resolving what he calls "partial problems" from within the capitalist world system:

This notion of the act must be conceived of against the background of the distinction between the mere endeavour to 'solve a variety of partial problems' within a given field and the more radical gesture of subverting the very structuring principle of this field. An act does not simply occur within the given horizon of what appears to be 'possible' – it redefines the very contours of what is possible.³⁰

The problem with such an approach however is that while it remains critical, at its best it falls into pure criticism, into skepticism, simply waiting for change, or, at its worst, into a nihilism that hopes for change in the massive destruction of ideas, which has historically often been associated with the massive destruction of people as well. Karatani is aware that any meaningful struggle against capitalism "redefines the very contours of what is possible" by "subverting the very structuring principle of this field", but he doesn't see "partial problems" and attempts at solving them as irrelevant in the achievement of this goal. On the contrary, it is essential to attack capitalism on multiple fronts simultaneously, and it is only partial struggles that contain the potential for an end to the capitalist structure. For him, it is doubtful that any single action or event could bring about the end of capitalism. This view of the struggle against capitalism is based on a desire to see changes emerge without the violence and destruction often associated with

³⁰ Žižek, *Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, Please!*, p.121

these kinds of change, but, also, on the recognition that an effective struggle against capitalism has to occur both internally and externally³¹. The current capitalist system is constantly being contested by a multiplicity of partial struggles that cannot be simply dismissed. Žižek's critique of partial struggles points out to an important fact that is often forgotten:

The recourse to multiplication (“there is not one modernity with a fixed essence, there are multiple modernities, each of them irreducible to others...”) is false not because it does not recognize a unique fixed ‘essence’ of modernity, but because multiplication functions as the disavowal of the antagonism that inheres to the notion of modernity as such: the falsity of multiplication resides in the fact that it frees the universal notion of modernity of its antagonism, of the way it is embedded in the capitalist system, by relegating this aspect to just one of its historical subspecies.³²

However, I believe that Karatani's approach is attempting to reconcile what Žižek calls “multiplication” with an awareness of the inherent antagonism within the structure that produces this multiplicity. The transcritical approach, by being both within and outside the capitalist system, appears as an approach that is able to simultaneously touch on the impossible Real, to remain transcendental, and produce solutions for partial problems, to remain critical, keeping the approach relevant in the fight against actual oppression and suffering. Constantly challenging the system on all fronts is how a break able to challenge the whole structure can eventually occur. For Karatani, resolving partial problems and challenging the structural whole aren't opposing strategies, but complementary ones.

In conclusion, the transcritical approach informs all of Karatani's writings. For him, it is the approach that allows to simultaneously deconstruct the dominant thoughts

³¹ An attentive reader will notice that the concrete challenge to capitalism being both “external and internal” is the same strategy that Karatani employs at the theoretical level. In other words, it can be said that the concrete challenge to capitalism that Karatani presents is simply transcritique applied to the concrete reality of capitalism.

³² Žižek, *The Parallax View*, p.34

and ideologies, but also allows the construction of new thought by recognizing the potential for subjectivity to emerge in the critical space located in-between discursive systems. It is an approach that informs both Karatani's theoretical project and his political/concrete project. For Karatani, there is no opposition between the critical and the transcendental, and, arguably, it is the move between the transcendental and the critical that allows transcritique to be both simultaneously. There is also no opposition between theory and practice, they appear as two sides of the same coin, and the transcritical approach requires you to move between them. Transcritique, in theory as in practice, is therefore constantly about the movement between seemingly opposed positions, and Karatani's conception of the nation, which we will now turn to, is embedded in this approach.

Chapter 2 - The nation and nationalism in Karatani's thought

As already discussed, in *The Structure of World History*, Karatani Kōjin rethinks world history from the perspectives of modes of exchange, rather than modes of production. Doing so leads him to present capitalism as a fundamentally global system organized around the triadic structure of Capital-Nation-State. Socialism has always been about establishing a grand community that would go beyond the oppressive logic of capitalism. However, Marxists have often overemphasized the importance of the economy (Capital) as the determinant of that oppression and have consequently concentrated their effort in fighting the economic system, expecting state and nation, which they saw as part of a superstructure created by the capitalist economic base, to naturally disappear with the end of what they saw as an independent capitalist economic system. By doing so, they have overlooked the distinct nature of state and nation, which for Karatani are both based on different modes of exchange. Because they represent different modes of exchange, nation and state ensure their self-preservation according to a logic that differs from the one of Capital. Together, they form the triadic structure of global capitalism. In this triadic formation, the nation appears of a peculiar nature, since it is rooted in the imagination. However, this doesn't mean that it isn't very real. In fact, it is arguable that for Karatani, the nation represents the greatest obstacle to the eventual realization of socialism. In the current context, in which nationalisms are on the rise globally, understanding how the nation as a form ensures the oppression of individuals living under world capitalism and hinders the prospect of an emancipatory future appears crucial. I will therefore now offer a deeper description of how the nation is conceived in Karatani's analysis of the current world-system and discuss how his account suggests that

the form of the nation represents the establishment of a community that supports the oppression and inequalities that capitalism engenders and need.

The nation

As we have discussed in length in the first chapter, Karatani's project is defined by the aim to understand the structure that brings about enclosures and the interaction between these enclosures. To do so, Karatani constantly attempts to put himself on the outside, within a "critical space". The analysis that he develops in *The Structure of World History* and, more specifically, his analysis of the nation, has to be understood in this light.

In conceptualizing our current world system, Karatani repeatedly argues that it cannot be grasped within the framework of a singular nation-state. This is because; no group can be grasped in isolation since they all belong to a world structure that determined them. Every enclosure is understood as a construct, and therefore, grasping a social formation from within the borders of an enclosure is already to submit one's theory to the logic that formed that enclosure. This is why Karatani's approach to the structure of our world is global, both geographically, in the way it determines the relations between communities, which take the form of the inter-national relations in our current world, and temporally, in the historical repetitions of structures it engenders, something that is discussed at length in *History and Repetition*.

The emergence of the nation

Even though based on a mode of exchange that is present in every social formation, the form of the nation represents a peculiar manifestation of mode of exchange A. Its

form is specific to the current system of capitalist world-economy. Therefore, in order to fully understand how it hinders the potential of socialism, it appears necessary to analyze in details how it is constituted.

The process of nation formation differs between countries where a state had already existed and those that never had a state. In the former, the previous state and its civilization become the basis for nationalist resistance to the Western rulers. In the latter, a national state and language are established through the leverage of the colonial state apparatus. In either case, a previously nonexistent identity as nation is formed.³³

In this passage, Karatani indicates multiple characteristics of the nation. First, we see clearly how the nation exists only in relation to other nations. In the capitalist world order, to get autonomy (not *from* the system, but *within* it), a nation must be established. Furthermore, the nation is a modern invention. This doesn't mean that there was no identity to begin with; Karatani isn't positing a naturalized and homogenous concept of humanity. However, we have to understand that the form of identity that the nation offers is a very capitalistic form. It isn't something that naturally emerges from pre-existing identities; it is the construction of new ones, or, at least, the reorganization of older identities into a new totalizing classification. This fact is even more evident when we consider that the unification under the nation requires a certain homogenization and erasure of difference, in order to organize people into a system of competition within the context of Capital-Nation-State. The nation is always about the construction of a delineated group, which forms the basis for an identity that is supposed to supersede all other identities. This identity has meaning only if it groups together a relatively large number of people. To do so, it must create the illusion of an undeniable "core"

³³ Karatani, *The Structure of World History*, p.211

supposedly shared by all its members, but this clear homogeneous “core” doesn’t exist. In short, the foundation of the nation is always about forgetting its real origins.

Internally, the nation emerges as the restoration of a lost community, but it only emerges in the form of the nation because it is within a system where other nations exist and vie in the global competition for wealth and power. This global competition is what we observe more vividly in imperialism, which is understood in Karatani’s account as the “expansion of nation-states”³⁴. It is important here to understand that this imperialistic expansion of nation-states occurs through mode of exchange C, and therefore, is distinct from the expansionism of “empires”, which are based on mode of exchange B. The term “imperialism” often refers to both kinds of expansion, but for Karatani there are major differences between the two that requires a differentiation, hence the use of “imperialism” and “empires” as terms that point to two different processes. While the expansion of empires occurs through the use of force and coercion, it doesn’t necessitate the disintegration of the communities it grasps. By contrast, the expansionism of imperialism appears as occurring freely (since it is based on mode C), but effects the dissolutions of the communities it absorbs and reorganizes into nations. This is because mode of exchange C functions through the isolation and mobilization of labor-power, which cannot function alongside the logic of community. The fact that imperialism transforms the society it conquers then explains the rise of nations, which offers to people who lost their link to their society the sense of belonging and the sense of permanence that the now disintegrating community of mode of exchange A offered. The nation, by replacing the old form of community with a new one, therefore allows for the transition to capitalism

³⁴ Karatani, *The Structure of World History*, p.226

and the creation and reproduction of the isolated labor-power. To put it in Walker's words: "the nation-state must be produced, managed and maintained, in order for the process of the dissolution of the village [community] to be arrested before it spins out of control"³⁵. However, this "sense of belonging and permanence" that the nation creates can only be ideational, since the disintegration of the community is necessary for mode of exchange C to become dominant. In short, the nation emerges as an imaginary entity that allows Capital to disintegrate a given community, yet prevent this disintegration from spinning out of control to the point where it would hinder the production and organization of the isolated labor-power created through this same disintegration.

The problem of the nation

Karatani's view that the nation has its roots in imagination and sentiment is also supported by his view that the nation is to be found in literature. In a sense, Karatani presents the creation of the nation not as a consequence psychologically constituted or as something emerging naturally, but as the creation of arts. This implies that people seek to understand their situation through narratives, which, in our contemporary world system, often assumes the form of the nation. In *The Origins of Japanese Modern Literature*, one of his early works, Karatani discusses the discovery of interiority in literature as something co-emergent with the discovery of modernity and the creation of the nation. I won't discuss his view on literature here, since it is beyond the scope of this text, but I would contend that we can see the process through which the nation is established as analogous to the discovery of interiority in literature.

³⁵ Walker, *The Sublime Perversion of Capital*, p.159

The pattern of retreat to interiority and literature after political setback has been continuously repeated in the modern time. ... But insofar as it can only consist of a return to a structure which has already been fixed as literary discourse and can no longer be subjected to doubt, it is a banal movement.³⁶

As we have seen, the nation emerges from the desire to recover mode of exchange A which is crumbling under the domination of mode B and C. But the nation is the manifestation of mode A that emerges only after the fall of the community, and consequently, from within the world system of global capitalism. Therefore, the turn to nationalism, like the turn to interiority in literature, is also a “banal movement” since it remains within the structure that it tries to critique. The nation, like interiority, isn’t something that “existed from the start”, but it appears as if it did because its origins are repressed:

In order for us to assume it to be natural that things exist and the artist merely observes them and copies them, “things” must first be discovered. But this requires the repression of the signification, or figurative language that precedes “things,” as well as the existence of a language which is supposedly transparent. It is at this point that “interiority” is constituted.³⁷

The “thing” of the nation appears as if it exists naturally, but it is only the capitalist manifestation in imagination of mode of exchange A. This is where the trap lays: In taking the nation as natural and in trying to restore it, we overlook the fact that it belongs, by nature, to the current world system and the fact that it cannot truly restore mode A. This fundamental fact about the nature of the form of the nation is explicitly exposed in the following passage: “A critique that returns to the “origins” must also critique the “origins.” For the nationalism that seeks the originality of Japanese literature in a source prior to modernity is itself nothing other than the forgetting of origins.”³⁸ What Karatani demonstrates is that the nation is a constituent part of the system, which appears as

³⁶ Karatani, *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature*, p.44

³⁷ Karatani, *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature*, P.61

³⁸ *Idem*, p.194

something external to it because its origins as a creation of the system are erased. Therefore, even though the nation acts as if it defies the system, its nature as something that is in fact rooted within the logic of capital prevents it from ever truly challenging it.

One could easily conclude that to present the nation as incapable of challenging the global world system of capitalism denies the specific characteristics of different nations in a universalizing manner, and, more critically, the value of nationalism within populations that use it to fight oppression. However, this would be a misunderstanding of Karatani. Indeed, although imaginary, “A nation-state is never created on a blank sheet. It is born on the ground of the already existing society. When we consider the question of nationalism outside the West, we need to pay attention to differences in the ground.”³⁹ This remark by Karatani at the end of his chapter on the nation is interesting because it prevents his account from being universalizing and from suggesting that different nationalisms can be approached with the same expectations or that they are built in the same manner. When it comes to the fight against oppression of different groups of people and the way in which they articulate their difference, Karatani acknowledges fully the importance of their struggles, even when it takes the form of nationalism. This is something that Marxists who relegate nationalism to the superstructure often fail to do. In a sense, his approach is reminiscent of Kozo Uno’s distinction between pure theory, the study of historical development and the study of contemporary economic conditions⁴⁰. In his account of the nation, Karatani seems to be relying on a similar distinction by presenting a “pure concept” of the nation but pointing out that the practical and concrete manifestations of that concept may vary according to where its concrete manifestation is

³⁹ Karatani, *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature*, p.226

⁴⁰ Uno, *Principles of Political Economy: Theory of a Purely Capitalist Society*, p.100

observed. These nationalist movements that fight oppression can be perceived as “partial struggles”, and as discussed in chapter 1, even though such struggles do not individually challenge the global structure of capitalism, Karatani still recognizes the potential need for them and the value that they might hold. Furthermore, one of the strengths of the alternative to capitalism that he suggests is precisely that it allows different identities to coexist in a non-antagonizing manner. What his account of the nation demonstrates, therefore, is not that the articulation of difference supports the capitalist formation, but rather that differences expressed solely in the form of the nation allow the capitalist world system to integrate these differences into its logic and to perpetuate its oppression.

Challenging the current world system & the threat of the nation

As we have seen earlier, every social formation that has existed is the arrangement of the three modes of exchange (A, B and C). To these three modes Karatani adds another one, which hasn't been realized yet and currently exists only in the realm of idea: mode of exchange D (associationism). Mode of exchange D “consists of the return of reciprocal exchange in a higher dimension. It differs from distributive justice – that is, from the amelioration of disparities in wealth through redistribution – in that it implements an exchange-based justice under which such disparities are prevented from occurring in the first place.”⁴¹ A society where mode of exchange D would be dominant would be based on both equality and freedom and would transcend the Borromean ring of the capitalist world system.

⁴¹ Karatani, *The Structure of World History*, p.231

Because they both bring to the fore the restoration of mode of exchange A, abide in a very different manner, socialism⁴² and nationalism appear falsely similar. However, by contrasting the differences between how socialism and nationalism respectively attempt to bring back mode of exchange A, we can understand how the domination of mode of exchange D would transcend the Capital-Nation-State formation, while nationalism can only perpetuate the triadic capitalist world structure.

As already mentioned, Karatani embraces the Kantian ideal of the moral law that requires one to “treat others ‘always at the same time as an end and never merely as a means to an end,’”⁴³ and in Karatani’s interpretation of Kant “the category of other people includes not only the living but also the dead and still unborn.”⁴⁴ Both the nation and associations require a feeling of shared belonging with fellow community members, as well as with ancestors and descendants. However, nationalism appears as the conscious attempt to restore the disintegrating community from within the Capital-Nation-State structure through the nation, whereas associationism is an unconscious, compulsory motivation akin to Kant’s “regulative idea”:

Nationalism is nostalgic, a proactive attempt to restore past ways of life. By contrast, even as associationism seeks to restore the past form of mode of exchange A, it is not about restoring the past. Associationism is about creating the future anew.

⁴² To clarify, Karatani uses the word “associationism” to refer to the formation brought by mode of exchange D in an attempt to give his concept a fresh start. However, it is appropriate to also use the word “socialism” to refer to his concept if we take it solely as the name of a world system that would transcend the capitalist system and the inequalities it creates. This particular use of the term “socialism”, as one that is interchangeable with associationism, is found in Karatani’s writings, and once again bring us to the theoretical approach of Karatani. Socialism is understood here as a concept, not as the concrete historical attempts that claimed its name.

⁴³ Karatani, *The Structure of World History*, p.231

⁴⁴ *Idem*.

What we see in this passage is that the project of nationalism is based on restoring an ideal past of the “nation” even though the nation itself only started to exist in the current system. Associationism, on the other hand, is about bringing back the mode of exchange A, in a form that also allows freedom. This is why it is defined as a restoration “in a higher dimension” of mode of exchange A. Since mode A was based on equality, but couldn’t accommodate freedom, mode D hence necessarily represents a new social formation, a new project. Furthermore, “because [nationalism] is nostalgic and based on “tradition”, it tends to deny rights to new kinds of population living with the subject of these “nations”⁴⁵. Nationalism is, ideally, about restoring the mode of exchange A of a disintegrated community⁴⁶, but also about restoring its enclosure, which often will not be appropriate for the society in which that nation is being “restored”.

Furthermore, the problem of nationalism can also be understood to spring from the fact that it is “proactive”. In contrast, a potential world system where mode D would be dominant has to emerge globally (occurring at multiple places at once) and must occur by itself, it will spring naturally, independently from human will, when the contingencies allowing its formation will be in place. This doesn’t mean, of course, that there is nothing that can be done to bring about the realization of associationism. For Karatani, what can be achieved consciously by human will is the attempt to find ways to work outside the logic of capitalism, aiming at the ideal (the regulative idea) of a society where freedom and equality would coexist. We must struggle to escape the Borromean ring of Capital-Nation-State, but we cannot establish socialism proactively, we have to move towards it gradually. It is in the struggle that the contingencies necessary for mode D to become the

⁴⁵ Karatani, “*Sekaishi No Kōzō*” *Wo Yomu*, p.78

⁴⁶ Let’s recall here that this restoration is necessarily *imaginary*.

dominant mode of exchange will emerge. Creating the contingencies is sufficient because contrary to the nation, which has to constantly be reasserted to remain valid and accepted, the return in a higher dimension of mode of exchange A is “not simply an arbitrary desire held by some people, but rather a compulsory, compulsive idea, a kind of ‘return of the repressed.’”⁴⁷ The nation in our contemporary society, because it is now proactively and consciously established by human will, is caught within the logic of world capitalism, and therefore can only perpetuate the divisions and oppression that this logic supports. The fact that it is proactively established is only another proof that the nation isn’t the real return of the community, which is a compulsion that doesn’t need to be created since it is already present in all of us, but rather a capitalist imaginary construct that only offers the illusion of this return.

This brings us to the second difference between associationism and nationalism, something I would like to call “flexibility”. The nation, which arises in the current world system, is an enclosure that exists only in relation to other nations. Its defined trait isn’t that it is a community based on shared identity (although this kind of community does exist), but rather the fact that it is an enclosure that allows capitalist competition between communities and ensures the continuation of capitalism by resolving in imagination the contradictions of capitalism. In other words, while communities can exist, the nation represents something else. It is imaginary and it takes the form it has today because it belongs solely to the current world system. Nationalism aims at restoring a destroyed community, and when it does so, articulates a nation within the framework of “us” and “them”. It is a project that implies a cowering into one’s own newly constituted shell. It is

⁴⁷ Karatani, *The Structure of World History*, p.231

necessarily a process which cannot support a global movement. Associationism, on the other hand, is fundamentally transnational, since it transcends the Borromean ring of Capital-Nation-State. This is because it is both equal and free. While nationalism aim to restore the equality of mode of exchange A, associationism seek to elevate it with freedom. This is why for Karatani freedom of movement is essential in order for freedom and equality to be both possible simultaneously. For Karatani, freedom of movement would bring a circumstance where freedom would bring equality⁴⁸ rather than oppose it, by allowing the frontier of identity to be constantly redrawn within a system that would transcend differences and allow them to coexist rather than compete. A world system based on mode of exchange D would therefore be fundamentally *trans*-national; it would transcend the borders of the nation. Conversely, it would not support an *inter*-national system because such system accepts the capitalist form of the nation as a given. The alternative world based on mode D that Karatani describes wouldn't deny differences. On the contrary, because of the freedom it includes, it would allow the groups created by these differences to constantly reinvent themselves and flourish, since people could join and leave these communities at will. This freedom would then be merged with equality, which would allow the multitudes of communities to coexist without having to vie against each other for wealth and power. The nation, by nature, could never achieve this.

The third difference between the nation and association lies in the character of mode of exchange A that they each try to restore. The nation rests on reciprocity. For example, one raises the young expecting them to protect them in return.⁴⁹ But the restoration of the community that associationism would realize would go beyond

⁴⁸ Karatani, "*Sekaishi No Kōzō*" *Wo Yomu*, p.288-289

⁴⁹ *Idem*, p.106

reciprocity. It would “treat others as ends”, a dynamic that reciprocity doesn’t bring about. This is why Karatani often refers to associationism as the realization of the community of the nomads, whom, because they were constantly on the move and couldn’t accumulate, had to constantly share what they had. They had to treat others well because they cared about others, because they valued the life of others⁵⁰. This is one of the reasons why freedom of movement is so important for associationism, because it would allow the communism (the sharing without the “gift return” dynamic) of the nomads. Of course, many would argue that the possibility of a system in which we would treat others as ends and never as means is idealist and unrealistic. Indeed, the realisation of mode of exchange D is an ideal. But this doesn’t mean that it is outside of reality or that it is disconnected from actual society. Mode of exchange D is what Kant calls a “regulative idea”, “an index toward which people should gradually attempt to draw close.”⁵¹ For Karatani, it is crucial to have a regulative idea if we want to eventually transcend the current world system. In other words, it is crucial to be critical of the system that we are in. Nationalism, because it struggles within the system, can never be that regulative idea, but associationism/socialism, because it represents a world system that would be based on a yet-to-be-realized mode of exchange, can be that regulative idea to inform our struggle against global capitalism. Finally, without entering the debate on human nature, Karatani does give us instances in which the potential for association in humanity is manifested, such as in the context of asylum and natural disasters. Indeed, for Karatani, asylum and the collaboration after a calamity constitute situations where the logic of a community of

⁵⁰ Here, the “nomad” should be perceived as the theoretical figure of mode of exchange D. The actual historical existence of such nomad society doesn’t truly matter. What we are interested in is the conceptual difference between the community of A and D. This is why Karatani talks of a restoration of mode of exchange A in a higher dimension (*The Structure of World History*, p.9).

⁵¹ Karatani, *The Structure of World History*, p.233

equals under a greater being, or a greater idea, comes back to the surface⁵². It is a situation where communism is applied, where people share and help each other outside the logic of exchange A, B or C. It represents a situation where mode D is realised for a brief moment.

The fourth difference, between associationism and nationalism lies in the return to the individual as the ultimate unit of the system. Nationalism organizes populations of the world according to the assumed enclosures of nations, then asking individual to recognize their belonging to this imaginary formation. It fundamentally implies a lack of ambiguity that denies the truth of our existence: that every individual is unique. Associationism, on the contrary, forges the imagination of itself on the recognition of every individual as unique. This return to individuality has to be understood through Kant's cosmopolitanism. Like the need for freedom, the recognition of the peculiarity of individuals who fundamentally can never "fit" in the exact same manner as someone else in the same community, is fundamentally against the capitalist imagination of the world. Individuals can belong to group identities, but they never belong to a single, all-encompassing one: "individuals are living in plural dimensions of social relations. Hence, the movements that are grounded upon a one-dimensional identity come to face internal conflicts by way of the return of the differences in the bracketed dimensions."⁵³ Capitalism sees individuals first and foremost as the containers of labor-power, their identity/sense of belonging has little incidence. The primary function of the human in our contemporary society is to work for the achievement of surplus-value; the rest is superfluous and is only considered if access to the labor-power is affected by it. The only belonging that matters

⁵² Karatani, *"Sekaishi No Kōzō" Wo Yomu*, p.37

⁵³ Karatani, *Transcritique*, p.305

for capitalism is the belonging of each human body to specific markets (nation-states). But because individuals, by nature cannot conceive of themselves as homogenized individuals under a single identity (nation), the nation is always challenged by the “return of differences”. By returning to the individual, Karatani attempts to show us that these differences don’t have to be organized/subsumed under an all-encompassing system of universal equivalent identities – the international system. A system that could allow differences is possible, but it requires a move away from the enclosing and antagonizing logic of the nation. It requires the acknowledgement of “individual’s belonging to multidimension[ality]”⁵⁴. To do so fully, the inevitable peculiarity of each individual must be recognized, and freedom to move between these dimensions⁵⁵ must be allowed.

Today’s world

World capitalism is characterized by the repetition of structures. This tendency of repetitions within the world system is manifested in multiple ways: the rise and fall of world hegemons, the recurrence of economic crises, the development and destruction of welfare within nation-states, etc. In this structure of repetition, we see an alternation between forms of liberalism and imperialism. Liberalism represents a stage where the national interests come to the fore, resulting in the rise of welfare policies and, in extreme cases, fascism. Globally, it is a period in which the restoration of a strong national base is prioritized over competitiveness on the world market⁵⁶. Imperialism, on the other hand,

⁵⁴ Karatani, *Transcritique*, p.3-6

⁵⁵ The “multidimensionality” of individuals here refers to the multiplicity of identities, relationships, communities that a given individual belongs to. Acknowledging the multidimensionality of individuals therefore requires that a given individual be able to express all of these dimensions.

⁵⁶ This does not mean, of course, that nation-states stops competing in the international market. However, it does mean that the wealth of national people becomes a central objective of the nation-state, resulting, for instance, in protectionist policies.

is a stage where “state-capital [is] freed from the egalitarian demands that characterized the nation”⁵⁷. It is a moment where the economic competition takes predominance over the welfare of the national people. As a result, welfare policies are gradually disintegrated in that stage, inequalities rise, and competition between nation-states is inflated. According to Karatani, the current situation, often called neo-liberalism, ought to be seen as a period of imperialism.

To understand what happens to the nation in the current imperialistic context, it is useful to look at Karatani’s concept of the “despotism of capital”. In the despotism of capital, the state-capital formation is perceived as the bearer of national interests and its self-preservation appears as a priority. There is a shared sense that the enclosure of the nation-state has to be strengthened. However, instead of attempting to oppose capitalism through the nation, or, in other words, instead of attempting to restore the community of mode of exchange A, the logic of capital is embraced. It is within this context that people are willing to accept hardships, the loss of jobs, and the rise of inequalities in order to ensure the economic competitiveness of their country. In this situation, in order for their country to “win” globally, the logic of the nation is fully subordinated under the support of state and capital to a point where the self-preservation of state and capital appears in the interest of the national community. However, because it is a context where the imagined community of the nation is put in the background, the sense of permanence and belonging that it provides also wavers, making the rise of nationalism more and more likely.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Karatani, *The Structure of World History*, p.279

⁵⁸ Karatani, “*Sekaishi No Kōzō*” *Wo Yomu*, p.83-89

The alternation between phases of imperialism and liberalism shows us once again, in a different manner, how the nation is crucial for the perpetuation of world capitalism. Capitalism is a system that fundamentally functions on the competition between capitalists as they tried to accumulate as much surplus value as possible. The constant need for economic “growth” should suffice to demonstrate this rather simple fact. A company, or for that matter, a country, that doesn’t manage to maintain growth faces bankruptcy and his forced out of the position of capitalist, back to the position of proletariat. By imagining identity and community as an enclosure more or less concordant with the enclosure of the state-capital enclosure, the form of the nation allows identity and struggle for a better situation to be fundamentally articulated in terms of competition against the other. The nation is necessarily enclosed. After all, as Anderson puts it, “No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind”⁵⁹. And because this enclosure finds its origin/articulation in nothing else but the contemporary capitalist system, in times of hardship, one finds himself/herself understanding the source of his/her sufferance as the effect of his/her nation “loosing” against other nations. It is a form that obscures how every individual is equally consumed by the capitalist world system and disconnected from his/her fundamental humanity, allowing the individual to see the struggle for a better condition as the struggle against other nations, a struggle that can only be fought as a nation. And in this capitalist system of competition, the culmination of the rise of nationalism, in which the nation becomes the prime logic to ensure the persistence of capitalism, occurs in the moment of fascism.

⁵⁹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p.7

The threat of fascism

Fascism occurs when “nationalism takes on the guise of socialism in developed industrial capitalist states. [...] It is, in other words, an attempt to transcend capital and the state through the nation.”⁶⁰ As we have already seen, this is possible because nationalism falsely appears similar to socialism in its attempt to restore the lost equality and community of mode of exchange A. Historically, it emerges when the inequalities that the imperialist stage brings reach a critical point, prompting the people to mobilize in opposition to the class divisions and alienation of capitalism. However, because it means cowering into an enclosure and attempting to bring back equality within one nation, it is doomed to fail. Indeed, because capitalism is a world-system, its capacity to self-preservation is found in the interactions (competition) between the unequal enclosures of Capital-Nation-State it created. Therefore, even though equality can be restored momentarily, insofar as it is limited within the borders of one nation, it will eventually be reabsorbed by the capitalist world-system. In fact, this capacity from the world-system to ensure the reabsorption of fascist states has been witnessed in the post-WWII reabsorption of formerly fascist states back into the capitalist world system. Because fascist states, or national-socialist states, were not challenging the capitalist world order but only embodying one of its extreme, the inevitable failure of their inflated nationalism left them even in defeat with a profoundly capitalist social structure that could be reabsorbed easily into the world system. Socialism for Karatani is fundamentally global; it is the realization of a *world*-system based on mode of exchange D. Hence, any movement attempting to restore mode of exchange A nationally cannot be called

⁶⁰ Karatani, *The Structure of World History*, p.258

“socialist”. In other words, Karatani sees nationalism and socialism as fundamentally opposed, as two different ways to attempt the restoration of the disintegrating community of mode A. In short, there cannot be such a thing as “national-socialism”, only fascism.

But the threat that fascism constitutes for the potential achievement of socialism isn’t only limited to false resemblance. It also springs from the tendency towards repetition of historical structures within the capitalist-world system. As described earlier, for Karatani, the Capital-Nation-State formation historically oscillates between the two poles of liberalism and imperialism. In liberalism, nationalisms everywhere produce a reduction of inequalities *within* the nation-states through protectionism, social welfare, and a generally more extensive redistribution of wealth within the nation-state. In imperialism, by contrast, nationalism is subjugated under the state-capital logic, resulting in a move toward free market, the crumbling of social welfare, and more inequalities. Despite having direct effects on the livelihood of populations, both poles remain within the Borromean ring of Capital-Nation-State. Currently, we are in a context that ought to be described as imperialist, but if we aim at the restoration of liberalism, we will return to the other pole of capitalism. This return to liberalism has historically been sparked by the rise of nationalism. The struggle against capitalism today is therefore fundamentally linked to the struggle to prevent nationalism to emerge, again, as bearer of the restoration of mode of exchange A. Fascism is a threat to socialism because it is the way by which capitalism seems to offer the ideal world that socialism promises. In other words, fascism is the false self-critique that capitalism periodically uses to perpetuate itself. If we let nationalism sway us, we are doomed to continue the process of repetition inherent to capitalism. “The choice between liberalization of the market, which sacrifices the

national economy, versus the protection of the national economy is one of the greatest points of political contention today,”⁶¹ but this debate remains caught in the Borromean ring of the current world system. Karatani refuses to participate in this debate, but instead transcends it and suggests that the true alternative that we can envision to restore the community in a higher form is one that would go beyond this debate, one that would render it irrelevant.

Chapter 3 – Karatani and Anderson

When it comes to the study of the nation and its place in the current world system, few names resonate as strongly as Benedict Anderson. In a sense, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to assert that *Imagined Communities* created a new standard for our understanding of the nation. Anyone familiar with Anderson will probably have noticed several similarities between his work and Karatani's conception of the nation. These similarities are not a coincidence. Karatani directly discusses Anderson in his books and mentions the writer a number of times. However, Karatani doesn't simply accept Anderson's interpretation of the nation; he instead modifies it in order to expose different implications of what it means for the nation to be an "imagined community". To truly understand the novelty of Karatani's interpretation, an analysis of the similarities and differences between the two authors is useful.

When attempting to compare Karatani and Anderson's respective interpretations of the nation, it is crucial to emphasize that despite similarities their respective approaches are rather different in nature. Indeed, Karatani's approach is fundamentally

⁶¹ Karatani, *History and Repetition*, p.23

transcritical⁶², and any discussion of singular concepts and ideas developed in his writings cannot be dissociated from the overall approach that informed their development. It is fundamentally at the level of thought that Karatani develops his conception of the nation. Anderson's approach is rather different. As anyone whose read *Imagined Communities* would quickly notice, his approach is firmly historical in nature, and, I would argue, mostly concerned with the concrete historical contingencies that create social formations. His extensive use of concrete historical examples to describe the emergence of the nation makes it rather clear that we are not so much concerned with the role of the form of the nation in the capitalist world-system as we are with the appearance of the "concrete" nation as an historical entity. It is unsurprising therefore that Anderson spends a lot of time describing the creation process of different existing nations. In *Imagined Communities*, for instance, the chapter "Creole Pioneers"⁶³ is concerned with the emergence of independent nations within the same linguistic community. To describe how such a thing is possible, Anderson undertakes an in-depth analysis of the experience of the American states of the late eighteenth century. This description of the American states situation is not only an example in Anderson; it is also, simultaneously, the analysis of the process of nation-formation within the same linguistic community. In short, the American experience here is used as a "key model": it plays simultaneously the role of example and of explanation. Such an approach reminds us of those who see the description of the development of British capitalism in *Capital* as the core of Marx's theory of capitalism. While this approach, concerned with the concrete historical contingencies and processes that allowed for the creation of existent nations is useful,

⁶² See chapter 1

⁶³ P.47-65

Karatani's approach is altogether different. Karatani's point of entry to analyze the nation isn't the empirically existing nations, but the place of the nation, as a form, in the capitalist world-system. This is perhaps why we don't find as many discussions of currently existing nationalisms and nations in Karatani as we do in Anderson.

One of the main ways in which this difference in approach manifests itself is in the different treatment of historical "contingencies", and their role in supporting the emergence of the nation. Anderson sees the origins of the nation as a result of these contingencies:

The convergence of capitalism and print technology on the fatal diversity of human language created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation.⁶⁴

As clearly illustrated by this citation, for Anderson the nation is the result of an historical moment in which the right contingencies allowed the development of this "new form of imagined community" that would form the source of the modern nation. For Anderson, the nation was never inevitable, nor was it the only form of imagined community that capitalism could have created; it was the result of different contingencies that converged at a precise historical moment to create what we call the nation. For Karatani, while contingencies are crucial to understand how the nation form comes into being concretely and how different contexts can bring about the creation of different nations with crucial dissimilarities, they do not form the origin of the nation. For Karatani, the nation is first and foremost the imagined recovery of mode of exchange A, the recovery of a community that we always long for but that we can never actualize. The nation is also one of the necessary and unavoidable entities in a world-system that is

⁶⁴ Anderson, p.46

dominated by mode of exchange C. While, for Anderson, the convergence of capitalism, print technology, and the diversity of language allowed the creation of the nation, for Karatani, it was always latent in any system in which commodity exchange would become dominant.

Fundamentally, what we are getting at with the different treatment of contingencies in Karatani and Anderson is the difference in how they understand the place of the nation in the world structure. As said earlier, Anderson is not really concerned with the place of the nation in our current capitalist world-system, but rather with the concretely existing nations. In *Imagined Communities*, although he addresses the relation between state and nation, Anderson never addresses the relation between capital and nation. However, his interpretation of the nation seems to imply the acceptance of the nation as part of the superstructure since he argues that the form of the nation emerges after the advent of capitalism, as the result of the particular contingencies that capitalist print created. For Karatani, the nation is more than a contingent imagined community that was created by capitalism, it is also the embodiment of a different mode of exchange, and hence, operates semi-independently. His departure from Anderson is clearly exposed in *Transcritique*:

As opposed to the common Marxist view, anthropological and psychoanalytic approaches intervened later on, cherishing as they did nation-as-superstructure. This tendency is summarized by Benedict Anderson's famous concept of 'imagined communities.' But it is impossible to posit, so simplistically, economic domain as reality and nation as imagined. The effect of the enlightenment of such a thesis cannot go beyond the closure of academics. The nation qua representation is certainly intensified by education as well as by literature, but it cannot be annulled by the critique of representation, for it does not exist in and by representation alone. Marx famously criticized those enlightened intellectuals who disdained religion, claiming that there was a reality that required religion and that religion could not be abolished unless the reality were changed. In the same way, there are

nations and the reality that requires nations. The nations would last unless those realities are solved.⁶⁵

In this passage, Karatani doesn't critique Anderson's conception of the nation as imagined; on the contrary, he accepts this observation. After all, he himself argues that the nation is the *imaginary* restoration of mode of exchange A. However, he criticizes the implied assumption that the source of the nation rests solely in this imaginative moment that became suddenly possible with the contingencies created by the apparition of "print-as-commodity". The nation isn't only a product of imagination; it is the imaginary satisfaction of a real need: mode of exchange A. The fact that with the rise of mode of exchange C, it took the specific form of the nation is indeed arguably the result of contingencies, but its true source is grounded in reality. For Karatani, therefore, in challenging the capitalist world system, one must remain aware that although the form of the nation does support it, it is not a consequence of it; it is not part of a "superstructure". The nation would not naturally disappear with the end of capital, it can only potentially disappear if the need it fulfills within the imagination is satisfied in reality. To critique the nation and ask for an alternative way to relate to others is therefore to ask for a real return of the repressed community, it isn't about an enlightenment regarding the nations true imaginary nature.

The relation between nation and religion, and especially universal religion, is also an interesting point where Anderson's and Karatani's respective interpretations differ. For Anderson, universal religions used to constitute the dominant form of imagined communities and were gradually replaced in that role by the nation. In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson posits that the principal difference between the two lies in the fact

⁶⁵ Karatani, *Transcritique*, p.277

that “The fundamental conceptions about ‘social groups’ were centripetal and hierarchical, rather than boundary-oriented and horizontal.”⁶⁶ Because the major world religions organized social group hierarchically, they were potentially able to include everyone, to “convert” them. For him, two things led to the gradual undermining of these communities. The first was the over-expansion of these communities and the encounter with other religious communities that ensued. The second was the end of the hegemony of the sacred scripts that came with the emergence of vernacular writing and print-capitalism. These contingencies then paved the way for the emergence of a new community: the nation. Karatani might not disagree with this overall narrative of the end of the hegemony of the religious community and the rise of the nation. However, for him, this is not where the fundamental difference lies. For him, it lies in the fact that the imagined community of religion constituted a *regulative idea* that included everyone, while the nation is, as an ideal, the precise opposite: the bordering of communities. Of course, the great world religions were subsumed by the logic of the nation and do not bear anymore the universality that they once embodied. However, for Karatani, universal religions are more than an archaic form of imagined community. They constitute the first traces of mode of exchange D, that is, the return of mode of exchange A in a greater dimension. This is why he argues that the advent of mode of exchange D would take the form of a universal religion. This understanding of universal religions opens up new ways to understand the specificity of the nation form and how it organizes societies in a way that supports capitalism, while universal religions, in their pure forms, are fundamentally incompatible with it. Furthermore, this understanding of universal religions helps us understand the recent rise of transnational contestations to the world system along

⁶⁶ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p.15

religious lines and the tendency for such religious groups to come into conflict with the nation-state's monopoly on control and violence. Of course, these religious movements, because they are based on already nationalized religions, cannot bring the end of capitalism, but they do testify to an undeniable dissatisfaction with the exclusive and oppressive logic of the Capital-Nation-State formation and the capacity of human beings to imagine different forms of communities.

Conclusion

In the triadic capitalist structure of Capital-Nation-State, the nation occupies a peculiar role as the imaginary restoration of a sense of community and equality that is disintegrating under the domination of the logic of commodity exchange. The nation is the creation of an enclosure through which the capitalist formation seems to offer the resolution of the contradictions on which it rests by offering the image of a community from the past. As with socialism, the theoretical foundation of the nation is often based on the promise of a society where freedom and equality can coexist, but, as I have attempted to demonstrate, the nation can never fully achieve these goals. Indeed, it constitutes one of the primary threats to a form of freedom that can only be achieved through socialism. . The historical repetition of the rise and fall of nationalisms shows us that the nation emerges as the banal form through which people attempt to oppose the alienation and inequalities of capitalism. However, the rise of nationalism is then followed by a gradual return to an imperialist cycle, where inequalities rise again. The circle is complete, and the world system of capitalism remains. Furthermore, because nationalism is localized within a singular bounded territory, it is unable to expand beyond the frontier of its enclosure, and cannot challenge the global system of capitalism, which

rests on the economic competition between nation-states. What Karatani's account of the nation shows us is that using the form of the nation to express a desire for community is fundamentally limited and limiting, framing societies in an antagonizing manner that supports competition and hierarchy. If we are to challenge capitalism therefore, we need a *trans*-national approach rather than an *inter*-national approach. For Karatani, this transnational approach has to be informed by both Kant and Marx. In his profound cosmopolitanism and insistence on the need and inevitability of a regulative idea for our current system, he gives a new breath to Kant's political project, which rest on the continuous attempt to always treat other as ends and never merely as means to an end. This is a return to seeing individuals as the ultimate end and subject of society, or to use Badiou's vocabulary, to recognize humans as Immortals. It is not, however, a simple return to seeing the potential for change in individual subjectivity or in a simple individualism. It consists instead in seeing each individual as the embodiment of a multitude of relationships and as intertwined in various systems of exchange simultaneously. Due to these diverse and constantly changing identities and communities that traverse it, a specific individual can never be defined by one all-encompassing community or identity. This is in this recognition of the true openness, flexibility and uniqueness of every singular human experience that it can be said that Karatani returns to the individual, or perhaps it would be more appropriate to say that it is how he transcends the individual by moving freely through the various identities and communities that traverse individuals. By treating others always as ends and never merely as means to an end, Karatani, in the footsteps of Kant, refuses to enclose and subordinate individuals within fixed and bordered communities and identities. Instead, he opens the individual in

order to acknowledge and support the development of new forms of connections and exchanges between individuals.

This push for the recognition of the value of the Kantian regulative idea is only strengthened by his Marxian critique of the rationality of our current condition. The rationality of capitalism is fundamentally a human construct full of contradictions, though it tries to appear as an essential and ahistorical law of nature. What Karatani shows us is that the form of the nation, like world-capitalism, is a construct particular to our current historical moment. Through his use of Marx, Karatani demonstrates that it can be deconstructed, that the capitalist world order isn't the end of history and that the nation isn't the ultimate expression of community and identity. But where he differs from other scholars, who also realized the contingent and imaginary nature of the nation, is in his exposition of the fundamental human need for community that sustains the existence of the nation. This need is something that would not wither away with the end of the nation, for the nation's disappearance would require the true fulfilment of this need for community. And at its core, Karatani's account of the nation is all about exposing the necessity of aiming for this true fulfilment. Although we cannot yet grasp what it would look like, it is undeniable that this true return of the community would transcend the nation and, therefore, any project that seeks the end of the current capitalist world system has to transcritically challenge the nation-form.

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