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Ken C. Kawashima

University of Toronto, ken.kawashima@utoronto.ca

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Abstract

Raju Das and Robert Latham interview Ken C. Kawashima about his work and lessons for workers involved in the struggle today.

Keywords

Labour, Marx

An Interview with Ken C. Kawashima¹

Labour Power Matters and Capitalist Racism

Raju Das and Robert Latham: Our interview is centered around two basic questions. The first is: what you have been writing about over the last years in terms of society and its major problems? In other words, we would like you to offer a glimpse of your scholarship so that readers can have a context to better understand what you will address in the second part of the conversation.

Ken C. Kawashima: Thank you, Robert and Raju, for this opportunity to share some of the results of my research with you and with other workers around the world. I am a historian of modern Japan, and for many years I researched the everyday struggles of colonized Korean workers in Japan during the economic depression of the 1930s. That led to the publication of my first book titled, *The Proletarian Gamble: Korean Workers in interwar Japan* (Duke University Press, 2009). Since then, I've spent more time doing theoretical research into Marx's *Capital*, as well as into the thought of a Japanese Marxist named Uno Kōzō, and last year I finally published my English translation of Uno's *Theory of Crisis* (Brill 2022; Haymarket, 2023). I have also a co-edited book of essays by Tosaka Jun, a Marxist philosopher in Japan, titled, *Tosaka Jun: A Critical Reader* (Cornell UP, 2014) and I've also written articles on Marx, Foucault, Uno Kōzō.

I would just begin by saying that, while I've done a lot of historical research about worker struggles in Japan, I never would have been able to do any of this research had I not studied the thought of Marx, especially his masterpiece, *Capital* (1867). I first tried to read this book when I was twenty-one, but I did not understand it. Moreover, at that time, I only tried to read Volume 1 (out of 3). I finally read and studied all three volumes in one summer when I was a graduate student. I still did not fully understand it but at least I understood more. I also read many books about *Capital* in English, and even took one class on Marx's *Capital* at the University of Chicago, but I still found myself scratching my head in confusion and annoyed by a certain Frankfurt School approach to Marx's book. However, when I read Uno Kōzō's books on *Capital* in Japanese while I was doing my dissertation research, something clicked. I've been researching and studying *Capital* ever since then.

There are two basic problems of Marx's *Capital* that have guided my research so far: *labour-power* and *capitalist crisis*. Labour-power and capitalist crisis are deeply related, but I will discuss them separately.

¹ Ken C. Kawashima is Associate Professor at University of Toronto. He teaches courses on the history of capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism in East Asia; on everyday life; on racism and fascism; and on Marxist theory. He is the author of *The Proletarian Gamble: Korean Workers in Interwar Japan* (Duke UP, 2009); co-editor of *Tosaka Jun: A Critical Reader* (Cornell UP, 2014); and the English translator of Uno Kozo's *Theory of Crisis* (Brill, forthcoming). Ken can be reached at: ken.kawashima@utoronto.ca.

Ken was interviewed by Raju Das and Robert Latham (both from York University, Toronto) for the 'Theory and Class Struggle' section of *Class, Race and Corporate Power*.

On *labour-power*: Marx “discovered” and theorized labour-power in *Capital*, and it is categorically different from “labour”. Marx, after all, did not discover the concept of *labour*, which had already been theorized by the classical bourgeois political economists like Adam Smith and David Ricardo. Marx wanted to smash these thinkers *in theory*, and to do so from the perspective of the life of the worker or proletariat. The problem with Smith and Ricardo is that they ignored the workers’ actual lives and only thought about how much workers could work in day for the capitalist, and how much the capitalist would have to pay for that work (the “price of labour”). Smith and Ricardo were only interested in the value and price of “labour”, and as a result they created an ideological understanding—still predominant today in mainstream economics—that what is exchanged, as a commodity, between an individual capitalist and an individual worker, is “labour”. Adam Smith and Ricardo ended up treating “labour” as a commodity to be bought and sold, just like any other commodity. In making these conclusions, the thinking of the bourgeois economists fell into serious problems that Marx ruthlessly criticized. I will mention four critical points.

First, Marx insisted that it is not “labour” (as labouring activity) that is being sold and purchased as a commodity. Rather, the peculiar commodity that the individual worker sells to the capitalist, which Marx theoretically “discovered”, is that of *labour-power* (*Arbeitskraft*, in German, 勞働力, in Chinese and Japanese). Marx in *Capital*, 270 defined labour-power this way:

We mean by labour power, or labour-capacity, the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in the physical form, the living personality, of a human being, capabilities which he sets in motion whenever he produces a use-value of any kind.

Workers, according to Marx, do not sell their labouring activity itself as a commodity to the capitalist. Rather, what they sell to the capitalists as a commodity is the sum total of their “mental and physical capabilities” to work, or their mental and physical *potential* to labour, which only exists “in the physical form, the living personality, of a human being”. At the same time, labour-power is only “set in motion” *after* the individual worker sells it as a commodity to the capitalist, and during the time when the capitalist *consumes* labour-power, i.e., during working day, when the worker *works* to produce “use-values”, e.g., for eight hours in a glass factory that produces glass mugs, whose use-value is found in containing beer for consumption.

Secondly, Marx showed that, before we analyze the workers’ “labour” in the production process, we first have to analyze the conditions in which *individual workers* sell their labour-power in the *marketplace*, or the “sphere of circulation”. By emphasizing the sale and purchase of labour-power—and not “labour”—as a commodity, and by emphasizing that labour-power is sold to capitalists by individual workers in the market, Marx showed that the analysis of class struggle does not simply begin in the sphere of production and in the labour process, e.g., in an assembly-line in a factory with other workers. Rather, it starts even before workers enter the factory, when atomized and individual “bearers” (*Träger*) of labour-power have to sell this peculiar commodity in the “sphere of circulation” and in the process of “exchange”. In other words, the *precondition* of the exploitation of “labour” in capitalism’s sphere of production is located in the sale and purchase of labour-power as a commodity, which takes place in capitalism’s sphere of circulation, i.e., in its process of exchange. Without this sale and purchase, there can be no “labour” in

production. Marx thus never ignores the individual worker, as many people often say. Rather, he *begins* his analysis with individual “bearers” of labour-power in the marketplace, but then shows that if and when labour-power is sold and purchased by the capitalists, the *labour* or working activity of workers will become social, collective and cooperative—and exploited as a class of wage-labour.

Third, Marx showed that the *reproduction* of the workers’ *labour* is fundamentally tied to the *reproduction* of the workers’ *labour-power*. The bourgeois political economists, by contrast, were only interested in reproducing “labour”, so when they asked the question, “What is the *value* of labour?”, they mistakenly said that it is equal to the value of the subsistence goods that are required for the maintenance and reproduction of “*labour*”. Marx criticized this definition because they clearly confused the reproduction of *labour*, which is the working activity of the worker, with the reproduction of the worker’s *labour-power*, which is not the same thing as the worker’s “labour”. The question that Marx correctly re-posed is thus: What is the value of labour-power? For Marx, the *value* of labour-power is found in the sum total of values that are required to maintain and reproduce the life of the worker’s labour-power—not only individually, here and now— but also for future generations of workers. The *use-value* of labour-power, by contrast, is its ability to produce new values when capitalists consume it as a commodity.

Fourth and last, we can mention a final characteristic of labour-power, which Uno Kōzō emphasized in his reading of Marx’s *Capital*. This pertains to the fundamental *contradiction* that labour-power represents to the capitalist as a commodity. While labour-power *is* a commodity in the capitalist mode of production, it does not exist in the same way that other commodities do, e.g., a piano, or guitar, or glass mug, which are all products of labour. Labour-power has certainly become a commodity under capitalism, but it is not a commodity like other commodities. This is because it is not a direct product of capitalist labour, like a glass mug. As a result of this difference, it can never be assumed that the supply and demand of labour-power, as a commodity, is the same as that of “regular” commodities.

Why is this? This is because labour-power only exists in the human body and mind, *which capital cannot produce directly as a commodity*. Capitalists, in short, have to hope and pray that living human beings sell their labour-power as a commodity, precisely because they cannot produce human beings directly. If human beings don’t sell their labour-power to capitalists, capitalists would not be able to exploit the labour of workers in the production process. Capitalists would not be able to produce “surplus-value”, the essence of profits. If workers do not sell their labour-power as a commodity, or if they refuse to sell it, the capitalists would be ruined as a class.

Labour-power, as a commodity, thus represents a fundamental contradiction to capital. This contradiction can be stated in the following “double-bind” of capital: In order to produce surplus-value and profit, capital(ists) *must* consume labour-power as a commodity; at the same time, capital(ists) cannot produce labour-power as a commodity directly, it can only *purchase* labour-power as a commodity. We could call this the basic contradiction between capitalism’s sphere of production, where labour-power must be consumed, and capitalism’s sphere of circulation, where labour-power must be purchased. Due to this contradiction, labour-power represents the “weak point” of capitalism, its “Achilles Heel”. Capital can only overcome this weak point by force and violence.

I can now turn to my other area of research: capitalist crisis. Since the capitalist crisis of 1973 and the emergence of neoliberalism in the late 1970s and 1980s, capitalism has repeated crises almost every ten years or so. This is similar to the historical period between the 1820s and 1860s, when capitalist crises were repeated every ten years in England. Like the period between the 1820s and 1860s, we seem to live in a world of repeated, cyclical and even “decennial” crises. Capitalism has developed not in spite of these crises, however. More perversely, *capitalism lives-on by means of its own crises*. Let me discuss four points that elaborate on this fact.

First, the phenomenon of capitalist crisis is inevitable, necessary and periodic to the capitalist mode of production itself. Despite all appearances, capitalist crisis is never simply “accidental” or merely “possible”. Rather, it is necessary to the very functioning of capitalism and thus “normal” to capitalism’s *modus operandi*. This perspective is very different from what we usually hear about capitalist crisis. It is often said that they are caused by accidents of history, e.g., the natural accident of the Fukushima earthquake in Japan in 2011, which led to a nuclear disaster that triggered an economic crisis in Japan. We are often told crises are results of individuals and their reckless behaviour, like B. Madoff in the 2008 financial crisis. Going against this (liberal) way of thinking, we should grasp the phenomenon of capitalist crisis as something that is inevitable, necessary and periodically repeated under the dominance of capitalism. The history of capitalism shows that capitalist crises were intermittent and not-yet periodic between the 1710s and 1820s; that capitalist crises became periodic and cyclical between the 1820s and 1860s, when industrial capital became dominant; and that capitalist crises were repeated, but with new features such as world wars, after the 1870s and down to the present day, when finance capital has been dominant. The question is: Why did capitalist crises become periodic between the 1820s and 1860s and thereafter? The bourgeois political economists always blamed crises on contingent or accidental factors and could only demonstrate that crises were possible. Marx differed from them and argued that, with the establishment of the capitalist mode of production after the 1820s, crises became inevitable, necessary and periodic to capitalism.

Second, before we define the phenomenon of capitalist crisis, we can ask, what does crisis *do*? We can say that it is a phenomenon that periodically brings the entire movement (or circulation) of capital to a grinding halt, but also that this suspension of capital’s movement is a necessary character of capitalism itself. In other words, in order for capital to circulate and to produce use-values and surplus-value, capital cannot avoid the periodic and necessary interruption of capitalist circulation and production, i.e., of capitalism’s expanded reproduction process. Capital needs to periodically “re-set” the basic relations of capitalist production in order to maximize profit making, and to re-set capitalism’s basic contradiction surrounding labour-power as a commodity. This “re-setting” takes place by means of crises, which are inevitable and periodic, and which interrupts capitalism’s reproduction process.

Third, while there are several Marxist definitions of the phenomenon of capitalist crisis, I emphasize that it is a contradictory phenomenon between “excess capital” and “surplus populations.” It is a contradiction between a surplus of capital (in the form of unsold means of production and means of consumption), and a surplus of unemployed people. Put differently, capitalist crisis is a phenomenon that periodically and necessarily *splits* society into a small minority of capitalists, who own huge sums of capital that remain idle and in the form of unsold

commodities (“excess capital”), and a vast ocean of people who are unemployed by capital and thus unable to consume basic means of subsistence (“surplus populations”). Capitalist crisis is a phenomenon that interrupts capitalist circulation and production, periodically bringing the whole movement to a grinding halt and leaving in its wake “excess capital” co-existing alongside “surplus populations”.

Fourth, what is the fundamental *cause* of inevitable and periodic crises? Following Marx’s analysis in *Capital*, the fundamental cause of crisis can be grasped by looking at a chain of economic processes based on industrial capital and the sale and purchase of labour-power. When labour-power is sold and purchased by the capitalist in the marketplace, the industrial capitalist consumes labour-power in capitalist production, exploits the workers’ surplus labour-time, and produces surplus-value and new use-values, e.g., glass mugs. At the same time, the industrial capitalist’s production processes are financed by banks, which offer low-interest loans to industrial capitalists when production is expanding. The conditions of crisis are actualized at the zenith of prosperity when the commodities that the industrial capitalists have produced cannot be sold on the market at their forecasted and speculated prices. If these commodities cannot be sold, then the surplus-value that these commodities represent cannot be “realized”. This leads to the appearance of *excess capital* in the form of unsold means of production and means of subsistence (Marx, Vol. 3, Chapter 15, section 3). Industrial capitalists now realize that their profit rates are tending to fall (“the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall”). In turn, banks react to the industrial capitalists’ falling rates of profit by raising interest rates. When the industrial capitalists cannot pay back the interest on the loans to the banks, let alone the principal amount of the loans, a massive *paralysis* of the entire chain of payments takes place between industrial capital and banking capital, and the entire movement of capital comes to a grinding halt. In the wake of such a crisis, i.e., in phases of economic depression, capitalists fire workers to re-set the relations of production and to introduce new technical means of production (e.g., robots or AI), thereby creating a massive “surplus population” in relation to capital. The labour-power of workers, which was once commodified, is now de-commodified and cast into the “industrial reserve army”, a floating population of people who have nothing but their labour-power to sell as a commodity. Crisis works to the advantage of capital, however, because the entire movement *compensates* for the fact that capital cannot produce labour-power as a commodity directly. Capital instead produces a “relative surplus populations”, which represents labour-power in an unemployed and *de-commodified* mass form in relation to capital. If capitalists are able to *re-commodify* labour-power as a commodity, a class of wage-labour is re-formed and the entire cycle of capitalist production and accumulation begins again, leading to repeated and inevitable crises. This process is repeated over and over again. The fundamental cause of inevitable and periodic capitalist crisis, therefore, is found in the sale and purchase of labour-power as a commodity.

Raju Das and Robert Latham: Our second question is what your work implies for today’s living struggles against capitalism and for the advancement of socialism around the world. By world we mean in in different locales and sites. You might approach this by imagining, if you’re brought before a group of radically oriented workers, what would you tell them you think your work offers them in these struggles.

Ken C. Kawashima: First, I think that my research (especially my historical research) shows that when we think about the how workers have to sell *labour-power* as a commodity, we have to consider this process as a very tortuous, painstaking and often violent process. Generally speaking, it is not a peaceful and happy process, but rather a kind of “hell”, full of unfortunate accidents and violent forces. The total analysis of the struggles of workers thus does not simply begin when workers are “lucky enough” to find themselves employed and exploited as wage-labour. The struggles of the proletariat begin even before workers start working under an official contract, so to speak. The analysis of proletarian struggles cannot forget about or ignore how the worker exists as someone who has nothing but labour-power to sell as a commodity.

For example, my earlier study of the struggles of colonized Korean workers in Japan showed that their struggles were not simply struggles of employed workers struggling against exploitation. They rather struggled against forms of domination whenever they tried to sell labour-power as a commodity through various intermediary institutions, such as labour brokers in the construction industry. For this reason, the Korean workers struggled against what they called “intermediary exploitation”, a form of exploitation that took place largely outside the factory system and in places like the day labour market, which institutionally supplied labour-power, through various intermediaries, to the expanding construction industry during the economic depression after the 1929 crisis. The point is that these were *proletarian* struggles, even though they were struggles outside sites of capitalist production and exploitation, such as the factories. They were struggles in capitalism’s sphere of circulation. To put it differently, they were struggles that resulted from the capitalist *expropriation* of (colonial) land, but not necessarily from the capitalist exploitation of surplus labour-time. They were struggles that resulted from having been expropriated of their land, but not-yet from having been exploited in capitalist production. Theoretically, we can call this in-between time the space of “the commodification of labour-power”, which always implies the work of violence or force in transforming labour-power into a commodity.

Second, my historical research shows that capitalist domination works by dividing employed workers from unemployed workers, and by artificially separating the former, as useful and productive labour, from the latter, as useless and unproductive labour. Moreover, these divisions and separations are fundamentally related to state power, state economic policies and state social policies, which, by the force of law, “mapped” racial (and ethnic) inequality onto the basic contradictions of labour-power as a commodity, as well as onto the contradiction of employed workers and unemployed workers. Again, my historical research of Korean day labour shows this chain of problems with great clarity.

For example, during World War One, colonized Korean workers were recruited by the state police and employed in the Japanese factory system as part-time workers, primarily as a means of breaking organized Japanese trade union movements, which had gained momentum during the war boom. During the war years, Korean workers were heralded by the state as great workers. After the war ended, however, the economy fell into a depression and industrial capital contracted. Now, Korean workers were the “first to be fired and the last to be hired”, and in the decades to come, Korean workers in Japan became synonymous with unskilled and chronically unemployed day workers. Japanese state policies reproduced and normalized this representation. State policies, we could say, *dislocated* the contradiction that labour-power represents to capital as a commodity, *dislocated* the contradiction of employed and unemployed workers, and *relocated* and *reformed*

these fundamental contradictions into ideological contradictions of race, ethnicity, nationality, and gender.

Third, I would say that my research into the colonial question implies how struggles against state-racism are fundamentally tied to struggles over the sale and purchase of labour-power as a commodity—and vice versa. This means that we cannot simply analyze state-racism apart from the origins and historical development of capitalism, and vice versa. Rather, we need to show how capitalism has historically incorporated racism into the “commodification of labour-power” by means of state policies, which were formed in relation to (but not necessarily in a correspondence with) capital’s commodity logic. *Capitalist racism* (and not just “racial capitalism”) *dislocates* capitalism’s fundamental contradiction around labour-power, and *relocates* it into *unnecessary contradictions* of racial (and gender) difference.

This history of dislocation is clear not only in the era of merchant capital and state-led slavery, when black bodies from Africa were sold and purchased as commodities. State-led racism survived into the era of industrial capital in England (1820s-1860s), dominated by the cotton industry. In this period, slavery was abolished in England and labour-power became bought and sold for definite periods of time only, but England still depended on state-led policies of *slave-labour* in the southern United States, which exported its *raw* cotton to England in exchange for the latter’s *manufactured* cotton goods based on wage-labour. State-led racism thus unevenly linked the wage-labour in the most advanced capitalist country, England, with the slave-labour in the relatively late-developing U.S. Finally, since the crisis of 1873, we can say that state-racism further dislocated capitalism’s fundamental contradictions in the era of finance capital, dominated by the iron and steel industries. In this stage of capitalism, state-racism became part of colonialism and inter-imperialist rivalries, which led to world wars that propagandized state-racism in combination with intense ultra-nationalism. Japan’s role in World War Two is exemplary: its ultra-nationalist claim to defend itself against the racisms of European and American imperialism was merely an ideological pretext to extend its state-racism over the countries and territories Japan colonized: Hokkaido (1873-9); Okinawa (1879); Taiwan (1895); Korea (1910); Manchuria (1932). Japan was then punished by racist military policies of the U.S., which dropped two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 to end the Pacific war.

Finally, my theoretical and historical research suggests that, when we think about revolutionary struggles that advance socialism, we need to consider socialism as a transitional epoch from capitalist society to a communist society. As Marx wrote in *Critique of the Gotha Programme*:

What we have to deal with here is a communist society, not as it has developed on its own foundations, but, on the contrary, as it emerges from capitalist society; which is thus in every respect, economically, morally and intellectually, still stamped with the birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it emerges.

My understanding of socialism is that it is a transitional epoch from the “old (capitalist) society” to the “new (communist) society”, and so in this transition, capitalism’s “birthmarks” have to be overturned and abolished by an organized working class that can dictate the terms of the transition and overthrow the dictatorship of capital. Socialist strategies and tactics therefore have to especially combat all of these violent *dislocations* that divide and conquer the proletariat as a class,

and that have characterized capitalism's birthmarks. These dislocations, which have been led by the state, have "displaced" capitalism's inner class contradictions around our labour-power, and "replaced" them with ideologies that divide workers unequally, for example through racial inequality. In the case of racial ideology, it has clearly been a basic "birthmark" of the capitalist mode of production and the commodification of labour-power. It has accompanied capitalism's entire historical development, down to the present day, and it "stamps" society with these birthmarks in the face of periodic crises, i.e., when there is a vast contradiction between "excess capital" and "surplus populations. State-racism is an ideological reaction to capitalist crisis, a state strategy to prevent capitalism from experiencing a final collapse from out of its periodic and inevitable crises. Socialism must bring about capitalism's actual collapse from within capitalist society's contradictions, and it can only do so by organizing those who "bear" labour-power, i.e., the proletariat.