

Marxist Theory in Japan: A Critical Overview

Tuesday 24 November 2020, by [WALKER Gavin](#)

To summarise the reception history of Marx in Japan is no small task. [1] In fact, it is essentially *impossible* to give an adequate overview of one of the deepest, most prolific, and most variegated linguistic repositories of the Marxist tradition. Although it remains remarkably little-known in contemporary European or North American intellectual circles, Marxism was the dominant strand of theoretical inquiry in Japan for most of the 20th century; more pointedly, we might say, 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. From its initial entry into the Japanese intellectual world in the late 1800s, Marxist analysis quickly came to constitute a vast and osmotic field that permeated all aspects of academic life, historical thought, forms of political organisation, and ways of analysing the social condition. Numerous examples testify to this, including the striking fact that the first *Collected Works* of Marx and Engels in the world was not published in German, Russian, French or English, but in Japanese, by Kaizōsha publishing house in 1932 in 35 volumes, overseen by Sakisaka Itsurō.

There are few other places in the world where the distinction between the history of Marx's reception and the history of *Marxism* is as important. Why? In the first place, while Japan constitutes one of the earliest and most influential receptions of Marx (especially for the 'non-Western' world), and in the twentieth century one of the advanced capitalist countries most intellectually and socially marked by Marxist thought, the path of development of this reception is quite different from its main comparable societies, mostly in Europe and North America.

While the English, French, German, Italian, American and numerous other receptions of Marx saw his work as immediately linked to and embedded in the history of the workers' movement, it would be hard to say that this holds true in the case of Japan. Although a strong and powerful labour movement had existed since the intense industrialisation of the 1870s-1890s, this movement was principally conditioned in intellectual terms by a certain socialist-nativist orientation that provided the political ground for numerous social movements of the 19th century, stretching back to the late years of the Tokugawa feudal system, with its millenarian peasant contestations and formations of mass social consciousness. In this sense, Marx's work entered Japan not simply as the *political* vanguard of the labour and socialist movements, but also (or even principally) as the *theoretical* vanguard of the cutting-edge of social-scientific inquiry into the character of modern society, with its two central poles: the social relation of capital, and the formation of the modern national state.

Marx's *Capital* was first published in German one year before the Meiji Restoration of 1868, which would place Japan thereafter on its pathway towards rapid capitalist development, industrialisation, and the turn to imperialism on the Asian continent. The first known introduction to Marx, well before the publication of *Capital* as a translated text, was a text titled simply "Karl Marx," written by Kusaka Chōjirō, who had studied in Germany in 1889-90, in the *Kokka gakkai zasshi* (vol. 6, no. 72-74) in 1893 (the 26th year of the Meiji Era) (Suzuki 1956: 1), although as Suzuki points out, it is perhaps doubtful that Kusaka's text was based on a real reading of *Capital*. For that, we ought to

rather point to one of the most dominant and important thinkers of the early reception of Marx in Japan, Yamakawa Hitoshi, whose text “Marx’s *Capital*” was serialised in his radical newspaper, the *Osaka heimin shinbun*, in 4 issues in 1908 (Suzuki 1956: 6). Yamakawa would later go on to be one of the key figures in the early historiographical battles that would deeply mark the reception of Marx in Japan, which we will touch on shortly.

A tradition of socialism, linked to the workers’ and peasants’ movements, already existed, whose prominent intellectuals included Kōtoku Shusui and Katayama Sen. Kōtoku’s *Shakaishugi shinzui* (The Essence of Socialism) emerged in print in the same year as Katayama Sen’s *Waga shakaishugi* (My Socialism), 1903, a pivotal turning point in the development of Marxist thought in Japan (Sugihara 1998: 47). Kōtoku, who would soon be executed in the ‘High Treason Incident’ of 1911 on trumped-up charges of plotting to assassinate the emperor, was the translator of *The Communist Manifesto*, and a committed early socialist. Soon moving towards an anarcho-syndicalist position in subsequent years, Kōtoku’s early linking of the emperor system to the development of capitalism in Japan would remain a key point of contention in later debates in Marxist thought. In the following year, on the eve of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05, it would be Katayama’s handshake with his Russian counterpart Georgy Plekhanov at the 6th Congress of the Second International in Amsterdam that introduced the socialist world to the existence and prominence of the Japanese socialist movement. Katayama would, in the subsequent decades, go on to an extraordinary internationalist life: as a member of the executive committee of the Comintern, he was a founding member of three communist parties: the Japan Communist Party, the US Communist Party, and the Mexican Communist Party, which he helped found alongside his internationalist Indian comrade M.N. Roy in their unlikely years of struggle in Mexico City together. His story is all the more remarkable considering Katayama was born a destitute peasant in rural Okayama in the last days of the feudal system (see Katayama’s early English text in Katayama 1918).

But, aside from these early developments of Marxist thought at the turn of the century, the specificity of Marx’s theoretical work – and its essence in *Capital* – remained to be developed. In a sense, it is impossible to dissociate Marx’s reception in Japan from its centrality to the university system. From the 1910s into the 1920s, during the Taisho era, Marx’s *Capital* came more and more to the fore, to the extent that it became even a public figure of discourse to refer to the young men obsessed with *Capital* by the name “Marx boys” [*Marukusu bōi*]. This new culture of the study of Marx produced an extraordinary generation of thinkers, many of whom would go on to become important theorists of Marx, and of Marxism in a broad sense: Yamakawa Hitoshi, Fukumoto Kazuo, Inomata Tsunao, Noro Eitaro, Yamada Moritaro, Hani Goro, Uno Kozo, Kuruma Samezo, and many others, alongside those in the realm of philosophy proper, such as Tosaka Jun or Kakehashi Akihide. Perhaps the catalyst or turning point of the entire period was the appearance of Kawakami Hajime’s *Binbō monogatari* (A Tale of Poverty), essentially a kind of popular introduction of socialist thought, which was serialised over three months in 1916 in the Osaka Asahi newspaper. The articles were shortly after compiled in book form, and proved so powerful in the intellectual climate at the time, that it was reprinted thirty times already by 1919 (Bernstein 1976: 87). This text in turn led Kawakami towards Marx’s own work, and in 1919, he published the influential *Introduction to Marx’s Capital* (*Shihonron nyūmon*). Many later Marxist thinkers cited this text and its appearance as the main catalyst for the popularisation of Marxist theoretical work. Uno Kozo for instance, later referred to the importance of Kawakami’s work as some of the first value-theoretical writing in Japanese (See Uno 1970, vol. 1: 214, 305). By the late 1910s, especially in the two years following the success of the October Revolution, the theoretical vitality of Marx in Japan had been firmly established, and a new era of polemics opened (On this period in general, see Wakabayashi 1998: 147-206).

II

One distinguishing and central element that deeply conditioned the Marxist tradition in Japan, as is the case most everywhere outside Europe and North America, is the necessarily-central status of the so-called national question. Historically speaking, the “national question” has been largely associated with Marxist theoretical investigations of the “non-West.” Typically, therefore, it has been something that Western Marxism often considered settled, although Gramsci’s analysis of the “southern” and colonial questions remained a notable exception. Unlike the instance of late imperial Russia or the various Third World movements in the 1950s and 1960s, the “national question” has been often treated merely as a sign of an incomplete bourgeois revolution. In Japanese Marxist theory and historiography, however, this has certainly not been the case. Compressed into a period of one hundred years, from the Meiji Restoration of 1868 to the 1968 explosion of the New Left, Japan’s history encompassed the emergence of a modern, rapidly industrialising nation-state, the formation of a multi-ethnic, multi-national empire, the defeat of the nation and its empire, the occupation of the former “centre” of the empire by the United States, and its subsequent stratospheric economic development, under American hegemony, into the second largest capitalist power on earth by the end of the 1960s. That is, the Japanese case effectively combines into one complex whole the trajectories of empire, colony, dependent power, and dominant power. From the introduction of the modern social sciences in their primarily German and French inflections in the early Meiji period (1868-1912), some form of the national question remained always the dominant concern: from Fukuzawa Yukichi’s attempt to translate JS Mill’s work on national sentiment into the discourse of the “national body”, to the Hegelian focus on “world history” and national destinies, the figure of the nation –historically new in its modern political sense at this time – constituted a genuine site of potential and anxiety. No wonder then that this multi-dimensional crystallisation of the national question was for a long time the foundational problem confronting Japanese Marxists: how to account for Japan’s historical position within the world (On the Marxist historiography of the prewar, see Harootunian and Isomae 2008, especially the preface).

Another distinguishing feature of the Japanese Marxist tradition of historiography has been its relative insularity, at least in the postwar period, from Marxisms elsewhere, or more specifically its *unidirectional* insularity. One still frequently meets in Europe and North America with incredulity: “Japanese Marxism? It exists?” I do not mean here that Japanese Marxists were unaware of the developments in Marxist theory, both so-called Western Marxism and Marxism of other sorts. Rather, I mean precisely the opposite. While the Japanese Marxist tradition encapsulated and developed an exceptionally high level of theoretical development, in many ways more advanced than the contemporary discussions occurring in Europe, North America, and elsewhere, especially in the prewar period, Japanese Marxist theory was and continues to be relatively little-known on a world scale save for a few figures. Even for those few figures that entered directly into global debates in Marxism, their context and the intellectual history that formed the background to their positions has been largely ignored. It is my view that the long, dense, and extremely comprehensive discussions of the national question in Japan, in addition to a series of other considerations, require rethinking the conventional division of Western Marxism, Soviet Marxism, and “other” Marxisms that underpins so many attempts to consider this space of thought in modern intellectual history.

This dominance of Marxism in Japanese academic fields such as political economy, sociology, history, and so forth, is only part of the story. There is also a decisive political history that underpins the massive influence of Marxist theoretical inquiry in the Japanese situation. After the formation of the Japan Communist Party in 1922, internal debate in Marxist theory centred at first around the questions of Marxist philosophy (in the major Marxist theorists of the 1910s and 20s such as Kawakami Hajime, Yamakawa Hitoshi, and Fukumoto Kazuo, among others): the theoretical grasp of subjectivity, the problem of alienation, and the historical necessity of the revolutionary mission of the proletariat. After enjoying a level of support in the early 1920s, Fukumoto’s austere obsession with the correct line, what would later be understood as the theory of the “primacy of correct ideas”

- the standpoint of so-called “*bunri ketsugō*” or, the unification of the party by removing ideologically incorrect elements (literally “unity in separation”) - became the target of denunciation during the time of publication of the 1927 Comintern Theses, largely authored under the influence of N.I. Bukharin (henceforth and still to this day in Marxist theoretical work in Japan, the term “Fukumotoism” is used to dismissively subject to critique a certain hysterical insistence on purity of line, perhaps similar to the figure of Amadeo Bordiga in the European situation). The Comintern-JCP ‘27 Theses began to lay out a theoretical line which emphasised the “two-stage” theory of the revolution: Japan was not a fully realised modern state, but still overwhelmed with “feudal remnants” in the form of parasitic landlordism, and so forth, and it was this analysis of the stage of development of Japanese capitalism that initiated the beginnings of the split which would come to a head with the ‘32 Theses (Comintern 1961). As the major “developed” country relative to its neighbouring states and primary imperialist power in East Asia, the Comintern considered Japan the most important and pivotal target for the revolutionary project, but in the wake of the ‘27 Theses, which emphasised that the 1868 Meiji Restoration had not yet been fully accomplished as the necessary bourgeois-democratic revolution and transition to modern world capitalism, the question thus emerged: was Japanese capitalism in the 1930s ready for socialist revolution - in the conditions on the ground, was it possible to discover the revolutionary subject of this process?

In the clarification of this question emerged the famous and influential “debate on Japanese capitalism” (*Nihon shihonshugi ronsō*), a debate whose centrepiece was the clarification of the essential questions of mode of production and the historical process of articulation of the social formation: what stage of development was Japan actually in - how, and by what means, had Japanese capitalist development proceeded, and did there exist a concomitant total development of the social formation as a whole, thus producing the political consciousness necessary for the revolutionary transition? Was the basic economic category of social life in the villages - the form of land-tenancy rent (*kosakuryō*) - a “holdover” or “remnant” of feudalism, something *partially* feudal, or a product of the development of modern world capitalism? The debate on Japanese capitalism, in its encyclopaedic sense, took place between the mid-1920s and the mid-to-late 1930s, a concentrated period of approximately 12-15 years. This debate, while central to Marxist theory, had an exceptionally broad influence on the formation of Japanese social thought, and on the formation of the modern Japanese social sciences in general. In addition, it must be emphasised here that, although there was certainly also extensive exegetical work directly on Marx in the 1920s and 30s, the principle field through which exceedingly complex receptions of Marx - not only of volume 1 of *Capital*, but of volume 2 (the reproduction schemas) and volume 3 (the category of ground rent and its theoretical explication) - took place was precisely the historiography and theoretical analysis of Japanese capitalism.

In the debate on these questions, there emerged roughly two positions: one, which became that of the Rōnō (“Labour-Farmer”) faction, who argued that the land reforms instituted in the 1868 Meiji Restoration - which they squarely considered to be a bourgeois-democratic revolution - had begun the solution to the “backwardness” of the countryside, planting the initial seeds that would lead to full capitalist development; and another, which became that of the Kōza (“Lectures”) faction (representing the mainstream line of the JCP and the Comintern), who argued that the Restoration had not been a full bourgeois-democratic revolution, but rather an incomplete transition to modernity, and that Japanese capitalism was only partially developed, on a primarily feudal basis. The Comintern’s ‘27 Theses, in splitting from earlier emphases on the immediate socialist-revolutionary process, installed the conditions for the split between the JCP and the Rōnō faction (particularly Yamakawa Hitoshi and Inomata Tsunao). But, in its ‘32 Theses, the Comintern position reinforced this line even further in parallel to the world situation, by calling for a mass-based bourgeois-democratic revolution against absolutism and feudalism concretised in the form of the Emperor-system (*tennōsei*) (On the history of the debate, see Nagaoka 1985; Hoston 1987). The

primary authorial and conceptual influence on this period of Comintern policy on the “national question” was Otto Kuusinen, who, in the 12th Plenum of the Comintern in this same year, called in general for mass-based actions which subordinated communist demands to the immediate needs of the broad mass front. By arguing that a directly communist political platform would alienate and keep the party separate from the rural poor and the “non-advanced” strata of the working class, this call essentially began the transition in the Comintern to the line of the popular front adopted a few years later in 1935.

In Japan, the Kōza faction’s position and dominance of this debate was comprehensively established with the publication of their 8-volume *Lectures on the History of the Development of Japanese Capitalism* (*Nihon shihonshugi hattatsushi kōza*) in 1932. The works in this volume were in preparation well before the publication of the ‘32 Theses, and therefore should be seen not as an expansion of the position of this Theses, but rather as preparing the ground for the hegemony of its position in the wake of the ‘27 Theses. Noro Eitarō, a leader of the JCP, who was arrested and died in prison two years later in 1934, oversaw the compilation of the *Lectures*. Noro could be seen as the one who most concretely laid the groundwork for the overall conceptions of the Kōza faction. For him, the only way to truly and effectively articulate the political consequence of theory, the proletarian strategy, was to focus on the “particularity” (*tokushusei*) of Japanese capitalist development. The reason for this, Noro claimed, was that, without understanding the “dominated” (*hishihaiteki*) mode of production (i.e., the agrarian semi-feudal structure of the countryside), one could not understand the particular way in which the development of the productive forces had necessitated a turn to imperialism. This basic logic was echoed by Otto Kuusinen, then the leader of the Comintern’s Eastern Bureau, and charged with preparing analyses of revolutionary conditions in East Asia. Kuusinen famously argued: “We observe the uninterrupted and limitless oppression of the peasantry, conditioned by the exceptionally powerful *remnants of feudalism* (*hōkensei no zansonbutsu*). The Japanese village is for Japanese capitalism a colony contained within its own domestic limits (*Nihon shihonshugi ni totte jikoku naichi ni okeru shokuminchi de aru*).” He continues: “Japan’s bourgeois transformation remains remarkably incomplete (*ichijirushiku mikansei de ari*), remarkably inconclusive or non-determinate (*ichijirushiku hiketteiteki de ari*), and is in essence *partial and unfinished* (*chūtohanpa*).” Precisely because of these features, he argues, Japanese capitalism is crippled or deformed (see on this point, Walker 2016). In an obvious sense, the transition debates in the Japanese context functioned *allegorically* to refract line struggles at the level of politics (the ‘semi-feudal’ thesis led to a two-stage theory of revolution; the thesis of an accomplished capitalism lead to a one-stage theory), but they also served as laboratories of theoretical experimentation on the status of Marx’s *Capital*, and how to apply its insights to the local conjuncture.

In the immediate postwar period, the Japan Communist Party, reinvigorated after decades of governmental repression, bloomed and flourished as a source of resistance politics and intellectual organisational force. In the early 1950s, the political logic around which the JCP had theorized its position began to change towards the form of a “national liberation” struggle, an armed struggle for liberation from “subordination” inspired by the Chinese revolutionary line. This was largely touted by certain JCP leaders, in particular Tokuda Kyūichi (1894-1953), who had spent 18 years imprisoned under the prewar Peace Preservation Law, and Nosaka Sanzō (1892-1993), who had spent the war years in a variety of locations, and who had established linkages to the Chinese party, fleeing the Red Purges undertaken by the American occupation forces to newly liberated Beijing.

They emphasised in particular the continuance, rather than rupture, of earlier land relations that had obtained in the Japanese countryside, what they described as a “parasitic landlord system” (*kisei jinushisei*): with this as the decisive backbone of the subjugation of the “nation,” the JCP began an ill-fated movement of returning to the villages. This took the form of the quasi-clandestine “Village

Operations Corps" (*Sanson kōsakutai*), groups of cadre and students who would enter the villages, agitate among the peasants, and attempt to ignite a revolutionary spark in the countryside (Mao's "a single spark can start a prairie fire") in order to sow the seeds of an "encircling of the cities." This movement was doomed from the start, not only because the peasants were by and large completely uninterested in the movement, but also because their conditions, although still mired in appalling poverty, had been shifted by the postwar land reforms, enough at least to diminish the direct "parasitism" they faced, and thus enough to render ineffective the "operations corps" call for revolutionary action (Koschmann 1996).

This moment, however, was certainly more than merely a failed political strategy: although the JCP soon disowned the return to the village as "ultra-left adventurism" (*kyokusa bōkenshugi*) and officially rejected the line of armed struggle in 1955 at its Sixth Congress, the material and affective memory of the village operations remained a critical site of literary politics, of political inspiration, and of imagination and experimentation throughout the decade of the 1950s and well into the subsequent years.

After the end of World War II, the Japan Communist Party returned to the forefront of Japanese society, bolstered by the sacrifice and legitimacy of its main leaders, Nosaka and Tokuda. Hailed as uncorrupted by the war years, the JCP and the Japan Socialist Party undertook a concerted electoral effort in 1946 and 47. Alarmed at the wide favour these parties enjoyed, McArthur and the Supreme Command of the Allied Powers (SCAP) took a pivotal decision: what came to be known amongst historians as the "reverse course," changing strategy to prevent the spread of socialism rather than principally attempt to rid the Japanese state of fascism. Thus, the so-called "red purges" of the late 1940s attempted to destroy the sudden resurgence of the prewar Japanese communist tradition, once the strongest in Asia (in the 20s and 30s), and the source of major theoretical work in Marxist thought. This drove the JCP underground, and led to a short period (late 40s-55) of emphasis on armed struggle, underground clandestine work, and a renewed proximity to the Chinese line (on the question of the nation in this period of Marxist thought, see Gayle 2003). In 1955, at the Sixth Congress of the postwar JCP, this line of armed struggle in the countryside was repudiated, its supporters expelled, and a new "historic compromise" (along the lines of the Italian party) was installed, paving the way for the JCP's full transition to reformism and participation in government. In a sense, this moment can be seen as the first emergence of a Marxian 'New Left' on a world-scale, one year before the events of 1956 in Hungary would generate a similar process for the Western European and North American communist parties.

As the 1950s drew to a close, a new social mass of students, intellectuals, workers, peasants, and the popular classes were once again rising, in particular around the 1960 renewal of the US-Japan Joint Security Treaty (Anpo, in its Japanese abbreviation) (see the texts in Haniya 1963). The inaugural mass demonstration of the 1960s around the Anpo protest mobilised immense numbers: only one of the three major general strikes called by the unions brought 6.2 million onto the streets in June 1960. With this intense level of mobilisation, a new combative Left had formed, heralding a new social arrangement: no longer beholden to the JCP, who were by now regarded by many on the Left to have betrayed their politics, this New Left in Japan came to produce one of the most intense decades of political organisation, political thought, and political aesthetics in the global twentieth century (see the essays in Walker 2020). New and creative theoretical work emerged from within the political movements of the Zengakuren around the 1960 Anpō, as well as from within the 1968-69 Zenkyōtō, notably Nagasaki Hiroshi's extraordinary *Theory of Revolt* (*Hanranron*) (see Nagasaki 1969), along with a new impetus and direction for Marxist theory as a whole, in this cauldron of political upheaval that would come to be the long 1968 in Japan. As the long 60s entered the 70s – a dark period of the intensity and desolation of the armed struggle, with its internal violence (*uchi geba*), the eclipse of the URA experience, the struggle of the East Asian Anti-Japanese Armed Front,

the emergence of new politics linked to a growing awareness and centrality of minority struggles (the Ainu, Okinawan, Zainichi Korean and Chinese, *buraku* movements, and so forth) – an older sequence of Marxist theory came largely to a close, while new battlegrounds ‘on the philosophical front’ simultaneously emerged, so to speak.

III

If the prewar debate on Japanese capitalism — its character, its development, its mode of relation to the emergence of capitalism depicted in *Capital* – was centred on the relation between the historical and the logical, the postwar boom of Marxist theoretical writing tended to be split between the methodological analysis of capital itself, and the search for a philosophy of subjectivity located around the theory of alienation, and characterised by an interest in the early Marx. These latter figures, particularly Kakehashi Akihide, Kuroda Kan’ichi, and Umemoto Katsumi, all tended towards a reading of Marx centred to an extent around the subject, or what Kakehashi called the ‘subjective grasp’ (*shutaiteki ha’aku*) of capital, with a concomitant centrality given to the figure of ‘human labour’. In contrast to this, Uno Kozo and his primary colleagues, figures like Suzuki Koichiro, Iwata Hiroshi, along with others posed against this a relatively structural, *Capital*-centred reading, concerned with three major points: 1) the methodological clarification of Capital in terms of levels of analysis (logic or ‘principle’; stage or mode of capitalist development; conjunctural analysis); the centrality of the peculiar quasi-commodity labour power; the importance of a theory of imperialism internal to a re-reading of *Capital*) (See Uno, Walker 2016). While many of those around him took up ‘world capitalism’ (Iwata), returned to the agrarian question (Ōuchi Tsutomu), or developed logical readings of *Capital* in their own right (Suzuki Kōichirō), Uno’s work, while studiously separated from politics proper, or from the increasingly intense partisan struggles internal to the Marxist left, nevertheless became widely influential amongst the New Left (Suga 2005; Walker 2020). In the wake of the moment of 1968, and the eclipse of the armed movements (for example, the United Red Army and the East Asian Anti-Japanese Armed Front [*Higashi ajia han-nichi busō sensen*]), a new turn emerged in the early 1970s. Characterised by Kojin Karatani’s *Marukusu sono kanōsei no chūshin* [Marx: Towards the Centre of Possibility] and Hiromatsu Wataru’s *Shihonron no tetsugaku* [The Philosophy of *Capital*], this moment saw a return to the textual centre of Marx’s work, once again at a certain degree of separation from the existing Marxist politics.

Hiromatsu’s extraordinarily dense philosophical prose, with its focus on the philosophical category of reification in relation to the theory of the value-form, was highly influential in the generation of the 1960s, not least because of Hiromatsu’s involvement in the student movement. His work, not only in the realm of philosophy, but also in the active correcting of the manuscript of *The German Ideology* to create a more Marxologically-accurate text, produced numerous examples of lasting philosophical importance, perhaps symbolised in his 1974 *The Philosophy of Marx’s Capital* (Hiromatsu 1974). Hiromatsu was, of course, much more of a bridge to the prewar high point of Marxist philosophy (see for example Hiromatsu, forthcoming), represented by Tosaka Jun or Miki Kiyoshi, while at precisely the same time, Karatani’s work brought into the reading of Marx a specific moment that coincided with the development of critical theory (in its broad, rather than narrow Frankfurt School, sense), particularly in the United States, where Karatani had spent time at Yale in the 1970s, and where he subsequently taught, at Columbia University.

Since the famed 1966 Johns Hopkins conference on the “Sciences of Man,” so-called “French theory” had been in intense development, particularly in north America. In a way, the generality provided by the language of theory was not an entirely new development in Japan, where a certain type of crossover between literary criticism and social theory had long been viable as a public discourse, even at times wholly outside the university system. Karatani’s *Marx: Towards the Centre of Possibility* (Karatani 2020), serialised in the literary magazine *Gunzō* in 1974 represented a break – or rather is itself situated within a break, one might say – with the prevailing reading of Marx,

dominant in 1968: that of the early Marx, a Lukácsian reading of the figure of the self-alienated labouring human. This new reading brought into the picture a literary or linguistic reading, focused on the textuality of *Capital*, a transversal reading intersected by structural linguistics (Saussure), psychoanalysis (Freud and Lacan), and deconstruction (Heidegger and Derrida). In a sense, Karatani's text can now be seen in the long intellectual-historical light as a key point wherein the tradition of Japanese Marxist theory produced a new point of departure for itself in the global terms of critical theory (Karatani 1990). This would condition heavily the development of what was called "new academism" in the 1980s, when the dominant critical figures came to be Karatani himself and Asada Akira (whose own works on Marx interrelated to Deleuze and Guattari, as well as questions of psychoanalysis and aesthetics would be widely influential).

Today, in the early decades of the twenty-first century, there is no question that the reading of Marx remains a decisive part of the Japanese intellectual landscape, although one would be hard-pressed to name any truly dominant or hegemonic intellectuals in the style of Uno, Hiromatsu, or even Karatani (who is himself still writing important work, albeit without the exceptional influence he had in the 1990s). The Japanese readings of Marx have paralleled the post-90s globalisation years in interesting ways: on the one hand, there has been a significant 'internationalisation' of Japanese Marxist theorists, historians, and philosophers, in the sense that the dominant modes of reading are now less centred on key figures and positions within the historical development of Japanese Marxist thought (the Rono/Koza positions, Uno's work, Hiromatsu's work, the work of more explicitly Kyoto-school inflected theorists like the postwar figures Kuroda Kan'ichi, Kakehashi Akihide, and so on). But, on the other hand, the rest of the world remains deeply ignorant of the Japanese tradition, a peculiarity that can only be explained by linguistic distance, since at every other level, Japanese is certainly a language in which as much theoretically powerful Marxist analysis exists as has been written in French, Spanish, Italian, or other major world languages. Certainly, the hyper-methodological character of mid-twentieth century Japanese-language Marxist thought did not help its reception, due in part to the quite obscure polemics in which much of it was embedded.

While the internationalism of the prewar period, upheld by both the existence of the Soviet Union, and specifically the pre-Popular Front (1935) Comintern, provided a globality to the early decades of Marxist theory in Japan, the postwar period saw a retreat of this international scope, with only a few notable exceptions (in the field of history, a number of important Marxists, such as Toyama Shigeki and Takahashi Kōhachirō were certainly known globally). The revolutions of 1968 and the formation of the New Left in the wake of 1955 provided another globality, but this time at a level of the contemporaneity of events and processes, rather than an intimate involvement. The early Trotskyism of the 1950s, with links to French organizations like *Socialisme ou barbarie* was one such avenue (Kuroda Kan'ichi, later the supreme leader of the Revolutionary Marxist Faction (the so-called *Kakumaru-ha*), was in the 1950s the Japanese correspondent for *S ou B*); the armed-struggle organisations, with their direct actions and descent from armed resistance into global armed struggle of an increasingly isolated character in Lebanon, Western Europe, and South-East Asia was another.

In the years after 1968, a new generation emerged, no longer necessarily beholden to the experience of the Japanese Marxist tradition as such. After the 1990s, a new change has taken place within the sphere of Marxist theory and Marxian analysis in Japan, bringing forward extraordinary and powerful voices that ought to be more widely disseminated in other languages (I think here of theorists such as Ichida Yoshihiko, Nagahara Yutaka, and others - see for recent examples Ichida 2014 and Nagahara 2017). The Marxian tradition of scholarship remains extraordinarily widespread, with new links to the growing body of work on value-form theory (although the many possible links between the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* and its antecedents in the various Japanese value-form debates remains to be a point further developed, which forthcoming work will surely deal with), as well as

new work linked to the reception of French and Italian post-68 philosophical-political figures.

The above highly schematic overview is a nothing more than a kind of *impossible placeholder* for a vast bibliographical and conceptual tradition. It remains a crucial task for Marxists today to bring this immense theoretical history in the Japanese language into connection with its counterparts around the world.

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<http://www.historicalmaterialism.org/reading-guides/marxist-theory-japan-critical-overview>

Footnotes

[1] Earlier versions of this text were previously published as Gavin Walker, "Marx in Japan" in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Marx*, ed. Imre Szeman et al (London: Bloomsbury, 2018) and « Le marxisme au Japon: guide de lecture » in the online journal *Période: revue de théorie marxiste* (January 2019).