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Japanese Proto-capitalism from the Perspective of Kōjin Karatani's Theory – a Case Study

ABSTRACT
This paper aims to present the characteristics of the social formation specific to Edo Japan by employing the framework outlined in Kōjin Karatani's *The Structure of World History*. Seeing the Tokugawa Era as a proto-capitalist period, the present study applies Karatani's methodology by contrasting it with available historiographical data and the legacy of the *Nihon Shihonshugi Ronsō*, a debate heavily relied on by previous research in this area. By using the Mode of Exchange framework, and thus reworking the Marxian architectural metaphor of base and superstructure, Karatani conceptualized a new model of the history of social formations. The main findings indicate that, in the current state of knowledge, it is impossible to duly implement Karatani's theory to study Japanese proto-capitalism without greater consequences. Nevertheless, the attempt to fit Tokugawa Japan within this framework not only places it within a broader geopolitical discourse and socio-economic reflection but also addresses the status of the theory itself.

KEYWORDS: Kōjin Karatani, proto-capitalism, Tokugawa Japan, Marxism, social formations

Introduction

The status of Japanese capitalism was one of the most burning questions for Japanese Marxists of the prewar period. The heated debate known as *Nihon Shihonshugi Ronsō* 'the debate on Japanese capitalism', conventionally originating with the 1927 Comintern Theses, set the stage for theoretical inquiry into conceptualizing Japan's current economic and political issues.

The particularities of the Japanese case prove to be intellectually demanding when attempting to encapsulate the phenomenon within the framework of Marxist theory, and they require further reassessment within the economic history of the Tokugawa (Edo) and Meiji periods. Despite the substantial research and further efforts to integrate them, the question of historical stages of development and the articulation of mode of production remains a disputed matter.

In 2010[1], contemporary Japanese philosopher and literary critic Kōjin Karatani proposed a theoretical model of history, which he thoroughly describes in *Sekaishi-no Kōzō* (Karatani 2010), or *The Structure of World History* as per the English edition (Karatani 2014; henceforth *The Structure*). Karatani undertakes the heritage of Marxist debate on the capitalist mode of production and reworks it by distinguishing four contingent modes of exchange he sees as the underlying basis for all types of historical social formations. The present article aims at expanding Karatani's system by using it as a methodological tool for Tokugawa Japan as a case study, building on previous research on Japanese capitalism. The main thesis of this article recognizes Tokugawa Japan as a proto-capitalist period. Furthermore, the present essay is confined to answering the research question of whether the theory put forward in *The Structure* facilitates the articulation of transitional historical periods. The attempt to fit Tokugawa Japan, as understood in light of recent research, within Karatani's framework is an attempt to address the status of the theory itself. To this end, the author will seek to answer the question of whether Tokugawa Japan exemplifies Karatani's model of history, serves as its illustration, or – by not fitting into it – proves the theory's purely theoretical motivations. This study is based on the subject literature available in English.

1. From modes of production to modes of exchange

The waning years of the 20th century brought a shift in Karatani's work. The troubling geopolitical context of the late 1990s and early 2000s compelled him to find a new vantage point, setting aside his focus on literary criticism. In search of answers about the current world system and its potential alternatives, he continued reworking his lecture on Marx, becoming engaged in the theorization of exchange. Against the existing Marxist dogma, Karatani's initial premise was to reject the framing of history through modes

[1] In the preface to *The Structure*, Karatani points out that the notion of rethinking social formations from the perspective of exchange was raised by him in *Transukuritiiku: Kanto-to Marukusu* (Karatani 2001; English edition Karatani 2003). However, the idea was not developed as a theoretical model until *Sekaishi-no Kōzō* (Karatani 2010) was first published.

of production which is the direct aftermath of canon base-superstructure dichotomy. Karatani argues how understanding the "economic" through production, i.e., separating it from the ideological (the cultural, religious, and/or political), hinders an in-depth historical analysis and thus its further theoretical examination. Firstly, this way of understanding makes it impossible to accurately reflect and, therefore, understand the social formations before industrial capitalism, as well as impossible to construct a realistic vision of the future, an alternative to capitalism. Karatani sees the world system as an interconnection of capital, nation, and state, rejecting the base-superstructure bifurcation. This measure stems from the recognition that the active agency and power of the superstructural bodies cannot be accounted for by Marx's economic base (Karatani 2020: XXXVI). Thus, deepening Hegel's Borromean knot by the contemporary understanding shall offer a new economic approach, a dialectical overcoming both economic determinism as well as, and resulting from it, the undermining of the economic sphere as reflected within the broad disciplinary specialization.

The Structure of World History was the first major philosophical book of Karatani, where he developed the intuition initially outlined in *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx* (Karatani 2001, English translation 2003). This new turn revolved around redefining the economic backdrop of historical social formation not in the sphere of production but in exchange. For this reason, four interrelated modes of exchange were outlined: 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. Together, they constitute social formations and define the new *economics*. Karatani directly defines social formations as historically existing "combinations of multiple modes of exchange" (Karatani 2014: XVII). Note that none of them exists in separation from the others. Karatani brackets them off to unravel their historical background, which is critical for explaining and understanding the mutual connection between the state, nation, and capital (*ibid*., 28). Despite all of them coexisting during the stages of historical development, their presence differs in intensity. Social formations can be distinct based on which one of the four modes of exchange is dominant at a given time and place.

Eventually, the modes of exchange contribute to making such social formations as clan (A, mini system), Asiatic (B, world-empire), ancient classical (B), feudal (B), and capitalist (C, world-economy) formations (*ibid*., 25). Each of them has a corresponding category shared with

Wallerstein's world-systems. Karatani argues for this conceptual framework on the premise of rejecting the aftermath of Hegel's realization of freedom in history marked by historical stages (*ibid*., XVII–XVIII). Methodologically, it is a direct repercussion of the elemental theoretical alterations that secure the structural shape of Karatani's work, leading to revoking the deterministic character of geographical specifications and historical linearity of the Marxian theory of social formations.

Even though the introduced notion of modes of exchange is new, the social formations featured in *The Structure* recall those of Marx's *Grundrisse* (Karatani 2014: 20). The first social formation Karatani outlines is the clan society, grounded in Mode A, which has roots in primitive societies' pooling practices (*ibid*., 35). For comprehensibility, the explanation of the reciprocity mechanism revolves around gift exchanges. Its rule is upheld by three obligations: to give, to receive, and to reciprocate (as a form of returning), which bring groups closer together (*ibid*., 47). What is important to note is that the gift-giving found in Mode C has existed since the beginning, which unambiguously proves the domination of Mode A in primitive societies (*ibid*., 82). Karatani distinguishes clan formation from primitive society due to the breakthrough marked by the sedentary settlement and its consequences on the organization of the community's order.

The discrepancy stresses Karatani's thesis that fixed settlements disclosed as such are not simply a formation between nomadism and the state, but a separate alternative (*ibid*., 56). This notion, however, will be brought back when discussing Mode D. The clan social formation concerns non-hierarchical groups connected by virtue of conventional (sacred, defensive or mercantile) alliances, thus, not falling under any absolute, centralized force (*ibid*., 47). As the rule of reciprocity fosters this "inter-between" relationship, it counterbalances the eventual inequalities and competition, stifling the emergence of the state and holding back class division (*ibid*., 40). On this level, Karatani recognizes what Wallerstein calls a mini-system, as the formation exists in a pre-state condition.

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, protection (kept with gestures of redistribution) and order in return for obedience and tribute to the ruling class (Karatani 2014: 70). Mode B is what Karatani sees as the origins of the state. It explicitly assumes going beyond the internal relations of a single community which independently would be unable to anchor and solidify a hierarchy seen in state bureaucracies (*ibid*., 72). Despite appearing as a Hobbesian

contract theory, Karatani emphasizes that there exists a crucial difference in nature between chiefdom, emerging over the rule of reciprocity, and a kingdom. Vassalage relations dictated by mode A cannot form a state by simple expansion (*ibid*., 71). Karatani returns to Hobbes when stressing that the state is reproduced through the threat of war and disorder.

Karatani recognizes the first dominance of commodity exchange with the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Europe (*ibid*., 159). Mode C is what Marx examined in his work by emphasizing the economic sphere of production. Hence, its analysis in *The Structure* predominantly draws on what is conceptually already worked through in *Capital*. The structure does not entail the "reciprocal obligation of Mode A or the brute force compulsion of Mode B", but involves a two-sided consent between free beings (Wark 2017: 34). However, the concerned parties are ultimately not mutually equal (Karatani 2014: 6). The cornerstone of commodity exchange indicates class division driven by money as the superior commodity. As a universal equivalent, it grants its owner a distinct advantage over holders of other commodities, who are incapable of accumulating capital by means of their goods. Once wealth is extracted through commodity exchange, Karatani writes, the power structure takes on the form of world-economy (*ibid*., 160). As evidenced, "Modes A, B and C produce different kinds of power, which are successively community, state and international law" (Wark 2017: 34). The fourth is a notion with which Karatani aims to uncover the eventual superseding conditions for the world-system dominated by the triplex apparatus of Capital-Nation-State. Mode D is somewhat a conclusive part of Karatani's conceptual work in *The Structure*, which he chose to refer to as a Freudian "return of the repressed" (Karatani 2014: 230–231). Within Karatani's model of world history, Mode D is the regulative idea of a force transcending the dominating exchange relations by dialectically renewing the rule of reciprocity. It corresponds to the envisioned practical plan for realizing the World Republic put forth by Kant in *Zum ewigen Frieden: Ein philosophischer Entwurf* (1795), or *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch,* as translated into English. Seen as the return of the mini-world system but in a higher dimension, it aims at untangling the knot of interdependence of the nation on the state and capital.

Karatani's project can thus be seen as an intriguing example of the way philosophical traditions can be integrated with a historical perspective to account for the development of the world's social formations within a broad but coherent conceptual framework.

2. The case of Japanese capitalism in theoretical debate

2.1. Prewar period (mid-1920s to late 1930s)

After the Japanese Communist Party was founded in 1922, questions on the status of present-day capitalism and revolutionary conditions became widely discussed among Japanese intellectuals. Comintern Theses of 1927 denounced the priorly dominant lecture on Marx advocated for by Fukumoto Kazuo, exchanging the purity of study with a new theory of revolution. Casting light on the particularities of the Japanese case, the philosophy of two-stage revolution succeeded in becoming the new line of thought of the JCP (Walker 2023). Plans for developing Marxist philosophy through revolutionary action provoked several distinct standpoints, reaching beyond inner party discussion and those directly engaged in Marxist economics. The debate unambiguously dominated the prewar period from the mid-1920s continuing into the 1930s, becoming known as the *Nihon Shihonshugi Ronsō*.

The discussion spun between two opposing schools known as the Kōza-ha (the "Lectures" faction) and Rōnō-ha (the "Labor-farming" faction) . The name of the former comes from the 7-volume set of lectures regarding the history of Japanese capitalism, published by Iwanami Shoten, *Nihon Shihonshugi Hattatsushi Kōza* (Noro et al. 1932–1933). Following Comintern's narrative, it represented the official narrative of the JCP. Among others, its representatives were Kinnosuke Ōtsuka, Eitarō Noro, Yoshitarō Hirano, and Moritarō Yamada. The Kōza-ha advocated for the stagism theory arguing for the necessity of undergoing a bourgeois revolution as a crucial step in the further development of Japan's social formation. The main premise of their theoretical analysis of Japanese capitalism was the semi-feudal thesis, arguing for the incompleteness of the Meiji Restoration. According to the Kōza-ha members, the emperor-system (*tennōsei*) was politically absolutist with a socio-economic feudal basis, thus they reflected on the Restoration as only partial. As a result, the then contemporary economics could not account for the modern capitalist system. With an incomplete bourgeois-revolution, Japan would not thus enter the full spectrum of modernity.

In opposition was the Rōnō-ha, which argued that the Land Tax Reform (*chisokaisei*) instituted in 1873, began the questioned bourgeois-democratic revolution. The policy was born out of the "pressure of necessity", to secure an economic basis for future development, in order to protect Japan from semi-colonial subjugation (Matsukata 1934: 75). Responding to Kōza-ha's arguments regarding post-1868 feudal characteristics, Rōnō-ha representatives saw them not as the remnants of Tokugawa Japan's

feudalism, but as derivatives of a developing, modern capitalism (Totten 1956: 293). The institutional changes of the Meiji period were allegedly a solution to the state of the countryside regions, which would eventually bear fruit to the full spectrum of the modern social formation (Yasuba 1975: 68–74). Hence, despite agreeing on the incompleteness of the Restoration, the Rōnō-ha's view on the revolutionary conditions of 20th century Japan remained distinct.

One of the main points of contention was the high post-Restoration rent levels. Yamada from Kōza-ha saw it as the direct cause of barely subsistence living standards, poor working conditions and semi-servile (*han-reidoteki*) wages (*ibid*., 65). According to his estimations, post-Restoration rent could grow even higher than the feudal dues. Some members of the faction, like Hirano, pointed out how such conditions gave birth to a wide scale trend among tenants towards searching for employment away from agriculture, contributing to the expansion of light industry, especially cocoon raising, weaving, silk reeling and spinning (*ibid*., 75). Arguing for the "particularity" (*tokushusei*) of Japanese capitalist development of productive forces, Noro, leader of the JCP, explained that the practice of confiscating surplus value by landowners from tenants was rooted in non-economic coercion (*keizaigai kyōsei*) on the feudal basis (*ibid*., 66). However, this rationale was not satisfying for the Rōnō-ha, which maintained that the Meiji institutional changes granted peasants freedom on the non-economic level (*ibid*., 69). At some point however, it was recognized that post-1873 rent was determined by means of the same method as in Tokugawa Japan, hence, on feudal basis (*ibid*.).

Despite Tamizō Kushida recognizing the remnants of feudal system even in the Taishō era, other Rōnō members kept diving deeper into theorizing about feudalism, arguing that "feudalism was formally and substantially abolished with the development of capitalism, or in other words, as commerce invaded the villages" (Itsurō Sakisaka, *Nihon Shihonshugi-no Shomondai* 'some problems of Japanese capitalism', originally published in *Kaizō*, October 1935, as cited in Yasuba 1975: 70). Taking a step further, Takao Tsuchiya contended that undermining of feudal restrictions had already been done during the Tokugawa Period[2]. His claim initially focused on the capitalistic symptoms within agriculture, with a subsequent focus on large-scale production due to the influence of research around the "manufacture" issue (Ike 1949: 186). Evoked by a Kōza-ha member, Shisō Hattori, controversy sprung up around his thesis that the sphere of production in Tokugawa Japan

[2] See also Smith (1959) for a detailed discussion of this topic.

was dominated by the one Marx recognized as manufacturing. Albeit opposing this statement, Kōza-ha members supported Hattori's theory about the course of Japanese economic transformation. It looked back on the beginnings of the country's modern development, identifying them as already existing in the Tokugawa Era. This implied that by the time of the Meiji Restoration, the industry was already modern, yet still resting on feudally structured agriculture (*ibid*., 187).

The mid-1920s to late 1930s can be therefore described as marked by the question of how to interpret Japan's development and its revolutionary trajectory. The central point of contention revolved around issues such as post-Restoration rent levels, the character of agricultural production, and whether capitalist transformation had begun in the Tokugawa period.

2.2. Postwar period (1950s to 1960)

Historiographical battles surrounding the feudalist controversy (*hōken ronsō*) and unanswered questions about modernity experienced a postwar revival amongst historians and economists who tried to confront the past and future of political practice in Japan. Attempting to reconcile the intuitions of Kōza-ha (Hattori) and Rōnō-ha (Tsuchiya), Gorō Fujita examined the groundwork for subsequent industrial development laid upon Tokugawa Japan's economic reality. To put it briefly, demand for harvest forced peasants to seek additional income in subsidiary industries, giving birth to a nationwide domestic system of production organization and a prototype of the wage worker (Ike 1949: 188). On the premise of a rising labor market, Fujita argued for the "semi-modern" character of Tokugawa Japan, pointing out how "commercial capital and the use of money began to affect the economy of the feudal nobility" causing such changes in industry, despite resting on a feudal agriculture (*ibid*.). One would not be mistaken to see similarities between such changes in Tokugawa Japan and north-western Europe's path to industrialization. However, there are several significantly different factors in these two centers of economic development.

The foremost research that shed light on such comparison was conducted by Thomas C. Smith, who argued that "the earliest non-Western industrializer, which also experienced pre-modern growth" was eighteenth and nineteenth-century Tokugawa Japan (Smith 1973: 127). In the study, Smith examines the simultaneous output growth in the reviewed regions against the background of their urban dynamics. With the rise of economic growth in per capita output as the common denominator in both geopolitical environments, the two were separated by their notably divergent demographic trends. In contrast to Europe, the expanding output of Japanese

towns and castle-towns was accompanied by population decline (*ibid*., 129). Smith reflected upon what then determined such a swell of industrial and commercial activity, as it posed a peculiar case against other countries' historical growth models later followed by industrialization.

Unquestionably, the collected data and remarks regarding the role of the market structures and institutional framework accounted for an increased understanding of the Japanese case. Later, Smith's research saw further enhancement. Particular significance is given to the work of Osamu Saitō, who explored Tokugawa Japan's average growth rate in quantitative detail, focusing on changes in wage levels, labor, land market, and commercial agriculture. Provided that GDP per capita was increasing in both regions, even while European wages declined but Tokugawa Japan's wages grew, Saitō makes important remarks regarding the Western proto-industrial model of development, arguing that eventual discrepancies between these two cases make the model "inapplicable in the Japanese case" (Howell 1992: 276).

An extensive inquiry into the issue of Tokugawa Japan's proto-industrial status has been done by David Howell. Albeit deriving directly from Saitō's scrutiny of the model, Howell advocates for its adequacy, by going beyond the realm of production to explain Japan's structural transformation. He gives an example of a working understanding of proto-industrialization with a case study of Hokkaido herring fisheries, responsible for large-scale fertilizer production during the late Tokugawa Era and early Meiji period. Howell posits that proto-industrialization should be placed within the horizon of social and economic history, as only then are we able to grasp the nature of its successful transformation to capitalism. The pivotal part of this notion is to consider proto-industrialization as "the nexus between commercialization and capitalism", while understanding capitalism as not only a social, but also economic, change (*ibid*., 277).

The above overview of historical scholarship is an attempt to give a concise background for further investigation. Naturally, it does not cover the whole subject, nor does it lay claim to be the only narrative about Tokugawa Japan's economic growth and its implications. Nevertheless, it should eliminate any top-down tendency to regard this period of history merely as feudal in its most basic sense. It highlights how the earlier debate on Japanese capitalism was revisited as scholars sought to reinterpret Tokugawa Japan's economic trajectory and its implications for Japan's modernity, as Japan faced new challenges that did not fit into the patterns of European model of transformation. The quoted body of research challenges

the view of the Tokugawa period as purely feudal, revealing instead a multilayered process of economic and social change.

3. Karatani's modes of exchange versus the notion of proto-capitalism

The concepts of proto-capitalism or proto-industrialization, whose respective definitions are provided below, do not appear within the framework of Karatani's work[3], neither in the context of Japan nor neighbouring theorization regarding the historical process of social formation articulation. Thus, it is necessary to clarify the conceptual model fundamental for further investigation to ensure consistency and comprehensibility.

Taking into account existing research in the field, it is still safe to follow Franklin Mendels in his original understanding of proto-industrialization as the "growth of 'pre-industrial industry'", the "first phase" for further development into industrial capitalism (Mendels 1972: 241). It was the first model that put forward a theory regarding the development of modern factory industrialization in strict connection to demographic behaviour (Kriedte et al. 1993: 217). As mentioned in 2.2., Howell extends this notion, grasping proto-industrialization as a junction between commercialization and capitalism. He defines the former as the "widespread commodification of agricultural produce and other goods", whereas, under capitalism, wage labor emerges, which becomes the new, superior commodity organizing production by being available for sale and buying, thus altering prevailing social relations (Howell 1992: 277). Notwithstanding, adopting the preceding would mean remaining within the scope of Marx's definition of capitalism, embedded in the perspective of production, at least as argued by Karatani.

On a logical level, to grasp the capitalist social formation via Karatani's theoretical intervention is to outline its dominant mode of exchange (cf. 1) – Mode C or the commodity exchange underpinned with elements of Mode B (plunder-redistribution), a cognate of feudalism. Therefore, it is perhaps fitting to accept then the working definition of proto-capitalism as the first phase of the "process of reorganizing the modes of exchange", which is how Karatani characterizes the transition from feudal to capitalist social formation (Karatani 2008: 582). Accordingly, articulating its symptoms requires understanding how the feudalist and capitalist social formations depend upon Modes B and C, respectively. Karatani draws on Karl Wittfogel's theory of core, surrounded by margin and submargin, and

[3] The author only refers to work that has been translated to English.

Wallerstein's theory of world systems. He supports these buttresses by arguing that "the formation of one society largely depends upon the formation of adjacent societies" (*ibid*., 577).

In line with the adopted framework, the feudal social formation was characteristic of the submargin structure. When examining exchanges within 6th-century East Asia, Japan is considered an infrequent case of a submarginal "semiperiphery of the new world-economy, … [that was] able to move into the core" (Karatani 2014: 108). The core to which Japan responds is the core of the Asiatic empire, China, with Korea forming its margin (*ibid*., 125). Particularly, submarginal regions' dependency on the core, unlike that of marginal region, is not decisive, for they can preserve autonomy while drawing on substantial civilizational influence from the outside (*ibid*., 110). However, Karatani generally states that the "submargins adopted the civilization (writing system or technology) but fundamentally rejected the centralized bureaucratic structure that existed in the core … [because they] preserved to a great degree the principle of reciprocity (Mode A), which rejected hierarchy" (*ibid*.). Karatani does not extensively explore this understanding with explicit reference to mediaeval Japan's reciprocity, yet this is not the issue of primary concern.

Taking into account the historical example of Japan, following the adoption of the Tang dynasty's system of governance, the newly introduced administration fostered the spread of kanji and the significant development of a land-based transportation system. As argued by Yoshihiko Amino, a clear departure from the past driven by the archaic imperial desire for expansion was observed. The introduction of the *ritsuryō* state marked the reinforcement of the ideology of agrarian fundamentalism supported by Confucianism as one of the main governing imperatives (Amino 2012: 50). It was reflected in the establishment of a new taxation system based on paddy land allotment, of a family registration system, and of new land administration, creating a much tighter state control that operated on written records (*ibid*., 48–49). Therefore, the administration of the state was firmly anchored in the documentary practice (*monjoshugi*) of irrefutable importance for the later expansion of Chinese characters (*ibid*.). Given this, it is hard to comply with the general thesis put forward by Karatani that explicitly undermines the impact of changes within bureaucratic structure after adopting the Chinese system, as it came to have a substantial effect, markedly changing power structures on the whole archipelago. Nevertheless, the study of Japan's transition to feudalism lies beyond the scope of this paper.

Karatani identifies the beginnings of Japanese feudalism between the 7th and 8th centuries, which distinguishes him from the commonly held view that feudalism emerged only in the Heian–Kamakura period. Karatani sees it as a result of Japan being a submargin of the Chinese empire, which led to the introduction of the *ritsuryō* system in Japan. Apart from defining it in terms of modes of exchange and spatial properties, he conceptualizes feudalism as a "mutually binding contractual relationship of fief for loyalty between lord and retainers" (Karatani 2014: 125). Considering the power structure in Edo Japan, Karatani sees feudalism as a social formation where the rule of authority has two primary sources, i.e., the shogunate and feudal lords (*daimyō*). Despite its upbuilt structure, the former had limited power over local regions, so decentralization was already present.

Karatani refers to the Tokugawa period in a two-fold way. Firstly, as one with "aspects more characteristic of a centralized state than of feudalism" (*ibid*., 126). Secondly, as "feudal and not Asiatic" (*ibid*., 326n21). The former, he explains by saying that "it attempted to establish a centralized bureaucratic structure [that] sought to legitimize itself by situating itself within the continuity of the imperial state that had existed since antiquity" (*ibid*., 126). The latter is explained by taking into consideration a trend beginning in the 14th century Japan when "[peasants] acquired de facto private ownership over land" (*ibid*., 326n21). It may seem contradictory, even though both formations fall under the domination of Mode B. The centralized state, whose superiority appears to be indicated by the first sentence, is characteristic of Asiatic social formation (tightly connected with bureaucracy), which the second sentence seems to regard as dominated by feudalism. Where does this contradiction stem from?

> Marx's Asiatic social formation is characterized by a system in which one community gains ascendance over another and mandates compulsory service or tribute payments. In other words, it is a system in which mode of exchange B is dominant. Of course, there are various kinds of systems in which mode of exchange B is dominant, including feudal and slavery systems. They differ in whether the principle of reciprocity still remains intact within the ruling community. If it remains, it is difficult to establish a centralized order [which] requires abolishing reciprocity among the ruling classes. Only then are a central authority and the organization of a bureaucratic system possible (Karatani 2014: 22).

One should look closer at how Karatani theorizes the origins of the state. Pre-state feudal structure preserves the principle of reciprocity (to a great degree) within its communities consisting of two levels (*ibid*., 110).

Centralization is blocked by the existence of lower and higher-level groupings, i.e., by the existence of a reciprocal conflict (*ibid*., 68–69). The state emerges when, symptomatic of reciprocity between communities, infinite vendettas are prohibited, as they constitute the autonomy of a community. When this happens, the agency is conveyed to the state, which operates under bureaucracy. Hence, when the independence of lower-level communities is negated, state community emerges. There seems to be confirmation that centralization, therefore bureaucracy, is tightly connected with the state. However, the example of feudal Tokugawa Japan poses a counterinstance of this notion.

Due to the significant agency of the warrior class and decentralized power dissipated between the *daimyō*, "the warrior-farmer system based on personal ties of fief for loyalty" was more important than loyalty to the shogunate (*ibid*., 125). This shift weakened the existing state structure, making it harder for the central government to maintain control over the entire area, especially the Eastern part of the archipelago. Karatani sees this shift as a factor of great importance that gave rise to the emergence of private property, which we can eventually see reflected in the levels of employment and production, as shown by research conducted on the topic of manufacturing in Tokugawa Japan (the second notion he does not make explicit). Karatani contends that "in feudal systems that refused the establishment of a centralized state, trade and cities were able to develop outside of state control" (*ibid*., 25). Supposing that Tokugawa Japan was an example of such, Hattori's claim that after the Azuchi-Momoyama period, "absolutism miscarried in the Edo Period" would seem fitting (Amino 2012: 117–118). The image of a decentralized, feudal state, with a hint of reciprocity, as Karatani could probably call it, Japan appears to be in line with the narrative of Amino, although the parallels offer more of an interpretive tool rather than facilitate a definitive historical interpretation.

It seems to agree with this wildly repressed approach among historians, which casts a new light on the Meiji Restoration and Japan's modernization, as it points out the self-agency of the domains that backed up the Restoration (*ibid*.). Amino maintains that these could not have been "remote and backward" due to the "accumulated volume of commercial and financial enterprises" that were the result of long-time conducted maritime trade (*ibid*.). With that, he postulates that "we must not underestimate [...] the growth of capitalist society up to and throughout the Edo period" (*ibid*.). Notwithstanding the above, the echoes of "ancient imperial structures" purposefully intensified by the shogunate allowed the Tokugawa rule to uphold its legitimacy (Karatani 2014: 126).

What can be thus said about the issue of (de)centralization and the contradiction around it? To answer this question, it would seem that the centralized and Asiatic (as understood by Karatani) Tokugawa Japan is the official image consistent with the government's ideology of agrarian fundamentalism. On the other hand, the "feudal and not Asiatic" Japan would reflect the actual links between economic, social, and demographic change that could be observed in the everyday life of the ruled classes. On the one hand, such change – as demonstrated by research to date – goes way beyond what can fit into the notion of feudalism, "contributing not only to our understanding of Japanese economic history" but one that "refines the proto-industrialization model as a theoretical construct as well" (Howell 1992: 282). On the other hand, the prevailing trend of research striving to prove the early-modern character of Tokugawa Japan is said to be "grounded in invalid conventional thinking that overwhelming majority of the population was agricultural, which diminishes the force of the economic society" (Amino 2012: 117).

When thinking about the shift towards the capitalist mode of exchange, is it congruent with growing centralization? Although it is hard, if not impossible, to point out a demarcation line between an enough-centralized and not enough-centralized state, as Karatani does not state it, he does give an answer, although very broadly. He contends that the "modern state is virtually unchanged from earlier states", as it still operates on the plunder-redistribution mode, yet "it took on the form of state taxation and redistribution […] Moreover, the people, having replaced the king in the position of sovereign, were subordinated to the politicians and bureaucratic structures that were supposed to be their representatives" (*ibid*.). Therefore, modes of exchange B and C are inseparable, despite each constituting a base for different "ideational superstructures" – B is a fundament for the state, C for the city or capitalist economy (*ibid*., 65). Taking a step further, the city's rise is inseparable from the rise of the state (*ibid*.). Shizuo Katsumata displays a similar intuition, seeing the 15th–16th century town and village system as a prototype of today's hamlets and cities (Amino 2012: XL). Asking about the reasons for their development, Amino argues that only a careful examination of the "cumulative effect of major transformations on a variety of levels" allows us to understand the significance of the growth in productivity within such settlements, together with the division of labor (*ibid*.). He sees such reductionism as a direct cause of overlooking economic and social phenomena of significant influence like religion, commerce, the status of the marginal groups, women, and writing, which largely shaped how Japanese society progressed. In this way, the output of his insight seems

to be in tune with Karatani's general idea about reshaping the discourse around the relentless geopolitical and socio-economic reflection.
The discussion emphasizes that while the notions of proto-capitalism and proto-industrialization are not explicitly framed within Karatani's theory, the concept of modes of exchange does not necessarily remain redundant with respect to studying Japanese historical transitions. Ultimately, the analysis underscores the inseparability of social, economic, and political transformations in shaping early-modern Japan, refining both Karatani's framework and broader models of proto-industrial development.

Conclusions

A great deal of the above remarks consists of comparing Karatani's insights on Japan with the ones of Amino. This choice stems from the abundance of Amino's research on Japanese history, which poses a new direction for interpreting key issues to which the vast majority of scholarly literature is subject. One such matter is the status of premodern agrarian society. The notion challenged by Amino rests upon the conviction that Japan was agricultural because nearly 80% of its population (at least until the late Tokugawa period) consisted of farmers (Amino 2012: 4). However, as argued, this is an inaccurate oversimplification stemming from the implications of the term *hyakushō*, which stands for "villagers" who initially constituted the mentioned roughly 80% of the population. In this sense, Amino, supported by extensive documentary evidence, wrestles with the complexity of misinterpretation in historical research. The term *hyakushō*, interpreted as "farmers" leads to a widespread fallacy reinforced by the agrarian fundamentalist ideology that preaches that the country was agricultural. Therefore, people who did not fit this common notion were largely overlooked. This included professions like coastal people or mountain dwellers. The excluded, who in reality had a strong sense of agency in terms of Japan's economic development, seem to have become the subject of scholarly attention only in the 20th century. The insights that emerged with the study of Japanese capitalism in the wake of the debate on the feudal controversy are, in fact, long overdue. At the same time, the prominent research on Japanese feudalism and capitalism rests on the shoulders of this misconception. However, before postulating the urgency of revising this deeply rooted outlook, this theory needs further examination. Amino's objective is generally limited to the pre-Tokugawa period, which is why, despite the all-encompassing resonance of his understanding of Japan, it is impossible to duly implement it to study Japanese proto-capitalism here and now.

Nevertheless, trivial as it may seem, noticing the perspective-based dichotomy between the ruling and ruled classes appears to be crucial. In the context of Japanese capitalism, this notion still needs deepening, although, ironically enough, it originated from the Marxists of prewar Japan. Nonetheless, the general intuition of rethinking history from a wider perspective seems to show through Karatani's attempt to reconcile the Marxian base and superstructure. Examining the question of Japan's modern state and its (de)centralization through Karatani's conceptual framework, some things cannot be explained only through the formal principle of state's agrarian fundamentalism based on land taxes (Amino 2012: 117). On this premise, Karatani's system might offer new insights into the case of Japanese capitalism, as well as pose a tool for expanding the argument initiated by Amino.

That said, *The Structure* does not offer any specific insights on Japan, ones that would be reminiscent of the extent of attention devoted to Greece and Rome which Karatani also considers submargins of the Asiatic empire. All the less is said about the Tokugawa Era. Additionally, the broad scope of his inquiry seems to leave little to no place for such detailed treatment of an Era veiled in unclarity. In this light, the possibility of extrapolating his historical model as a methodological tool for investigating the still confusing problem of early modern Japan, especially when adopting Amino's notion, is limited. Karatani's model of history, while not failing to take root, remains too vague in light of current research to offer a comprehensive alternative narrative. Thus, the blueprint put forward in *The Structure* applied to the case study of Tokugawa Japan remains limited to the theoretical level, which encourages one to critically evaluate its applicability. Nevertheless, it is hard to conjecture what use Karatani's theory will have in light of developing research. Using the mode of exchange framework seems more responsive to fluctuations of historiographical evidence, yet it compels one to ask whether such a departure from Marx's critique of political economy does not yield too many sacrifices.

Author Contributions

The author confirms the sole responsibility for the conception of the study, presented results, and manuscript preparation.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that they have no conflict of interest.

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