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## **TOWARD A WORLD REPUBLIC: KŌJIN KARATANI AND REVISITING KANT**

### **W stronę republiki światowej: Kōjin Karatani i powrót do Kanta**

**Słowa kluczowe:** Kōjin Karatani, Immanuel Kant, republika światowa, wieczny pokój, sposoby wymiany

**Key words:** Kōjin Karatani, Immanuel Kant, World Republic, perpetual peace, modes of exchange

#### **Streszczenie**

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest próba przedstawienia kluczowych tez *The Structure of World History* Kōjina Karataniego w odniesieniu do filozofii społecznej Immanuela Kanta. Pierwszą część pracy stanowi streszczenie głównych założeń dotyczących koncepcji wiecznego pokoju Kanta. Druga część dotyczy Karataniego – teorii „sposobów wymiany”, tj. próby konceptualizacji historii w sposób reprezentujący zmodyfikowaną linię myślenia w obrębie tradycji marksistowskiej. Trzecia część poświęcona jest uwagom metateoretycznym dotyczącym omawianych tekstów oraz interpretacji i zastosowania kantowskiej koncepcji wiecznego pokoju w ramach koncepcji światowej republiki Karataniego.

#### **Abstract**

The paper aims to recount key issues to Kōjin Karatani's *The Structure of World History* in regard to Immanuel Kant's social philosophy. The first part of the article summarizes key points made by Kant regarding his notion of perpetual peace. The second part concerns Karatani's concept of the “modes of exchange”, an attempt to grasp the entirety of history in a way that represents a modified line of thinking within the Marxist tradition. The third part amounts to metatheoretical remarks concerning the presented texts, the interpretation and application of Kant's perpetual peace into Karatani's World Republic.

Contemporary Japanese thought remains marked by the Marxist-theoretical scholarship that dominated the intellectual culture in Japan in the 20th century. A noble example of such is the publishing success of Kohei Saito's *Capital in the Anthropocene* (人新世の「資本論」),

where “the Japanese edition of the book sold over half a million copies, sparking discussions about Marxism on public television and in mainstream media” (Januszkiewicz 2024: 136). Less of a commercially, yet definitely widely academically acclaimed was the book of Kōjin Karatani, *The Structure of World History: From Modes of Production to Modes of Exchange* (世界史の構造), which gained positive reviews in sources such as the *Journal of World-Systems Research*, *H-Asia*, *Capital & Class*, and others. It seems especially important when recognizing that “Japanese has remained perhaps the most important language for Marxist-theoretical scholarship beyond English, German, and French, yet its theoretical history remains relatively isolated within its own linguistic boundaries” (Walker 2020b). What can be indicative of the cited works’ publicity is the disruptive nature of its main theses. From a philosophical point of view, Karatani’s work seems to be of particular interest. *The Structure of World History* poses a rather original attempt at constructing a theoretical bridge between Marx and Kant. The paper’s aim is to recount the key issues regarding the notion of Kōjin Karatani’s *The Structure of World History* in regard to Kant’s social philosophy. The first part of the article summarizes key points made by Immanuel Kant with respect to his notion of perpetual peace. The second part concerns the concept of Karatani’s “modes of exchange” as a distinctive attempt to grasp the entirety of history in a way that represents a modified line of thinking within the Marxist tradition. Finally, the third part amounts to metatheoretical remarks concerning the scope of Karatani-Kant hybrid framework, as well as the interpretation and application of Kant’s perpetual peace into Karatani’s theory and idea of a World Republic.

## Perpetual peace

Kant’s *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Essay* was published in 1795 on the eve of the Napoleonic Wars. Naturally, it’s hard to not look at the publication date without reference to French Revolution, which was slowly getting at its climax. The essay itself was hard to overlook with regard to the mood of the moment when it comes to the history of Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as well, as the year marked its final partition. On the one hand, theoretical solutions proposed by Kant thus resulted in favorable reception due to a *Zeitgeist* yearning

for hope and direction. On the other hand, as Mary Campbell Smith writes in her *Translator's introduction* to *Perpetual Peace*, “no political idea seem[ed] to have so great a future before it as this idea of a federation of the world” (Campbell Smith 1903: 2). Nevertheless, in order to understand the area addressed by *Perpetual Peace*, it is important to recall that Kant distinguishes between two types of law, the private and the public. Within the latter, he identifies two main values that are legitimate authority as well as the titular perpetual peace, “a permanent condition of international order” (Kuderowicz 2000: 85).

The question of perpetual peace becomes addressed directly by the *definitive articles* outlined in the second section of his work. However, it is important to first acknowledge what is described as the *preliminary articles*, a matter set forth in the first section. Kinga Marulewska described them as six “preliminary assumptions intended to prepare the ground for further theses that will specifically regulate the issue of perpetual peace” (Marulewska 2005: 175–176). For the sake of maintaining clarity, it is essential that all are listed following the original order: 1) “No treaty of peace shall be regarded as valid, if made with the secret reservation of material for a future war” (Kant 1903: 107); 2) “No state having an independent existence whether it be great or small shall be acquired by another through inheritance, exchange, purchase or donation” (Ibidem: 108); 3) “Standing armies (*miles perpetuus*) shall be abolished in course of time” (Ibidem: 110); 4) “No national debts shall be contracted in connection with the external affairs of the state” (Ibidem: 111); 5) “No state shall violently interfere with the constitution and administration of another” (Ibidem: 112); 6) “No state at war with another shall countenance such modes of hostility as would make mutual confidence impossible in a subsequent state of peace: such are the employment of assassins (*percussores*) or of poisoners (*venefici*), breaches of capitulation, the instigating and making use of treachery (*perduellio*) in the hostile state” (Ibidem: 114).

A close reading of the above preliminary articles reveals that Kant's considerations regarding the conditions necessary for the eventual implementation of measures toward perpetual peace are deeply embedded within an anti-war narrative. The premises' objectives, as pointed out by Caspian Richards, “are to freeze the current shape of nations by assuring the sovereignty of each (Articles 2 & 5), to remove apparent threats to the sovereignty of other nations (Articles 3 & 4), and to

reassure each nation that the word of another may be trusted (Articles 1 & 6)" (Richards 1999: L-2). When elaborating on that, it's crucial to notice that the rationalistic system of common peace must be based on the elimination of any hidden possibilities of new war, under the threat of terminating accords and treaties. Their relevance remains crucial, as "Kant supported reform initiatives carried out by the governing authorities, as they serve to maintain the principle of legal legitimacy and preserve the state's authority in the domain of law" (Kuderowicz 2000: 83). Karol Bal emphasizes that article three, regarding the abolishment of *miles perpetuus* in course of time, is a great example of Kant's antimilitaristic, yet realistic ("course of time") attitude and endorsement of partial and gradual institutional changes, in opposition to the revolutionary ones (Bal 1986: 13). Furthermore, it touches upon the theoretical foundation of practical reason, which recognizes the state as an association of people, yet differentiates between the subject of international law and the people themselves. It is also a statement of support for substituting professional army by *levée en masse* characterized by its defensive purpose and voluntary nature (Ibidem: 14). The subsequent articles can be viewed as a forerunner of international conventions.

Kant wants to build a peaceful world all through man's own reason, which brings upon the notion of turning from the state of nature to a civil society guided by the law. In this context, one must notice that Kant's "indebtedness in the sphere of politics to Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu and Rousseau it is difficult to overestimate" (Campbell Smith 1903: 40). Nonetheless, the guidelines outlined in *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch* are theoretical, meaning that just like the state's function to uphold universally binding law, the articles are "derived from practical reason, not from historical experience", as is the case with Hobbes, for example (Kuderowicz 2000: 81). In this sense, the first section of the essay focuses on "recommendations [...] intended as a philosophical guideline for how to achieve a peace that would never again be broken by war" (Marulewska 2005: 175).

When it comes to section two, there are three definitive articles outlined: 1) "The civil constitution of each state shall be republican" (Kant 1903: 120); 2) "The law of nations shall be founded on a federation of free states" (Ibidem: 128); 3) "The rights of men, as citizens of the world, shall be limited to the conditions of universal hospitality"

(Ibidem: 137). These are of decisive importance, for they address the public-law aspect of the project on perpetual peace, and they do it in a general manner. As Kant's vision of republicanism remains rooted in the context of the late eighteenth century, the first "rule" should not be understood on contemporary terms. Rather, the "republican" aspect is seen as referring to "preserv[ing] juridical freedom by ensuring that each morally autonomous individual is also a self-legislator in that they and their peers are subject to laws they give themselves" (Simpson 2018: 2). The second definitive article refers to a mutual agreement between the states involved, whereas the third one addresses that establishing a cosmopolitan law would "reinforce the shared identity among nations and facilitate the widespread circulation of reports on legal violations and inflicted injustices, with such transparency acting as a deterrent to unlawful conduct" (Kuderowicz 2000: 87).

Given this knowledge, a point raised by Kant in the *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Perspective* (1784) may offer additional insight. The seventh thesis reads that "the problem of establishing a perfect civic constitution is dependent upon the problem of a lawful external relation among states and cannot be solved without a solution of the latter problem" (Kant 1963). One can recognize the dominant antiwar overtone that echoed through the *Perpetual Peace*, when Kant writes that "through wasting the powers of the commonwealths in armaments to be used against each other, through devastation brought on by war, and even more by the necessity of holding themselves in constant readiness for war, they (the established states) stunt the full development of human nature [...] Thus it (our race) is forced to institute a cosmopolitan condition to secure the external safety of each state" (Ibidem). This path "toward the creation of a commonwealth" was something, as Kant stresses, "which reason could have told them at the beginning and with far less sad experience" (Ibidem). The significance of that sentence is particularly compelling, as it highlights the extent to which a priori assumptions shape Kant's social philosophy.

## Modes of exchange

As Gavin Walker writes following his note on the translation of Karatani's *Marx: Towards the Centre of Possibility*, the contemporary

Japanese philosopher and literary critic “has been at the forefront of Japanese intellectual life since the 1970s. Producing numerous influential works of social theory, literary criticism, political thought, and intellectual history” he, safe to say, began a new movement within contemporary Japanese thought (Walker 2020: XI). At the time when Karatani was entering the stage of Japanese intellectual life, the pivotal part of the country’s postwar tradition was Marxist theory with a strong inclination on the part of “heavy methodological analyses” primarily represented by Uno Kozo and Hiromatsu Wataru, whose echoes are present in Karatani’s thought (Ibidem). After the failure of the Anpo protests of 1960, Karatani began working on a new project which, together with “reflecting on the theoretical questions of the Left” motivated by the late political events, led to forsaking literary criticism as a principal axis of his work (Karatani 2020: XXIX). His new stance was tied to a practice of “thorough scrutiny of existing theories” amongst which, according to Karatani, nothing remained “unaffected by or outside of Kantian and Marxian critiques” (Karatani 2003: xiii). Hence, the then-upcoming research projects and interests of the philosopher revolved around the mentioned systems of thought. Throughout the 1990s, when along with Akira Asada, he co-edited the journal *Hihyou kuukan* (Critical Space), Karatani became engaged in the theorization of exchange, which, as he states, meant “attempting to discover the »economic base« of the historical social formation not in the sphere of production, but in exchange” (Karatani 2020: XXXVII). Undertaken research regarding the problem is reflected in one of Karatani’s most innovative ideas and is assembled as a theory, foregrounded in *The Structure of World History* (2014).

In his book, Karatani explains his understanding of history through four contingent modes of exchange that drive the history of the world and the history of social formations. These are respectively: mode of exchange A (of reciprocity), mode of exchange B (of plunder and redistribution), mode of exchange C (of commodity exchange) and mode of exchange D (a theoretical formation attributed to transcending the prior ones in a post-capitalist world). None of them ever exists in separation from the others. The reason for their distinction is rather classificatory, yet they possess representative features. When Karatani states that behind one social formation stands a certain mode of exchange, it simply means that the given mode is dominant at a relevant time and

place. Frederic Jameson provides a neat summary of how these “modes of extraction” (what he also calls the modes of exchange) co-constitute specific social formations that make up Karatani’s vision of history, which “follows a traditional sequence: societies before power (clan or tribal societies, primitive communism); power societies, in which the state exists; and finally capitalism as a society organized not so much around power relations as around economic and monetary categories” (Jameson 2016: 336).

Following Marcel Mauss, Karatani recognizes Mode A as having roots in the primitive societies’ pooling practices, recognizing in them Wallerstein’s notion of a mini-system, exemplifying how various modes of exchange embody different types of power. (not only military, for example). The formation based on Mode A exists in a pre-state condition, because the rule of reciprocity fosters an “inter-between” relationship between societies, counterbalancing the eventual inequalities and competition (Karatani 2014: 40). On the other hand, mode B arises between communities when one plunders another. As plunder itself is not a form of exchange, it represents a prototype of the state when the ruled are granted peace (kept with gestures of redistribution) and order in return for obedience. When it comes to exchange understood through Mode C, McKenzie Wark notes that it’s “neither the reciprocal obligation of Mode A or the brute force compulsion of Mode B”, but a recognition of another party “as a free being owing nothing more to community or ruler once the transaction is done” (Wark 2017: 34).

The mentioned World Republic is a conclusive part of Karatani’s model of world history, reaching beyond the past and present, drawing lessons from them, and reaching into the future. Considering Karatani’s terminology, it corresponds to the envisioned mode of exchange D (X). By employing his conceptual plane, he links the theory with a practical plan for realizing the idea of a World Republic put forth by Kant in *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch* (1795). With this comes a new framework delineating Kant’s regulative idea within the global-market-dominated, neoliberal epoch. Karatani rereads Kant, finding a plausible frame of reference in his Kingdom of Ends. Transcoding Kantian ideas to the ground of Karatani’s work, and vice versa, compromises what is beyond the array of generic theoretical constructs of Marxism. Perchance, as Karatani states, poses a solution for transcending the dominating exchange relations.

It must also be mentioned how Karatani claims to read into *Capital* as a sheer source of philosophical and economic thought itself, detaching the subsequent build-up Marx's work has gained through Engels, his study, and commentary he bestowed on Marx with its upward trajectory in the 19th and 20th centuries. With the dogma of historical materialism, Karatani rejects the characteristic of broadly but commonly understood Marxism architectural metaphor of base and superstructure. As a consequence, his understanding of what's called "economic" comprises what's subjected to the modes of exchange, not only modes of production, as for Marx. Karatani stresses that the foremost upshot of applying such methodology is the ability to profoundly analyze and explain all historical social formations before industrial capitalism. As Jameson argues, "exchange here means not only capitalist circulation but a larger, more all-encompassing economic category, an emphasis Marx argues tirelessly against in his polemics against Proudhon and the latter's version of associationist anarchism. And in that respect, of course, Karatani does reveal himself to be fully as much a follower of Proudhon as of Marx himself" (Jameson 2016: 336).

## **Toward a World Republic**

To understand the general idea as to what is being tackled by Karatani, one must recall a broader trend of attempts at grasping what could be called a universal history. As pointed out by Jameson, the way in which Karatani's contribution can be of interest is marked by his "assimilation of Wallerstein", the way he "epitomizes the spatial turn in modern thought" which opens up a possibility to "rethink much of our cultural past" (Ibidem: 330). More than that, Karatani does not focus on the past and present only, but with the notion of mode of exchange D, he envisions a possible project of the future. In this regards, *Structure of World History* comprises particular focus on Kant's idea of perpetual peace, as it appears to be driven by a similar motivation.

Kant conceptualized the world system as a federation of nations, searching for the blueprint of a peaceful condition to be grounded in the Moral Law and its exigencies. However, Karatani stresses that Kantian peace should not be read, as it often is, "simplistically [...] within the lineage of pacifism that begins from Saint-Pierre's »perpetual

peace»” (Karatani 2014: 296). The postulate of rejecting it is precisely what seems so special about his approach to Kant. The Japanese thinker reads the German philosopher through the lens of the sublation of state and capital, not from a political perspective. Karatani argues that even though Kant’s bourgeois revolution might be politically motivated when it comes to particular state’s liberty to exercise self-governance, in the end, the whole notion is inseparable from the struggle for economic equality. Because of this two-fold structure, the “peace” in question would first and foremost mean an “end to all hostilities”, implicating a state without the state (Ibidem: 296). The structure of this argument is as follows:

Kant’s refusal to admit the possibility of revolution in a single country was not only due to the way that revolution invited interference from other countries. Kant from the start gave the name “Kingdom of Ends” to the society that had realized the moral law of always treating others not solely as means but also always as ends. This necessarily refers to a situation in which capitalism has been abolished. Yet this Kingdom of Ends could never exist within a single country. Even if one country should manage to realize a perfect civil constitution within, it would still be based on treating other countries solely as means (i.e., exploitation) and therefore could not qualify as the Kingdom of Ends. The Kingdom of Ends cannot be thought of in terms of a single country; it can only be realized as a “World Republic” (Ibidem: 297).

*Perpetual Peace* constitutes a practical plan aimed at realizing this regulative idea. Following Karatani, it’s a “possibility of a new global movement or resistance toward capital and the state”, encouraging a fundamental reconsideration of the structure of world history (Karatani 2014: XV). Hence, despite Kant does not advocate for perpetual peace in Marxist or socialist terms, Karatani sees his position as a precursor to the views of the utopian socialists and anarchists (such as Proudhon). This is where Karatani points out an encounter between the author of *Critique of the Pure Reason* and Marx, stating that “from the beginning, communism could not have been conceptualized without the moral moment inherent in Kant’s thinking” (Karatani 2003: viii). Seizing the moment to reclaim the subject of ethics & morality and undertake its detailed analysis, it’s also an attempt to liberate it from functioning as a myth with careful consideration of its past fail-

ures. In the context of bringing back Kantian Marxism that “has been eclipsed by history” (Ibidem), rereading Kant should be done in a manner of understanding “how local communes and countermovements against capital and state can avoid splintering and falling into mutual conflict” (Karatani 2014: 302). Karatani provides contemporary examples of institutions like the League of Nations or United Nations that to a limited extent, but approximately point out the direction of the pathway Kant proposes (Ibidem: 299). Illustrative for this approach is the quote of McKenzie Wark from the book *General Intellects – Twenty-One Thinkers for the Twenty-First Century*: “Most modern thinkers read their Marx through the supplement of another philosopher. There are Spinozist-Marxists (Althusser, Negri, Virno), Hegelian-Marxists (Lukács, Adorno, Žižek), Nietzschean Marxists (Deleuze, Lyotard). The supplement in Karatani is Kant, and in particular Kant’s kingdom of ends, his regulative idea of treating others not as means but as ends, a reciprocity of freedom itself” (Wark 2017: 45–46).

Notably, Karatani underlines how important in this case is “rejecting the view that Kant was superseded by Hegel, and Hegel in turn by Marx” (Karatani 2014: 302). At present, Hegel’s criticism of Kant is often reflected in dismissing the attempts to resolve international disputes through the UN as Kantian idealism. Nevertheless, Karatani claims that the future of humanity is unthinkable without the UN, despite it being far from the new world system. With the UN being a complex federation, its activities cover military affairs; economic affairs; medical, cultural, environmental issues. Amongst the three listed, only the third one, according to Karatani, isn’t closely related to state and capital (Ibidem: 306). Hence, in order to fix the UN after the fashion of a Kantian new world system, the first and second domains should be adjusted similarly to the third one, where “there is no rigid distinction between national, i.e. state-based and non-national entities” (Ibidem). Thus, the formation of a federation of nations as a future world order can be grounded solely in the principle of new reciprocity in terms of mode of exchange D. The perspective of modes of exchange may prove itself useful when revisiting the difference in terms for creating peace according to Hobbes and Kant. In the case of Hobbes, the state of peace is established through mode of exchange B, whereas in *Perpetual Peace* “the development of commerce [poses] a condition for peace (commerce understood as dense relations of trade between states which will render war im-

possible)" (Ibidem: 302). However, what today is known for capitalist market, represented by mode of exchange C mainly, remains dependent on the state regulation (Mode B), thus can never abolish the state. In fact, Karatani states, development of Mode C (industrial capitalism) resulted in a new kind of conflict and war, which is the imperialistic one. Here, Karatani's resolution is the elimination of economic disparities between states (including the capitalist form of their reproduction).

## Concluding remarks

When Karatani conceives of possible ways to overcome a capitalist society simultaneously pursuing the World Republic, he points out the potential of "consumer-producer cooperatives and local currencies and credit systems" (Ibidem: 291). Rethinking power, the author of *Structure of World History* records that the contemporary base for the Kantian federation of nations lies in an economy developed on a world scale, where Mode C is generalized. Hence, if the grounding principle of the reciprocity of the gift one must notice that the starting point is different from the one present at times of tribal confederations. In other words, restoration of Mode A would mean the return of the Wallerstein's mini-world system in a higher dimension. Naturally, the question of resistance here is unmistakably clear and Karatani is well aware of the fact. Nevertheless, he speculates:

Usually, a simultaneous world revolution is narrated through the image of simultaneous uprisings carried out by local national resistance movements in their own home countries. But this could never happen, nor is it necessary. Suppose, for example, one country has a revolution that ends with the country making a gift of its military sovereignty to the United Nations. This would of course be a revolution in a single nation. But it wouldn't necessarily result in external interference or international isolation. No weapon can resist the power of the gift. It has the power to attract the support of many states and to fundamentally change the structure of the United Nations. For these reasons, such a revolution in one country could in fact lead to simultaneous world revolution (Ibidem: 307).

The answer is by no means exhaustive, yet whether or not it is satisfactory depends on the variety of expectations one has for this school

of philosophy. What can't be denied is that a suggestion of a possibility of practical intervention has been put forward. Karatani concludes his book by reminding that: "The realization of a world system grounded in the principle of reciprocity will not be easy. Modes of exchange A, B and C will remain stubborn presences [...], yet as long as they exist, so too will Mode of exchange D. No matter how it is denied or repressed, it will always return" (Ibidem). That is to be "the very nature of what Kant called a regulative Idea" (Ibidem).

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