

Gavin Walker: *The Sublime Perversion of Capital. Marxist Theory and the Politics of History in Modern Japan*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016.

Book review, Christian Uhl

The subtitle of Gavin Walker's book is quite an understatement. For sure, we learn a big deal from Walker about Marxist theory and the politics of history in modern Japan. However, Marxist theory here is not – as one may expect – the passive object of yet another inquiry into the archival facts of an important current in modern Japan's intellectual history. "By grasping instead" one of "the moments when theory itself was developed outside of 'the West'" (4), Walker mobilizes a select group of Japanese Marxist thinkers for an expedition "from the margins" into the center of established Marxist theory, in order to liberate it from its dogmatisms, its arrogated universalism and persisting Eurocentric tendencies, and to recover "the globality of the Marxist theoretical project" (6) in a way that, as Walker asserts, enables us to understand more adequately our present situation and move beyond the entangled systems of the "nation-state" and of the "extraction of surplus value on a total scale" (7; 194) that together constitute our seemingly inescapable global interior of capital.

Walker's endeavor benefits immensely from the profundity and breadth of his truly impressive erudition, which allows him to involve in the unfolding of his argument a plethora of ideas and inspirations also from regions far beyond the horizon of the known Marxist universe, and to prepare in turn the ground "not only for rethinking Japanese intellectual history, but for numerous interventions in contemporary debates on the philosophy of history, in postcolonial historiography, and for contemporary political thought" (44). Walker's rich argument doesn't fit into this review without some curtailing, nor does without some straightening-out the somehow fugal structure of his text that reflects Walker's concern with "a chain of related questions that circle around", what he calls "the sublime perversion of capital" (14). The expression signifies what Walker identifies as the fundamental flaw in the "so-called logic" (173) of capital that always relies on the violent exploitation of the contingent "savage exterior" (154) of life and history (the perversion), but is capable of "recoding" (170) these contingencies retroactively as internal necessities of its seemingly flawless, smooth and sterile circuit of accumulation (its sublimity).

The point of departure of Walker's inquiry into capital's "paradoxical reliance ... on the stratum of history while arrogating itself as a logic" (157) is an exploration of the influential debate on Japanese capitalism, held in Japan by Marxist theorists from the late 1920s to the mid-1930s. As Walker points out (43), the contributors introduced theoretical and conceptual innovations to deal with the discrepancies between the process of "primitive accumulation" as discussed in the work of Marx (the enclosure of the commons in England and the "liberation" of the feudal subject as the free owner of nothing else but his or her capacity to work), and the social and historical reality of the emergence and development of capitalism in Japan (the "feudal remnants"). These innovations, and, above all, their extensions in the work of the preeminent Marxist thinker, Uno Kōzō (1897-1977), fill Walker's conceptual arsenal. The two most important items in this arsenal are Uno's methodical device of the distinction of an analytical level of "pure capitalism" (logic) from the analysis of its actual unfolding amidst the contingency of history, and Uno's notion of the "impossibility of the commodification of labor power" that emphasizes labor power not as the only commodity capable of creating value, but rather as something that capital isn't capable of producing (a notion, it seems, that makes sense only under the premise that nothing can be a commodity that hasn't been produced by capital).

Labor power is in this sense an "externality" to capital's "logic". Yet, for its continuous smooth operation capital, indeed, requires a labor market (147), and to make the impossible possible, it has to rely on yet another "externality", namely the whole legal, political, and ideological "apparatus" of

the capitalist nation-state, and with it the inter-national state system that correspond to capital's logic not as its rectilinear super-structural extension, but rather as a Derridean "supplement", i.e., "as an *exterior addition*, something whose presence is necessary but whose presence must be retroactively erased as having been necessary" (183). Both, the system of the extraction of surplus value, and the nation-state system have their retrospective "impossible origin" in the process of primitive accumulation ("is it the logic of capital ... that presupposes enclosure as a specific moment, or does this logic already exist, and thereby give rise to this moment?" 85), the "original sin" of the accumulation of exploitable workers and capital, perpetuated in capital's "circulation-form of the buying and selling of labor power" (147), and of the "accumulation of differences, inequalities, hierarchies, divisions" (91) that haunt and keep turning the discontinuous continuity of the world of capital.

Uno Kōzō's distinction of a level of "pure theory" (logic) and a level of the analysis of capital's actual manifestation in history (38) provides Walker with the opportunity to fabricate the dualisms that any deconstruction requires. Walker applies this strategy skillfully to deconstruct Marx and to disclose a "gap" to crack open and "implode capital's circuit process" (181). One might ask, however, whether he really achieves a "renewal of Marxist theory" (66), rather than a mere de-Marxification of Marx that in fact disempowers us against the real totalizing dynamic of capital. In any case, Walker's modern Japan too is after all "a cross-section ... of the world-historical process" (193), and his book thus not a book just about Japan, or, to quote Walker who cites Marx who quotes Horace: "*De te fabula narratur*" (It is of you that the story is told)" (3). This alone should be reason enough to not miss out on it.