

Exigency of Time: A Conversation with Harry Harootunian and Moishe Postone

A *Concentric* forum with the participation of
Joyce C. H. Liu, Viren Murthy, Chih-ming Wang, and Ming Hung Tu

[Editor's Note] Professors Harootunian and Postone were in Taiwan in June 2012 to give keynote addresses at the International Workshop "Marxisms in East Asia" organized by National Chiao Tung University. Upon the invitation of Concentric, they participated in this open forum with local scholars, Professors Liu, Wang, and Tu, as well as Professor Murthy from the US. The forum, held on the morning of June 11 at National Taiwan Normal University, lasted for two hours, and the conversation was continued over lunch for another ninety minutes or so. The transcript here represents about half of what was discussed.

Professor Harootunian is a specialist in early modern and modern Japanese history and is author of numerous important books including Toward Restoration; Things Seen and Unseen; Overcome by Modernity; History's Disquiet; and The Empire's New Clothes. Professor Postone specializes in modern European intellectual history. His Time, Labor, and Social Domination is an indispensable work for anyone working on Marxian thinking today.

In their long and remarkable careers, one persistent concern is time: the temporal factor that subtends production relations in capitalism, the dimension of time in the cultural production and collective identification of a community, the normative function of temporality in the disciplinary practices of the humanities and social sciences, and so on.

“There is no time outside of its context.”

Temporality of Capital

dialectic of abstract time and historical time in capitalism; limits of categories of linear, circular, “real,” and ontological time; dynamic of value and time in Marx’s analysis

Murthy: I think it’s a great opportunity to discuss the issue of temporality with Professor Harootunian and Professor Postone. Your works have transformed the way in which I, and many others, understand time, and the reason why your works are sort of difficult and important is that they are interdisciplinary. In other words, they bring together history, philosophy, sociology, and literature. Not only do these works provide people working on various fields with a different framework, they also attempt to account for the condition for the possibility of that framework, by grounding it in history. A lot of people who do theory read philosophy, and I am someone who started with philosophy and found that purely philosophical works have certain limits. Let me just mention one example. At the end of the famous essay by Heidegger, called “Das Ding,” “The Thing,” he tries to answer a question by an interlocutor. This person asks: where do you get the directive for all your philosophy? Heidegger couldn’t really come up with a response, but he says that other philosophers can’t come up with a response, either. This is where you have the crisis of philosophy: what is the starting point of philosophy, or how does philosophy legitimate its point of origin? In other words, philosophy can come up with theories about time, but cannot discuss its own relation to time or history.

Each of your works, in some way, tries to ground philosophy in history or to address, in Professor Harootunian’s words, the answerability of philosophy to history, and vice versa. Since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there have been a number of different critiques of linear time and history. Both of you try to historicize the production of time or historical consciousness. I will begin by posing questions to Professor Postone—because he pitches his arguments at a much more abstract level—and we can then move into the historical particularities of this with Professor Harootunian.

Professor Postone, a central idea in your work concerns the distinction between historical time and abstract time: abstract time is connected to the process in which time changes in capitalism and goes from being what you call a “dependent variable” to being an “independent variable.” Can you elaborate on this distinction? Also, why is it that capitalism constitutes the shift? Why is this

distinction more accurate than the distinction between linear time and circular time, as you have discussed? In your book *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory*, you have a long discussion of Chinese clocks, and how they may appear in certain ways to be modern—but you show how this is different. Perhaps you can work with this example in your response.

Postone: Let me begin by emphasizing that the distinction made in my book between abstract time and historical time is not intended as a critique of the former from the standpoint of the latter. Many theorists have associated abstract time with capitalist modernity and then gone on to formulate critiques of linear, abstract, or homogenous time from the standpoint of putatively “real” time—an ontological time, an authentic time, a timely time that is outside of time. I am calling into question all such critiques. Within the framework of the analysis I have undertaken there is no time outside of its context. Hence, there is no time that can serve as the purportedly ontological basis for a critique of modernity.

Moreover, I argue that capitalism cannot adequately be grasped with reference to abstract time alone, but that both what I characterize as abstract time and historical time are fundamental features of capitalism; they are constituted by, and become constitutive of, its most basic structuring social forms. According to this approach, capitalism must be understood in terms of a complex dialectic of abstract time and historical time.

This approach suggests that the very common distinction between linear and circular time is not adequate analytically, for it does not elucidate the nature of the time involved but only refers to its presumed path. It is more illuminating, in my view, to distinguish between an abstract form of time and a variety of concrete forms of time. What characterizes abstract time is that it functions as an independent variable whereas concrete forms of time, the predominant forms of time prior to the generalization of the commodity form, are dependent variables—functions of natural events (such as the solar or lunar cycles, or the movement of the stars) or of activities such as walking, plowing, cooking. As dependent variables, these times are also qualitatively specific. One trace we have of this notion is the Zodiac. When time units have names—such as the signs of the Zodiac, or the names of the old Chinese (“double Babylonian”) hours—this indicates that those “units” are qualitatively particular; they are not interchangeable. That is, they are not abstract.

Prior to the historical emergence of abstract time, even time units that at first glance appear abstract, such as the hour in the ancient world, were not independent

variables. The ancient Egyptians were the first to divide the day into twenty-four hours. However, they did so in terms of twelve daytime hours and twelve nighttime hours. Consequently, these hours were not constant, but were variable; they varied with the seasons. In the summer, the daytime hours were longer and the nighttime hours were shorter; in the winter, the opposite was the case. Very sophisticated time pieces were developed that expressed this temporal conception and marked hours that changed with the seasons—for example, the water-clocks of the Roman, Hellenistic, and Islamic worlds, or the Japanese clocks of the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. All of these devices were based on a conception of the hour as variable. (What is particularly interesting about the case of Japanese clocks is that they were developed by craftsmen who tinkered with European clocks in order to construct timekeeping devices that varied with the seasons.)

It is in fourteenth-century Western Europe that abstract time begins to emerge—first as a practice (the early institutionalizations in some areas of Flanders of a working day of uniform length regardless of the season) and then as a concept. The sort of time that emerged and, then, gradually became consolidated, was rooted in a new temporal organization of labor. It was constituted historically as a measure of activity, rather than as that which is measured by activity. Consequently, it was constituted as abstract and homogenous, an independent variable—that is, as Newtonian time.

Capitalism is a very peculiar form of social life, one whose characterizing forms—although socially and historically constituted—are abstract and apparently decontextualized. Yet this peculiarly abstract form of life is, at the same time, uniquely dynamic. Capitalist modernity is characterized by an ongoing, accelerating, directional dynamic. One of the tasks of a critical analysis of the modern world is to explain the basis of this dynamic in historically specific terms in ways that avoid either projecting this dynamic onto all societies and histories or denying its very existence. The notion of historical time—which is not simply the passage of abstract time—is an attempt to grasp this dynamic. Capitalism, then, should be grasped with reference to two kinds of temporality—abstract time and historical time.

I sought to show that the categories of Marx's critical theory of capitalist modernity provide the basis for an analysis of the two-fold character of temporality in capitalism. Marx begins his analysis with the category of the commodity as the most fundamental category of capitalism. One of its salient characteristics is that it is dual: the simultaneity of value and use value. Many theorists have taken Marx's analysis as one that, proceeding on the basis of this opposition of the quantitative

and qualitative, shows that capitalism involves the subsumption of the latter by the former. Marx's analysis, however, is more complex and less moralistic than that. Relating the value dimension to abstract time and the use-value dimension to productivity, Marx uncovers a very complex dialectic between those two dimensions. The nature of the dialectic is such that it generates pressure toward higher and higher levels of productivity. At the same time the level of productivity recalibrates the abstract temporal unit associated with the value dimension. I can only allude here to the very complex dynamic that ensues from this ongoing dialectic of the two dimensions of the commodity form. On the one hand, there is pressure for ongoing changes in production, organization, knowledge and, ultimately, of social life. On the other hand, the recalibration of the abstract temporal unit—for example, the hour—means that it is redetermined, pushed forward, as it were, while at the same time it is reconstituted as an hour. As an hour—an abstract temporal unit—it is constant. Yet as a unit that has been recalibrated, the temporal unit has been moved. On the surface, then, the Newtonian axis remains unchanged; an hour is an hour. Beneath the surface, however, the entire axis of abstract time has been moved. This motion of time is what I term “historical time.” It is intrinsically related to abstract time, a function of the use-value dimension in its interaction with the value dimension. That is, historical time is a new and very different form of time as a dependent variable, of concrete or “substantial” time. It is neither like the pre-capitalist forms of concrete time, a function of natural phenomena or contingent activities, nor does it represent an ontological foundation of human life. Rather it is historically constituted as a totalizing form of concrete time that is a central dimension of capital. It grasps a very fundamental feature of capitalism that, unlike other forms of social life, is characterized by an ongoing dynamic beyond the volition and control of the individuals who constitute it.

Note that the historical dynamic generated by the two dimensions of the commodity form is directional, but not linear and certainly not teleological. It entails both change and the reproduction of the value frame. That is, the dialectic of capital is one of ongoing transformations of social life and, at the same time, the reconstitution of its historically specific fundamental social forms. That this dynamic is totalizing does not mean, however, that there is no possibility of its overcoming. That possibility is rooted in its own growing internal contradictions, the growing tension between its two temporal dimensions—not in a return to the putatively more “organic” forms of the past or in a “recovery” of the authentically human and ontological.

“The past is constituted by the present.”

From Mytho-Historic Time to Capitalist Time

*use of the past in Japan's Tokugawa nativism; the concept of restoration
in the Meiji period; capitalism's conceptualization of time accountancy*

Murthy: We can come back to some of these issues in a moment. I will now switch and ask a question of Professor Harootunian. I would like to start with your early work and move to your more recent work. Your work has also dealt with the reconstitution of time for many years. Your early work was on the Meiji Restoration: the famous *Toward Restoration*, and then the later, equally famous, *Things Seen and Unseen*, which is on national learning or *kokugaku*. Both works deal with the issue of temporality in relation to problems of identity. These periods, the Meiji and the late Tokugawa, are very interesting because they are sort of in-between capitalist modernity and what came before, which is why they offer a very good historical lens for talking about the reconstitution of time in modernity.

What is significant about your work is that it is not trying to make Japan look like it's something somehow outside of the world. Let's start with *Things Seen and Unseen* because, although it came a little later, it really deals with the period that comes before modernity. What is so interesting about it is that you have a discussion of Motoori Norinaga's concept of *mono no aware*, the “presencing of things,” through which Norinaga's attempts to return to a type of constructed Japanese past in order to distance Japan from China. What is fascinating about this book is that you are dealing with the period where the concepts that animate your later work are not really applicable in the same way, because you are not dealing with a capitalist society. Hence, this work provides a contrast to your later work.

I want to ask a question connecting this work to *Toward Restoration*, because *Toward Restoration* was an early work and there a lot of theoretical implications were not yet drawn out but they can be at this point. *Toward Restoration* provides us with a concrete example of what you more recently call “the past being constituted by the present.” So I was wondering whether you could talk a little bit about this—I don't want to use the word *transition*, but we can talk about *reconstitution*. The reason why I say this is because they are things that seem similar: Norinaga also goes into the past; that's why there are so many works that say “oh yes, he was a proto-nationalist” or something like that. Yet, your work is able to talk about this difference and thus give us a concrete example of some of the things that Professor Postone has been talking about, the reconstitution of time in

the modern period.

Harootunian: Let me begin with the first part of your question, which addresses the project of *kokugaku* nativism, especially Motoori Norinaga. I will try to relate it to some of the things that Moishe has talked about because, as you know, I have been much affected by Moishe's work on time and labor.

Norinaga was among a number of Japanese writers/thinkers from the late eighteenth century through the nineteenth century who began talking about some way of getting out of what they believed to be the artificiality of contemporary life. What they were referring to in that term of artificiality was the immense cultural domination of Chinese forms of thinking, expression, representation, morality, ethics; they were particularly concerned with the effects upon the language itself. As you all know, Japanese is in fact immensely different from Chinese—at least originally, and certainly in a syntactical way—even though it is entirely dependent upon Chinese, especially for the writing system. And there was obviously the mediation of Chinese sounds on Japanese sounds, and vice versa.

What Norinaga was trying to do was trying to return to a past: it's basically an imagined past even though he uses some of the earliest texts that the Japanese actually wrote in Chinese, like *Kojiki*, and even some of the poems of the great collection *Man'yōshū*, as a way of trying to get at the point he wanted to make: he wanted to dramatize that the intention of the archaic Japanese was really different from the Chinese intention, and yet that intention had been obscured, displaced, ultimately forgotten about in the years in which Japanese life, culture, and civilization developed, largely in a kind of Chinese modality. The way you could reach this Japanese intention was to get back to the pure, original language of the Japanese by claiming, for example, that Japanese was not a written language but a spoken language which was polysyllabic. Or, there was always the belief that Japanese was the language of the gods, that the language was suffused with deity.

Why I think I differ from a lot of people was that many of them saw this as a pure form of nostalgia, a kind of dreaming or imagining about a past that probably never really existed. But I think it's much more about the present. I think Norinaga's work was far more about the present, because he reminds us that we need to use the past, bring the past or the intentions of the archaic past back into the present, in order to straighten out the present. But it didn't mean slavish imitation; he wasn't thinking about returning to a distant past in order to reestablish some sort of golden age in his present. I think that is at the heart of what in Japan became a restorationist impulse. It is a very powerful notion because restoration in Japan—

restoring something from an archaic moment—really refers to a kind of repetition. So it's important to determine what kind of repetition they were in fact referring to: whether just simply some attempt to literally restore a past in all of its detail, or some spirit of the past. I think it's probably the latter, as a means of essentially resolving questions of the present, that is, the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries.

What Norinaga dramatizes is the notion of restoration itself, and this is picked up by his students and other nativist scholars. It's essentially a return to something that is "pure Japanese," fresh, original, affective, and different from Chinese. But it's also something that promises to resolve the questions that are agitating his particular present. So it's not just some kind of romantic atavism. This becomes a really powerful trope, especially in the mid-nineteenth century, when the system begins to fall apart and ultimately the authority system is overthrown. Then, what you get is a political restoration of the emperor. What is being enacted is a return to imperial authority, since authority in Japan had for a thousand years been in the hands of samurai, the shogun and his successors and retainers. What is interesting is that in 1867 when the restoration took place, the model that was used was not the model of the earlier restoration of imperial authority, which had failed. Restorers were mindful that they shouldn't use those examples of failure, so they went back to an event that probably never happened: they went back to mytho-history, to the origins of state foundation or nation foundation, under the mythic, legendary emperor, the first emperor Jinmu-tennō, as a representative of restoration. The Meiji therefore appealed to a conception of restoration that is actually outside of time, any kind of time or a time without duration—but we are not talking about capitalist time yet.

Norinaga and his successors in a very remote or crude way resembled Heidegger, when Heidegger tells us in *Being and Time* that the present is inauthentic, that there is something wrong with it, and that the only way to get to fix it is to return to what he calls the unavoidable everyday of primordial life.

Basically, that's what the Japanese had in mind: they had a restoration which was essentially out of time; it brought an end to time lived up to that moment in 1867. As the early Meiji writer/publicist Fukuzawa Yukichi observed, in Japan there has been no history, as such, by which he meant temporal change; there has been only politics, one political regime after another. In a sense, that was an accurate assessment. At the same time, that restoration ultimately meant opening up Japan to the world of capitalism. That's what it did. It brought Japan right into the center of the capitalist world: within a decade or so, Japan was wired into the world market—

which meant that the new Japan would ultimately be mediated by another conception of time, that is, capitalist time. This means that you have a modern nation-state that is ultimately formed and established, and that state, in many ways like all modern states, becomes a placeholder for capital. One of the major functions of the modern state has been to synchronize the various temporalities of capital, smooth the discordant rhythms of capitalist time.

It's a recognition that was already made, of course, by Marx. One of the things that Marx saw in capital was an immense conceptualization of time accountancy, a time accountancy that actually structured a social metabolism: it reorganizes our lives, reorganizes everybody's life, according to something we call normative time. So societies like Japan—and there are a lot of these societies—tried to retain something of another conception, of what we might call mytho-historic time. So the Meiji Restoration in 1867 was a very curious amalgam of what Antonio Gramsci once called “restoration/revolution”: on the one hand, it was a restoration, and it was essentially timeless; on the other hand, it was about breaking time—all time—and starting it all over again in another direction. In other words, the concept of “restoration” is, in fact, an ambiguous temporal category, embodying contradictory impulses such as repetition, timelessness, and the sense of a new time, usually associated with revolutionary change. They mediate each other in such a manner that nothing seriously transformative happens. Yes, certain kinds of institutions are changed, certain modes of economic conduct and production are changed, but what you get with this arrangement is an attempt to maintain some control over the received notion of social relationships—people have always complained that the trouble about Japan is that it never had a social revolution. Moreover, the idea of restoration remains a memory for the future, despite its apparent rootedness in the past, inasmuch as its presence invites the present to embark upon completing what a prior restoration failed to accomplish. In the twentieth century, the trope was summoned in the 1920s and 1930s, and echoes of it were audible even in the postwar period. But I think this temporal heterogeneity marks the presents that all modern societies must occupy—with Japan, the ambiguity explains both an enthusiastic embracing of the world and a reluctance to be part of it.

In any case, you have this mix of time. One of the most interesting examples that I used in something I wrote some years ago was out of a novel written by Tokunaga Sunao in the 1920s, *Taiyo no nai michi* (*Sunless Streets*), where the writer describes a street scene in central Tokyo. “Everything came to a halt.” It's essentially right in central Tokyo, and he says, “Nobody knew what was happening”; “There was absolute silence, and everything stopped. Nothing moved.” The reason

for this pause in the bustle of modern everyday life was that an imperial retinue was coming through and this meant the staging of a very interesting collision between one kind of time and another, one conception of time essentially taking precedence over another. An archaic residue from a distant agrarian society and its temporality were deposited now in the center of a modern street intersection, whose own rhythms of time obeyed “normal” social time—the time of capital, I should add. In a sense I think Moishe has pointed this out, and what I’m describing is essentially the adjustment the Japanese had to make to the world of capitalism, which ultimately meant that everything they were doing was historically and socially constituted anyway, even though they were appealing to something that they believed or wanted to believe was a natural enduring, when in fact it wasn’t. An embodiment of an archaic moment interrupted the routinized flows of everyday life in a modern city. It was essentially a reconfiguration in the interest of making it work for this new capitalist historical moment.

I just want to make one addition to what Moishe said about Japanese clocks—he was absolutely right about what he said. He said that the Japanese concept of time gets replaced by a certain version of Western time very early. Of course the great symbol of that was the gold pocket watch. It has never been clear to me whether or not this was determined merely by a new system of time accountancy or whether it was a prestige item of looking civilized and westernized.

Postone: Both?

Harootunian: Both, yeah, in the 1880s.

Postone: Many people, such as Lewis Mumford, contend that the invention of the mechanical clock of the late Middle Ages gave rise to the idea of uniform hours. The examples I provided earlier—of the water clocks and the Japanese clocks—indicate that this sort of technological explanation is historically questionable. When the Japanese first encountered Western mechanical clocks in the sixteenth century, they didn’t simply adopt them and at the same time shift their understanding of temporal units from variable to abstract hours. Instead, they retained their system of variable hours and modified the mechanical clocks accordingly so that they marked hours that varied with the seasons, which entailed considerable mechanical sophistication. This example undermines the idea that a mechanical invention generated the idea of constant hours. The latter must be understood historically and socially. So, for example, the Japanese begin making

Western-style clocks and, relatedly, adopted an understanding of time as abstract and hours as constant after the introduction of capitalism in the late nineteenth century, during the Meiji Restoration.

“That capital has become truly global is the precondition of emancipation.”

A Different Future within Capitalism

*the value and use-value dimensions of capital; formal and real subsumption;
contradiction of capitalism emerging with real subsumption*

Murthy: Professor Postone, you discussed the idea of historical time and the way in which the hour moves or is reconstituted. You were saying that the frame of abstract time is changed and that it happens only in capitalism. This makes us think of a number of other Marxian categories that are connected to, for example, absolute and relative surplus value: in other words, the historical dynamic that you are talking about is really about relative surplus value, which for you—for Marx as well—is connected to the distinction between real and formal subsumption. What’s important about both your and Professor Harootunian’s work is that when you talk about these things, it is not just a theoretical issue that has nothing to do with the world we live in, but it has something to do with the possibility of a different future. This very much runs through your works: the possibility that is generated through capitalism and yet is also excluded by it. Importantly, you argue that it’s only when we are done with historical time that we can begin to make history. I was wondering whether you could elucidate the relationship between historical time and real and formal subsumption, and the possibility of a different future.

Postone: The degree to which I think I should go into detail here also depends on the audience’s familiarity with Marx’s critical theory of capitalist modernity. So in a sense it’s up to you.

Audience Member: Can you talk a little bit about the dialectic of “value” and “use,” and give us a few examples of this dialectic?

Postone: Before beginning to outline that dialectic I should note that by the time Marx wrote *Capital*, he had come to the conclusion that the categories of his analysis—such as value, commodity, abstract labor, and capital—are historically specific to capitalism. They do not purport to be universal categories of social life. This also suggests that, for Marx in his mature writings, there are no universally

valid theories—including his own. Since Marx understands theory and, more generally, consciousness, subjectivity, to be rooted in its context, any theory that claims for itself transhistorical universal significance implicitly accords the theorist a position outside of their own context, an extra-terrestrial and extra-temporal position. This conceit is as much the case of positivist social science as it is of existentialist philosophy.

When Marx begins *Capital* with the categories of commodity, use value, value, abstract labor, concrete labor, those categories are intended to be historically specific. Their analysis elucidates the historical specificity of the object of investigation: capitalism. Marx analyses the commodity as a doubled social form—it is at once a value and a use value. The latter category frequently has been taken either as referring to consumption, or as a category of the qualitative that is overrun by the quantitative or the value dimension. Marx's analysis of the dual dimensions of the commodity form is, however, more complex. I can only begin to sketch out that analysis here.

Basically, Marx argues that as a value, the commodity is a form of wealth and of social mediation unique to capitalism. It is an abstract temporal form that is constituted by what Marx calls abstract labor and measured by the expenditure of socially necessary labor time alone. As a use value, however, the commodity is also a product of concrete labor, which is labor as we usually understand it, an activity that deals with determinate materials in a determinate way in order to create determinate products. Concrete labor is the use-value dimension of labor. It generates what Marx calls “material wealth.” Whereas value is a function of labor time alone, material wealth is a function of skill, knowledge, and materials. Yet, according to Marx, the form of wealth in capitalism is not, in spite of appearances, material wealth, the amount of goods produced, but value. Material goods serve only as the embodiment of time. Material wealth in capitalism serves both to transport value and, at the same time, to veil its existence.

Nevertheless, as I suggested above, the two dimensions of the commodity interact. In tracing the development of production in capitalism, Marx distinguishes what he calls the formal and real subsumption of labor under capital. In formal subsumption, although production is geared toward the production of surplus value, that goal has not yet informed the process of production itself. As capital develops, however, the process of production becomes molded materially by capital, by the goal of producing surplus value. At that point, the real subsumption of labor, the process of production, has become intrinsically capitalist.

Real subsumption does not mean that all possibilities of emancipation have

been choked off. Such a view implicitly presupposes that the totality is a unitary whole. However, capital as totality in Marx's analysis is not at all unitary, but emphatically contradictory. Indeed, that contradiction only really begins to emerge with real subsumption. It is the case that, within this framework, the issue of overcoming capitalism no longer can be understood in terms of abolishing private ownership of the means of production alone, as was maintained in the social democratic and, then, communist traditions. Those traditions did not recognize the material molding of production with real subsumption and, instead, regarded the form of production and technology developed under capitalism to be purely technical. Contrary to such positions, overcoming capitalism should be seen as entailing a fundamental transformation of production itself.

The possibility of such a transformation is rooted in the dynamic of capital itself, in the dialectic of the value and use-value dimensions. In the first chapter of *Capital*, Marx outlines that dialectic with the example of weaving. In a situation in which handloom weaving is the predominant form and determines the standard of socially necessary labor time, that is, of value, the introduction of a power loom that doubles productivity generates twice as much value per unit time at first, so long as socially necessary labor time remains determined by handloom weaving. Once the new level of productivity spreads and becomes general, however, the value produced per unit time falls back to its original level, even though the amount of cloth produced has doubled.

This movement is an initial determination of the complex dialectic of time I outlined above. One corollary I would like to emphasize at this point is that the reconstitution of the amount of value produced per unit time entails the reconstitution of the necessity of the same amount of labor-time expenditure. This dialectic of transformation and reconstitution only becomes historically significant in Marx's analysis with the transition from absolute surplus value (where increases in surplus value are effected by lengthening the working day) to relative surplus value (where increases in surplus value are effected by increasing productivity). With relative surplus value, science and technology become increasingly integrated into production.

With this dialectic Marx attempts to explain several basic characteristics of capitalism. The first is that, unlike other forms of life, capitalism is marked by pressures for ongoing increases in productivity, which constantly revolutionizes production and distribution and, more generally, social life. Marx seeks to elucidate this characteristic of capitalism with his theory of value as a function of time rather than the amount of goods produced. At the same time, this theory helps explain an

apparent paradox—that the invention of generations of “labor-saving devices” has not lightened the burden of labor nearly as much as might have been expected.

As I mentioned above, if value is a function of labor time, the reconstitution of the abstract time frame means the reconstitution of the necessity of labor regardless of the level of productivity. With these categories, Marx is laying the groundwork for understanding why it is that in capitalism, on the one hand, you have this immense apparatus marked by ever-increasing levels of productivity that increasingly depend on the application of science to production; yet, on the other hand, the necessity of labor is reconstituted even if productivity increases by a hundred-fold. This is evident even on the surface. Workers in England fought for the ten-hour day in the 1840s. Later, workers fought for the eight-hour day. Yet since 1973, at least in the United States, this tendency has been reversed: labor time has increased and there is a growing unequal distribution of labor time. Many people work longer and harder than before, while others are chronically under- or unemployed. This is a complex problem, but it does indicate that, as capitalism develops, there is less and less direct correlation between the level of productivity—the amount of goods being produced—and labor time. One could imagine an inverse relationship, at least potentially, between the level of productivity and the amount people have to work. But that is not the case here. Instead, we have an incredibly productive apparatus that retains the necessity of labor. This latter necessity, which is a function of labor, comes under increasing pressure as capital develops.

As abstract time is moved historically, the production of material wealth becomes increasingly a function of knowledge and less a function of muscle or artisanal skill. At the same time, according to Marx, proletarian labor remains absolutely essential for capital. Note that proletarian labor does not represent the *other* of capital; it is the *basis* of capital. What Marx outlines is a growing contradiction between the wealth producing capacities of capitalism and its continued reliance on proletarian labor. The latter becomes increasingly anachronistic and yet remains necessary for capital. This is the most fundamental contradiction of capitalism. It generates a growing discrepancy between the potential of the system and its actuality. The abolition of capital would involve the abolition of both capital’s quasi-automatic logic of history and the mode of producing based on proletarian labor.

With this reading of Marx, I am arguing that the possibility of a different future is not located in the past or in that deemed outside of capital, but in capital itself, in its potential generated by the growing gap between what is and what could

be. (This gap is frequently misrecognized, but I cannot elaborate the theory of misrecognition and fetishism here.) By reformulating and emphasizing the intrinsic contradiction of capitalism, I am also suggesting that the idea that capital has become truly global, that—on a logically abstract level—the dialectic of capital’s temporalities has become global, does not preclude the possibility of emancipation but, on the contrary, is its precondition.

This position corresponds to what increasingly has become the case historically. Areas and countries are not only more tightly intertwined, but they are moving historically in similar ways (even if development is uneven)—as indicated, for example, by the overarching global transition in recent decades from state-centric to neo-liberal forms of capital. Both Harry and I are very critical of the idea that the possibility of a different form of life is located in the past, or in the outside, in that which is not yet capitalist. Both of us are trying to consider the ways in which capitalism itself is generative of other possibilities that could conceivably negate it.

“What we are faced with is a capitalist crisis, rather than a natural disaster.”

Disaster and the Endless Everyday

*impact of the Fukushima disaster on one’s sense of time;
routine as a temporal regime*

Tu: Well, let’s do a time slip into contemporary Japan. As a scholar who is interested in Japanese thought and popular culture theory, I would like to focalize my questions on two interrelated issues: first, the impact of disaster on nationalism and capitalism, respectively; second, how we can re-imagine popular culture and “the endless everyday” after Japan’s 3/11 disaster. The first question will be on the motif of time in relation to the 3/11 disaster. How are the “temporal arrhythmias”—I’m referring to Professor Harootunian’s term from his 2010 article “‘Modernity’ and the Claims of Untimeliness,” by which he means the disjunctions of temporal rhythms of varying speeds and durations in the historicization of modernity—of the everyday and Japanese history unsettled by the 3/11 disaster? Second, what happens to the relations between the clock time (*chronos*), which consolidates and homogenizes measured time and everyday repetitions, and disaster time, which de-territorializes and re-territorializes everyday lives and their political valence? In times of disasters, how are time and its indexicality reorganized, re-deployed, and remobilized by the “fractured, traumatized nationhood” and the persisting capitalist machine? Can possible breaking points of the “timeless world of commodity”

(Professor Harootunian's words from *History's Disquiet*) be found or imagined in post-3/11 Japan?

Harootunian: That's a big question. At one level, I think it is important to keep 3/11 in the register of a natural disaster largely because if you do, it represents a kind of indefinite suspension of time: there are extraordinary things and measures that have to be done, the nation must be calm, everyday life as it has been lived is no longer possible, etc. But I don't think that in a capitalist world there is any such thing as a natural disaster any longer. Natural disasters do happen, but they immediately get fused with capital and state. A recent investigation of the disaster placed blame on the state. They—the collusion of nature and history—merge into moments of capitalist crisis, or exacerbate both as unstable and crisis-prone capitalist order and challenge the state's responsibility to care for the populace. Fukushima is a perfect example of that. Those atomic power plants were not naturally put there: they were put there by the state; the state had poured in the money. The private power companies that took over their operations were really state enterprises. This practice goes all the way back to the Meiji period; nothing has changed. What it really showed, at one level, was what had always existed in northeastern Japan, that is, vast uneven development. Northeastern Japan is a region in Japan which ever since the Restoration has been treated as a "distant relative," a secondary consideration, largely for political reasons. They were always at the rear end of any kind of help. The atomic plants were put there in the 1960s as a way of generating employment and lifting the economy, even though the power went all the way south; the power was for Tokyo, not for the region.

It's hard for me to imagine what kind of ultimate future there is for northeastern Japan, or possible resolutions that might end the indefinite suspension of time marking everyday life. It really has to do with the way the natural aspects of that disaster have receded: just as when the tsunami recedes, you have a mess, the mess that's really capitalism. All the things that capitalism had literally done were merely exacerbated by the occasion of the earthquake and the tsunami. Secondly, 3/11 exposes the political classes to the incompetence and the corruption that has always been there: the problem of slowness in informing people of the levels of radiation, for instance, where the hot spots surfaced or which ways the winds were blowing. The putative prowess associated with Japanese bureaucratic efficiency collapsed completely. It failed in performing its initial obligation, which is to serve the population, to protect it, to do what it can to save it from precisely such disasters, instead of adding to the misery. But now its own behavior has become an

inextricable part of the disasters, or condition of their prolongation.

One thing that has interested me is the absence of any massive, mobilized opposition. Yes, there were demonstrations, especially in some of the Japanese cities, but they were by no means large-scale; they were not really sustained. That represents something of the nature of the Japanese political society that had developed in the post-war period. What it led to is not action, but a profound distrust: for instance, people would go around and buy their own Geiger counters rather than listen to the government when they are buying vegetables, or milk, or whatever.

What we are faced with, in terms of your notion of various temporal regimes or registers or the way they are put into play with that particular event, is essentially a capitalist crisis, rather than a natural disaster: a capitalist crisis which, as far as I can see, has not yet been attended to in any constructive way. This crisis has also implicated the role of the state bureaucracy at every level. They don't have a plan. What's going on up there is not very much, in terms of forms of reconstruction, replacement of homes for the displaced, and some purchase on the future. There are still thousands of displaced people up there. Their lives have been upset: at that level of everyday life, routine has changed forever for some. For a large number of people, everyday life is no longer the routines they had once known, configured, and constrained by the working day and other habitual activities. Now, it's trying to get through the everyday.

I wrote about an "endless everyday" before; I took it from a Japanese pop sociologist. In Japan the endless everyday that was used by pop sociology in the 1990s was really about consumption: people navigate through the everyday by buying things. Well, *that* certainly has changed. Now, at least in northern parts of Japan, which were most directly affected by the Fukushima tsunami, the everyday is a constant struggle. In other words, it's not about surviving; it's about making ends meet, about getting through the day, one day at a time, without anything more happening to you. So, that becomes another kind of routine.

I think it's very productive and interesting to see what characterizes the temporal regimes that people actually live on a day-to-day basis. I read an article for a journal not too long ago which tried to deal with this issue: the clash between the habitual everyday on the one hand, and, on the other, the confrontation of its disappearance for the uncertainty of something else or nothing else. In the article, there is a wonderful ethnographically grounded example where the author talks about the rail crossing that the people have to cross daily. He reports the incidence of a local inhabitant who stopped at the rail crossing, even if there was no way that

there would be a train since the tracks were mangled; but he stopped there, either out of some ingrained habit or a desire to maintain some connection to an everyday life he once lived but was no longer accessible to him. It was that habitual stopping. You see, there is that kind of carry-over. I'm not really great with psychological analysis, but it will be very interesting to think about what that means in terms of how people are really trying to hold on to what they had that no longer exists because the other part of it is just getting on—in other words, how, under these completely altered circumstances, the notion of time has changed yet induces forms of disavowal.

“The only history we have is a contemporary one.”

Writing the History of the Present

Marx's emphasis on the temporality of the present; Benjamin's and Gramsci's conceptions of the present as contemporaneous history; the task of history today

Wang: I have a question about the historian's task and the sensibility of time. It seems to me that history is all about the beginnings and the ends. It's also about how subjectivities are formed within a particular time frame. I wonder how you think about different conceptions of time and the politics related to these conceptions. For instance, history as time set in the past and history as time informed by the present? How do you perceive the task of the historian as inevitably bound by these different time frames? It seems to me that Harry has been concerned with the question of the contemporary, with how history comes to be today. I wonder what your take is as a historian on the contemporary as a temporal category. Does that matter to other temporal modes, such as those marked by the “post-” —all those particular moves that are trying to break away from the past and yet to keep it alive as in the form of some kind of entanglement?

Harootunian: Well, one of the things I discovered about time is that it was Marx, with his inordinate emphasis on the temporality of the present, recognizing capitalism's privileging of an endless present, starting from the present to move backward in order to secure a glimpse of its process of formation, that constitutes the basis of contemporary history. In fact, the production of contemporaneity is about making history, and all other temporal tenses like the past and the future are figured in the present. In any case, both Walter Benjamin and Gramsci, in their own ways, carried out this understanding of the present as contemporaneous history as

the vocation of historical materialism, especially its relationship to politics. What Marx especially has taught us is how the present is the crowding of differing historical times, which marks off the modern from the presents of prior pasts. Most historians aren't really involved in considering the question of historical time, much less willing to recognize that the only history we have is a contemporary one; their involvement in chronology, which is a misrecognition of historical time, allows them to believe they can actually roam the past and anticipate the future in their present. Chronology is not time; it's a way of fixing time and displacing its force, a way of measuring time and establishing its rigid and irreversible direction.

In other words, the stories a lot of historians tell, especially in national history, are stories that are already foretold and completed. The German philosopher Ernst Bloch pointed out that there is no time in national history, there is just space. He was absolutely right to make that statement.

I'm interested in the present largely because we are living in the present: the present is not an outcome of some identifiable past in some linear way as if it were a train moving from one station to another. The only history you can write is really a contemporary history. For me, a contemporary history has to be also political—that's Gramsci's great insight. That's the kind of work we need to do. I am not talking about the Foucauldian history of the present which, as Moishe reminded me, was never about the present. It's rather a way of deferring the temporal location of the present, and the technique he uses is genealogy, saying that I am not writing about the origin, but about the conditions of possibility. Marx said that already when he talked about historical presuppositions, which, he says, don't necessarily lead to this or that but are there as conditions of later possibilities.

For me as a historian, it was that kind of self-discovery that got me out of earlier forms of writing history, especially somebody else's history. What has always bothered me is that we end up becoming patriots of somebody else's history. I think that's a dangerous position, whether you are doing American history, or Japanese or Chinese history. Concentrating on contemporaneity, on the present, obliges us to begin looking for forms or units of analysis that might cut across, not necessarily abandoned space, but certain kinds of spatial regularities, whether it's the nation-state or region. If you don't reinvest these spaces with a proper temporality (as Mikhail Bakhtin did) or bring them together with some conception of time—time as an agent itself—in connection with some spatial unit, then all you have is a fixed space and its chronology, dead space, dead time.

I have been trying to think my way through this to see how time itself gets embodied in certain forms. Again, the best guide here is Marx. What could be more

evident than Marx's observations about the working day, where the whole nature of work reorganizes our everyday; and where work itself becomes a form of time because it embodies the magnitude of time necessary to produce a product that disposes the worker to act in a specific manner for a certain period each day. But I think we can go beyond that as well. It's hard work.

Postone: I think a corollary of what I have outlined is that writing a history of the present necessarily must be different than, for example, writing a history of the Roman Empire. What makes the writing of history particularly difficult today is that the particular event or development must be mediated by the overarching movement of capital. If the historians of the modern world focus on particular events or developments in ways that are sharply circumscribed, they will be missing or obscuring the point that there is no history of the present that is completely separable from the movement of capital. Any empiricist history of the present is necessarily misleading. It tears events and developments out of their temporal context—a context that is essentially different from what had been the case in ancient Rome, medieval Europe, China, or Japan.

The history of France from 1945 until 1968, for example, must present a history of specific French events and developments while mediating them more globally. And those global developments must be grasped in ways that include, but also go beyond, the sorts of large-scale developments with which historians are comfortable—such as attempts to establish a new European community or processes of decolonization. Those processes themselves and the imaginaries they express must also be mediated by an understanding of capital's development. Only then can the local and global be mediated intellectually in ways that begin to be adequate to the ways they are actually mediated. This is a very difficult, but also important, task.

It is a mistake to regard history as an intellectual practice that remains the same regardless of its object. The very "stuff" of the object, the nature of context and of temporality, varies historically. The practice of history must vary accordingly. Although one always reads through the lens of the present, writing about ancient Rome should be different than writing about East Asia today.

“Categories of nation and state are already mediated by global capitalism.”

Thinking the Common

validity of concepts like Nancy’s “inoperative community”; example of nonpolitical communities; opposition between universality and particularity derived from the dual character of capital; pitfalls of the concept of resistance

Liu: I’m very much interested in and impressed by your works because both of you tried to offer not just critical analyses of historical conditions but also theoretical frameworks for us to rethink the conceptual entanglement that is so influential throughout the past two centuries and that is still so in contemporary society, such as the concept of capital, labor, value, time, and class conflict. We all know that the so-called age of capitalism since the sixteenth century has already affected the world, including East Asian countries, not only through colonial and imperial expansion, but also through the travel of thoughts and disciplinary knowledge. Whatever happened in Japan or China or Taiwan in the eighteenth or nineteenth century was not just indigenous. It was already globally inflected. When we speak of the experience of time, we are also talking about the measurement according to certain values, such as the linear, teleological concept of time. It is why I think it is an important task to re-consider the concept of time, value, labor, class, and capital, as we discussed several days ago at the conference on Marxisms in East Asia. All these concepts deserve to be re-considered and re-defined in our time.

This work is very difficult especially in East Asian countries because of the language. Chinese characters and their phonetic correlatives signify differently when used in Chinese, Japanese or Korean, embedded as they are with different historical processes, and conditioned by different cultural and political regimes. The meaning of the proletariat or the bourgeois referred to in the Chinese translation of Marx’s *Capital* differs greatly from the concepts referred to in German. The task of re-conceptualization therefore would be all the more urgent but difficult.

But here I would like to ask you: how do we reconceive the concept of commonness, the concept of “the common”? When we are accustomed to suspicion against the state, but are still trapped in the logic of international law or the regime of the United Nations, faced with the crisis of the European bloc, the rise of the new US-Pacific bloc, how do we reconceive the concept of “the common”? I would like to know what you think of this concept of the common land or *ager publicus* (public land) as elaborated by Marx in his *Capital*. According to Marx, part of the land was cultivated as owned individually by the members of the community, while

another part of the land was cultivated in common. The products of this common labor served partly as a reserve fund for the time of bad harvest or war time, or for common expenses. If parliamentary democracy and the communist commune have failed us, what other options do we have with which we can think and discuss more effectively the category of the social? What cause could constitute or organize local forces to attend to the underprivileged within society? Of course we do not want to fall back to self-protective politico-economic regimes. But, faced with the intrusive global capitalist monopoly from all sides, how do we discuss the concept of “the common” so that it would not be too weak or too defensive?

Harootunian: I’m not sure what you mean by the common. Coming together? Something that we share?

Liu: No, just the opposite. Of course the “inoperative community” is one clue, or, rather, one effort that Jean-Luc Nancy—or Maurice Blanchot—was trying to make: to resist the coming-togetherness while at the same time thinking of something that we could share and communicate. My question was: how do we think of local political practice of resistance against both domestic homogeneous consensus and the global hegemony of these different economic blocs?

Harootunian: If by “common” you’re referring to, say, Nancy’s conception of the singular in the plural or some such variation, I can’t help thinking that you slip into risking familiar and banal applications once you embark on operationalizing it. What comes to mind is some version of cosmopolitanism or pluralism or identity, whether it is ethno-cultural, regional or whatever. Of course, I may be wrong, but I have trouble with these antinomial formulations (what Karatani Kojin calls “parallax”) that, as you say, “resist coming-together” at the same time when they counsel searching for “something we could communicate,” whereby the social is no longer grounded in the subjective “I” and the individual “I” invariably follows “being-with” (a Heideggerian conceit that makes me nervous) that obliges us to think through new forms of co-existence. But, it seems, this too often leads to recuperating what it seeks to avoid.

In a different register, I read a really interesting book recently, written by James Scott, who is an anarchist, actually—he teaches at Yale, if you can imagine that. The book is called *The Art of Not Being Governed*. He is a specialist in Southeast Asia. What he has done is trying to talk about the upland, highland Southeast Asia, the area that stretches from eastern, central India all the way to

China. He tried to write both an environmental or ecological history and a political history of an area that had not known politics but had known communities. It's about people who had over the long haul escaped from the lowlands where state politics—tax collectors so forth and so on—have prevailed for centuries, and moved upward into these highland areas and created these communities which were essentially without politics. They were without political structures. The analogue would be something along the lines of, say, the commune, but they were village communities. This history is about the common, about that sense of the common. People organize according to ways that are not political, nor even necessarily hierarchical. They are, in your words, resisting politics, as such, at the same time as they are communicating something in their withdrawal into a non-hierarchical community. These people are escaping from any form of politics. The problem is that there is an enormous melancholy in this book. What the author wants to say is that this kind of community has existed throughout history—not just in Southeast Asia but throughout history—and the melancholy comes in in his recognition that these communities are passing or disappearing. Maybe that's one thing you might be talking about.

Postone: I think there are several different issues pertaining to the notion of the common. One, which has become widespread recently, is that of the commons as that which is possessed collectively—for example, the grazing areas shared by peasant villagers. In my view, focusing on traditional forms of the commons in various parts of the world is a mistake, however much one might sympathize with attempts to hinder the destruction of such commons. It does not offer us a way forward and is ultimately a losing proposition historically. Nevertheless, it might be possible to appropriate the idea of the commons by arguing that capital generates the possibility of a new kind of commons—of forms of knowledge and skills that no longer are confined to closed secret artisanal groups, but are species capacities. It could be argued that capitalism is generative of such species capacities that potentially could be appropriated by all people, but it does so in an alienated form that is inimical to the well-being of the vast majority of people. I think it makes a significant difference, in other words, if we try to understand a new form of commons that has been generated historically (if in alienated form) or if we remain fixated on that which is lost or is being lost, and which won't be retrieved.

Liu: Of course we are not trying to retrieve—or revive—the commune or the anarchist practice. But how could we re-conceptualize the practice of “the

common” either at the metaphorical level or at the philosophical level, as you did with value or labor, concrete labor or capital?

Postone: I think that is a very important task and must be seen in global terms. One important aspect of the double character of the structuring forms of capitalist modernity in Marx’s analysis—for example, the commodity as value and use value—is that it entails an opposition between abstract universality (the value dimension) and concrete qualitative particularity (the use-value dimension). It could be argued that these social forms are the historical grounds for that opposition, which has dominated the imaginaries of capitalist modernity since the Enlightenment. We are very familiar with the strengths and weaknesses of both sides of this opposition—of the world historical emergence of a conception and reality of a universality that is truly general but is abstract and negates difference, and an emphasis on difference, or qualitative specificity, that tends to lose any sense of the general and ends up glorifying particularism. Whereas, for example, classical working class movements tended to be universalistic in the abstract Enlightenment sense, in recent decades we have seen the predominance of various forms of particularistic identity politics. Within the framework of the interpretation I have been presenting, overcoming capitalism entails far more than overcoming private ownership of the means of production, however important that might be. It also entails getting beyond (overcoming, not abolishing) the structuring abstract/concrete forms of capitalism. The analysis of the commodity and capital suggests that an important aspect of that overcoming would be the development of a different form of universality, one that could encompass difference while remaining general, one that overcomes the one-sidedness of both abstract universality and concrete particularity.

If I may make a related point: one reason I think we must return to the idea of overcoming, of transformation, is that the notion of resistance that has become the touchstone of so much critical discourse is one-sided. The notion of resistance against the global is a case in point. In many respects, right-wing anti-immigrant movements also are resisting the global. The word “resistance” doesn’t allow for any differentiation between the resistance of, for example, Jean-Marie Le Pen, and a resistance I might regard as more progressive. The word “resistance” has occluded the ability of many on the Left to distinguish reactionary from progressive movements, particularly in what used to be called the Third World. We have a great deal of work to do, to imagine, discuss, and debate the common as an emancipatory category and conceptualize it in a way that is adequate to our global universe.

Categories of nation and state are already mediated by global capitalism. Even when engaged in what could be termed “forms of resistance,” they are mediated; their success or failure depends in fact on how successfully they deal with this mediation. One of the tasks of the historian is to analyze the specificity of that mediation rather than viewing nation and state either through the lens of modernization theory (“Their situation is the same as ours, except that they are a little behind”), or with reference to some sort of culturalist essentialism (“They have their own path, which is a function of their deep culture”). One of the many problems with the “alternative modernities” thesis is that it presupposes implicitly that there is a world historical stage—modernity—to which all societies tend. Rather than seeking to understand how capital transformed the world, they focus on the ways in which expansive European states changed the world. While the latter is the case, it is inadequate to fully understand the changes effected by capital—both to Europe and to the rest of the world. In seeking to affirm the “integrity” of each path, such approaches neglect to interrogate the historical emergence of what they call “modernity.” A theory of capital uncovers the emergence as well as the trajectory of “modernity” by uncovering its fundamental structuring principles. It is much more rigorous and less metaphysical than such approaches.

“Anything outside of capitalism is unimaginable.”

Overcoming Capitalism

good and ills of communist revolutions; whether or not capital can generate new forms of the common; conception of subjectivity in Marxian thinking; tendency toward particularism in newer social movements

Liu: I fully agree with you. That’s actually the work I have been doing for the past twenty years. I wanted to challenge the nationalist sentiment, both in Taiwan and in China, that is rooted in the wake of the Enlightenment in the beginning of the twentieth century, when all intellectuals eagerly introduced Western knowledge and the nineteenth-century episteme from Europe, including the concept of the nation-state, the theories of political economy, the necessity for national wealth and developmental progress, and so on. The birth of the nation-state is already a follow-up development of that global development. But after I have done so much deconstruction, I also try to see some of the divergent paths that have occurred at certain moments, be it intellectually, artistically, politically or in other forms. Perhaps some of the experimental and creative forms of critical thinking deserve to be reassessed.

Chinese thinkers like Tan Sitong (譚嗣同), Zhang Taiyan (章太炎), and Wang Guowei (王國維) at the end of the nineteenth century criticized the utilitarian and Adam Smithian political economy that was popular among their contemporaries. The intellectual inclination of the entire society was following that utilitarian and nation-building path, but Tan, Zhang, and Wang resorted back to Buddhist or Zhuangzi's (莊子) ideas. Why Buddhist thoughts or Zhuangzi's philosophy? Because they had the intellectual power to examine the drawbacks and traps of the nominal system and the consensual concept of justice, the consensus that builds up the juridical system and establishes the power system. The critical power of their thoughts already existed in Chinese intellectual history. This force of critical power in thoughts is something I would like to bring back.

But we also need to face the fact that the Qing dynasty was in the crisis of being divided up by the foreign nations, that is, by the imperial forces. When any individual, group, family, or tribe was invaded or slaughtered, or when their properties were divided up—even though it seems that the Qing government and the British government acted like free individuals, they were already determined by the law of the global market of that time. So, the external logic of that economic stage determined local forms of commerce, as well as local hierarchies of classes. That's why revolution at certain historical moment was necessary. But when it comes to the communist history, there is an impasse of thought for most people. Of course we have seen the endpoint—or, not necessarily an endpoint, but the disasters or the failure of the communist societies, and the different ups and downs of the political regime at different historical moments—but we could not easily negate the significance of some of the activities that had been enacted or achieved by the communists.

Postone: I don't think the choice is either to accept the revolution in its own terms or simply reject or dismiss it. I would argue that communist revolutions did not result in socialist societies—and could not have done so. Rather, they developed forms of state capitalism, statist forms for the accumulation of capital. This historical development must be distinguished clearly from the overcoming of capital. The traditional Marxist focus on property relations instead of on the nature of capital contributed to the confusion regarding the nature of the social order generated by communist revolutions. Nevertheless, to say that those societies were state capitalist and not socialist is not to argue that they were not enormously important. One could argue, retrospectively, that between the First World War and the 1970s, the only way a country on the periphery of world capitalism could

develop national capital was by means of the kind of state control effected by communist revolutions. This was the case of Russia and of China. Since then, the conditions of possibility for capital accumulation have changed fundamentally. Whereas strong state control seems to have been the only path for capital accumulation in peripheral countries for the first seven decades of the twentieth century, that changed in the course of the 1970s. Nevertheless, I would argue that China's situation today would have been impossible without the revolution. This suggests that, instead of arguing about states and markets in a decontextualized manner, we have to understand much more about changes in the global conditions of capital accumulation.

Harootunian: I'm still thinking about what you asked about the common. One way to get at it is being attentive to exceptionalisms, the impulse towards exceptionalisms, which is what a good deal of Japan's history and indeed any national history is really based on. But I think that the histories of most nation-states are based on that sense of the irreducibly unique. I also think that capital can only undermine any conception of the common, not throw up new possible forms. Only the US Chamber of Commerce could believe this.

Liu: Moishe, you talked about the generative force of capital: each moment is constituted as well as reconstituting. If we don't take a sheer pessimistic view but try to see different possibilities that can happen at this reconstituting moment, then the past can be treated, *not* as doctrine, but as a generative force with which we may better tackle any impasse of thought. Could that work? That is, could the generative force of intellectual work be thinkable?

Postone: Yes, but capital is generative in very complicated ways, which places a burden on intellectual work to try to be adequate to this complex object of investigation. Let me give an example by briefly sketching one aspect of the notion of equality. It could be argued that capital is generative of the idea of abstract equality, that the historical emergence of that idea is very much tied to the historical emergence of the commodity form as the structuring principle of society. Commodity owners enter into relations of formal equality with one another. This analysis could help explain why, during some periods, members of certain groups—women, the lower classes—were not deemed equal. They were not commodity owners. In such a situation of putatively generalized equality, where formal, juridical hierarchy no longer exists, social inferiority often became naturalized, for

example, in the form of biologicistic theories of gender and race. What is telling here is the experience of workers as a result of collective action—in ways that do not support the common idea that collective action is socialist (or proto-socialist) because it is opposed to bourgeois individualism.

Let me elaborate. The labor contract in capitalist modernity is a contract between two commodity owners, between equals. Yet, as Marx notes, once the worker enters the sphere of production, the relation becomes unequal. Many have taken Marx's analysis as indicating that the truth beneath the appearance of equality is inequality, that equality is merely a sham. I think this is one-sided and obscures an important historical dimension of labor contracts as contracts between commodity owners. Workers begin to see themselves as rights-bearing subjects, that is, as bourgeois subjects. (I do not mean this pejoratively.) The only way, however, that workers can actually realize their status as commodity owners is through collective action, which allows them to bargain over the condition of sale of their labor power, their commodity. In other words, through collective action workers become manifestly what they had been only latently: equal to others, that is, (collective) bourgeois, rights-bearing, subjects. This sort of collective action is rooted in the social form as a form of subjectivity as well as objectivity, and contravenes common understandings of the Marxian project as based on a functionalist conception of subjectivity.

The consciousness of workers as rights-bearing subjects does not by any means explode the limits of capital, but it's a very different kind of consciousness than, for example, that of peasants rising up against landlords in pre-capitalist contexts. The consciousnesses involved are fundamentally different. The workers, as rights-bearing subjects, develop a self-conception as agents. One could argue that the very conception of agency is rooted in the forms of ongoing everyday practice structured as the commodity form.

Socialist movements regarded collective action by workers and the expanded boundaries of equality associated with it positively. Many newer movements of the late 1960s and 1970s, however, were critical of this form of equality. Although a few consciously sought to get beyond the opposition of abstract equality and concrete particularity, most moved in the direction of particularism. Rather than getting beyond the oppositions generated by capital, they moved from one pole of the oppositions to the other. As such they failed. Right-wing anti-modernism also rejects equality, but on different grounds. Nevertheless, these are some unfortunate convergences between the two—especially in the case of anti-globalization as well as in some forms of anti-imperialism.

What I am trying to suggest with these considerations is that capital is complex and multi-faceted. It is generative of a great deal that cannot adequately be grasped as oppressive or as a distortion of what purportedly is a true essence. Careful analysis should be able to differentiate between those generated values that remain within the bounds of capitalism and those that point beyond them.

Harootunian: Moishe talked about how in the sixties and seventies people tried to get out and get beyond capital. Because we were so embedded in the particular system, maybe it's interesting to think about it in a reverse way; maybe we need to unwind capitalism. In the chapter on the working day, Marx focuses on the workers. He shows that, yes, the worker is a commodity, but it's a very different kind of commodity; it's a commodity that capital cannot make. So it might be interesting to think of ways to unwind in order to explore the generative possibilities you are talking about. Another way of unwinding might be to return to the moment when laborer and capitalist were equal yet in time what the laborer possessed became by law the property of the capitalist.

After all, capitalism was a revolutionary force. That was the one thing that Marx recognized: capitalism swept the world and changed all kinds of things. That's what we had. That's why anything outside of it is unimaginable. You work from within. You work from within the very system that brought about the changes. That's a possible way of rethinking, rather than recapitulating the old attempts of, say, utopian communities.

“Social democratic and communist parties transformed the non-teleological dynamic of capital into a teleology of human history.”

Thinkers of the Contemporary

Deleuze and Guattari's take on capitalism; French intellectuals' critiques of Hegel and dialectic; Marx's critical categories; risk of transhistorical theory

Tu: On that note, as a Deleuzian, I cannot help asking the following question. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's goal in *Anti-Oedipus* is to re-write history and economy of desire in a Marxist vision. They argue that they try to understand all history in light of capitalism. As historians, both of you seem to attempt at a more “pure” and “rationalist” engagement with Marxism and capitalism. On the contrary, Deleuze and Guattari focalize on an “affective” conjunction between desiring-production and social reproduction, between libidinal economy and political economy. They also address how the production of subjectivity is also very much

embedded in the social flows in a capitalist system. I wonder how you may react to their alternative Marxist vision of history.

Harootunian: I read their work on a different level than you—maybe that’s why I’m having so much trouble with it. But I’ve also recognized that Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* was itself a reading of Marx’s *Capital* with the effort to tease out subjective desire, which, for the most part is absent in *Capital*. What I liked most about it was the attempt to imagine some form of residual subjectivity capable of eluding the complete constraints of the commodity relation. Related to this and the lure of the capitalist desiring machine, I found very shrewd observations about fascism, especially the way fascism functions at the micro-level—in both *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*. Deleuze and Guattari are particularly aware of the relationship between capitalism and fascism, especially taking off from the Reichian insight that social repression needs psychological repression. But they are by no means unique; you could find this in the Frankfurt School already: people like Theodor W. Adorno and Herbert Marcuse all saw that relationship.

Actually I haven’t seen anyone operationalize what Deleuze and Guattari suggested or take off from it in their terms as a way of configuring a contemporary history.

Murthy: If you put Deleuze in the context, you have to see that there are a couple of targets that some of those books had. One is, of course, Jacques Lacan and psychoanalysis. But who lurks behind Lacan? It’s Hegel. Deleuze always targets Hegel for criticism. This is clear if you look at some of his books, such as the book on Spinoza. Then you begin to see that there is something common among a number of poststructuralist scholars, beginning with Heidegger and Nietzsche. There is a critique of totality that constantly returns.

Postone: So many French intellectuals of that generation, coming out of and reacting against the French Communist Party, perhaps the most orthodox in the West, took Marx’s critical categories, such as value and labor, to be affirmative categories. It seems to me that the widespread critique of Hegel, of the dialectic, and of totality is a critique of what were regarded as affirmative categories. And indeed those concepts had been treated as affirmative by the communists. So, for example, dialectic was not regarded as the movement of historically specific, dualistic, social forms, such as the commodity, but as an alternate, critical view of

the world promulgated by the Party. In criticizing this kind of positive Marxism, however, many gave up the attempt to confront capital intellectually. The consequences have been ultimately disempowering, for it has become increasingly clear that an understanding of capital is of critical importance in understanding the global history of recent decades.

One of the reasons I went back to Marx was to try to recover the categories of his analysis as critical. So, for example, I argue that dialectic in *Capital* is a feature of the forms of capital; it is not the basis of an alternate science. The dialectical interaction of free forms generates a historical dynamic, but it is not teleological. Social democratic and communist parties transformed the non-teleological dynamic of capital into a teleology of human history. I mention this to indicate that I am very sympathetic to the critique of orthodox communism. Nevertheless, I think the post-Marxist theoretical apparatus that served as the basis for that critique has left us conceptually helpless in the face of capital's development in recent decades. Capital was all too frequently ignored or the term was used metaphorically rather than as an analytical category, or introduced in a conceptually non-rigorous manner. So, for example, in *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida throws in a few comments about capitalism as a spice while cooking a very different soup. That is, when he does mention capitalism and the modern world he has recourse to the book of Exodus in the Hebrew Bible and throws in an eclectic list that he terms the ten plagues of modern capitalism. Although, for me, his turn to the story of Passover is culturally gratifying, it is not very helpful as an analysis of the contemporary world.

Murthy: I think Deleuze was precisely mixing a different soup, in which capitalism is one part.

Tu: He and Guattari got their inspiration from Nietzsche, about the co-existence of forces and relations. They see how traditional historiography attempts to render highly complex and dynamic force relations into some sort of successive configuration. That's why in their creation of alternative Marxist history, in addition to capital, there are always other "impure" but co-related elements they would like to bring into the assemblage, such as desiring-production, constitution of subjectivity, and social flows. All of these components penetrate or at least come into conjunction with capital.

Murthy: I can see where the appeal of Deleuze is. What he is doing is a transhistorical theory. That is why, in a sense, things like desiring-production are

not just specific to capitalism; they predate capitalism. Just look at what Deleuze says about China—he speaks of it using transhistorical concepts, such as state, territorialization/de-territorialization, and “war machine.” I don’t think he would be happy if I called him an ontologist because he sees himself as against Heidegger. (But Alain Badiou’s criticism of him is precisely that he is too Heideggerian.) So what you have is this transhistorical theory that goes outside of capital: capital is there simply to show how it reorganizes what is already there.

Because of his transhistorical theory, he is unable to grasp the historical specificity of the concepts that he uses.

Harootunian: The one thing that it does is to arrange them in an entirely different way according to a particular logic, driven by production. The concepts themselves lose their genuine historicity. The abstract logic is prior to its history—why else did Marx begin *Capital* with the account of the commodity form?

“Capitalism inadvertently produced the forces it was trying to eliminate.”

Capital Logic and Historical Reminders

*kinship between the commodity form and nation form; temporal heterogeneity
constitutive of capitalism; importance of the category of
formal subsumption in Marxian thinking*

Murthy: Yes, the logic is prior to or separable from its history, but we must understand this in two ways. First, obviously, the historical origin of capitalism does not follow the order that Marx sets out in *Capital*. In other words, it is not the case that the commodity emerged first, and then money and so on. The second way in which the logic of capital is separable from history, to which I believe you are referring, is more complex and refers to a broader conception of history. From this perspective, the question is whether the logic of capital is also a logic of history. You deal with this question in much of your work on formal subsumption and unevenness.

Harootunian: Viren has expressed this better than I might have, but let me further explain what I have in mind. I’ll shoot for brevity, but it’s a complex problem and doesn’t lend itself to programmatic exposition. We can all agree that capital logic inverts the historical process and refigures it from its own interior moments to make it appear after the commodity form has structured the capitalistic

process of production. It also dominates how history will be thought and put into practice. In this regard, I have always felt there was a kinship between the commodity form and nation form. When Marx described the commodity form as a “mystical thing,” he could have been describing the nation form itself, which is also mystical and spiritual. Both conceal their conditions of historical production behind the form and both privilege an “illusion” of immediacy rooted in the present. Both are timeless. When the nation-state aligned with capital to become its placeholder, its principal vocation was to synchronize capitalism’s temporal accountancy and ensure its continuity. It was thus the nation’s task to make sure that capitalism’s relentless synchronic system, whereby value repetitively valorizes itself to produce the present and a constant contemporaneity, would remain undisturbed. This meant that the nation was dedicated to synchronizing all signs of temporal discordance, unscheduled interruptions, and removing the specter of unevenness coming from either capital and/or an everyday not fully assimilated to the state’s exemplars. In other words, neither capital nor state could fully integrate the social as to eliminate signs of temporal disorder. As a result, there appears what we might call historical remainders (and reminders)—embodied in forms of different time that claim to co-exist with capitalism’s present. Ernst Bloch named this “contemporary non-contemporaneity.” In my view, the appearance of this kind temporal heterogeneity signifies the manifestation of forms of unevenness, economic, cultural, social that capitalism and national history have displaced or simply repressed.

Marx had already foreseen these remainders in *Grundrisse* when he spoke of “historical presuppositions” “lying behind” later developments, whose traces never vanish, and in later texts when he explained the conduct of “formal subsumption” as both “the general form of capitalist production” and as “a particular form alongside capitalism” in its developed maturity. Moreover, he pointed to “transitional” and “hybrid” forms of subsumption, some of which remained outside of capitalism but were reproduced alongside it. What I’ve been trying to do is theorize this category of formal subsumption, which has been underdeveloped in Marxian analyses, and concentrate on the fact that Marx saw it, above all else, as a form, not as a singular event, a one-time content reflecting a historical moment or a stage in a developmental chronology. Why this is important is because formal subsumption performs in such a way as to allow capital to take what it finds and put it to its own use; it resulted in inaugurating a form of uneven and unequal development with serious effects on the economy, politics, society. It produces mediations that must be considered in an examination of any present, anywhere and impels us to take into consideration the local, received histories at the moment they encounter capitalist

production in order to understand its global expansion.

Formal subsumption possesses the capacity to situate practices from earlier modes of production alongside and under newer ones introduced by capitalist production, which means that capitalism, from its beginnings, was marked by mixed practices denoting different temporalities. The reproduction of this system worked to forestall the completion of the commodity relation. Capitalism thus inadvertently produced the forces it was trying to eliminate. Hence, formal subsumption, and its subsets, was the category that embodied the encounter of newer modes of capitalist production with older practices that it took over and thus became the form of intelligibility—though subsequently repressed by both capital and the nation—by which this encounter might be identified as a temporal agent no longer bound by either the actual moment that had generated it or its original content. The form itself signifies the persistence of historical difference and unevenness, which both the narrative of capital logic and national history must repress in order to prevent the consequences of untimeliness.

“I fear that the problem will not be answered by real philosophy or theory.”

Theory in Crisis

hegemony of neo-liberalism; uneven development on a global scale; the state's implication in global inequality; failure of social democracy; limitations of theory

Postone: I think we definitely need historical categories to understand our world. I have experienced several different kinds of global historical phenomena. One was 1968, which was global and which cannot be adequately explained in local terms. Another was the demise of the sorts of state-centric political-economic forms that were predominantly everywhere around the middle of the twentieth century. These forms, whether communist or social democratic, represented the wave of the future for many people. It seemed that capitalism either had been conquered or tamed, that a higher degree of social equality had been attained, and that the harshness of a great deal of life under capitalism had been mitigated. But that configuration has passed away. Instead, what is frequently termed neo-liberalism has become hegemonic, with its attendant growing differentiation of populations everywhere into the enormously wealthy few and the increasingly impoverished many. This large-scale transition has been global. It therefore requires a historical approach that is global. There may be different nodes and swirls in this dynamic pattern, but they are local inflections of global developments. I no longer have

much interest in approaches that cannot address such overarching developments.

Liu: A real philosopher should address contemporary crises.

Postone: Real philosophers, yes.

Harootunian: While I agree with the assessment that neo-liberalism has accelerated the growth of massive inequality on a global scale, the multiplying crises we face are no longer susceptible to either philosophy or theory as we've come to understand them. In fact, what characterizes the current situation is how it has exceeded the familiar received theorizations and explanations concerning the cycle of capitalist crises and how societies manage to eventually get out of them by expanding the horizon of capitalist accumulation. But this time the formula for recovery no longer works. Rampant descent into an unimaginable runaway inequality between rich and poor has managed to do what no political or social theorist had foreseen: join an endless cascade of multiple crises consisting of the disappearance of the middle class, rising permanent unemployment everywhere, insane policies urging austerity (to bail out the banks which made the bad investments in the first place), a financial assets industry which daily discloses that its everyday practices have been habitually riddled with the worst forms of corruption with no impulse for accountability or fear of punishment by the state, etc. A bad analogy for this might be an organism that gradually loses its diverse functions, one by one, whereby each loss affects the others.

The reason for this is because of the state's own intimate involvement in finance capital, its history of enabling it, leading to a failure of nerve to act against its own immediate interests. When nation-states became proxies for globalization, they forfeited not just their own autonomy but also a "sacred democratic" trust to place the interests of their people above all other consideration. What we face is a situation where the political and economic have merged to a vanishing point where they are now indistinguishable. In this scenario, the state serves only the political and financial classes. Banks before people.

What's befallen us is no local crisis but an immense failure in every sector of the social formation that can only make the local and predictable crisis of capital into a world historical event, into a plurality of crises. What appears to be our collective fate now is the recognition of an endgame in which none of our political, economic, social institutions seem to work or are able to sustain the fiction that they work. They appear to be standing at the edge of imminent extinction. What's being

offered is simply attempts to repair the system whose massive global failure has threatened to bring us all down. (Here is a sense of the common that might be worth considering and which the various occupy-movements and Arab Springs have already made manifest.) But we know that capital, as a totality, can't be reformed and that in the past its periodic repair after each successive collapse has resulted only in enlarging its reach, strengthening it for the sole purpose of prolonging its life. Moreover, capitalism's aptitude for systematic totalization means that no domain of society is exempt from its structural failures. In so-called social democratic societies, the impulse is always directed to reforming capitalism, driven by the unquestioned presumption that there is no other alternative to what there is.

Yet, the irony of a democratic order dedicated to equality and a capitalist system founded on inequality yoked in common purpose is a holdover of the Cold War that has outlived its rhetorical and ideological function. There is thus the empty hope that some sort of incremental diminution of injustice and inequality will save the day and end the crisis. But we know that these uneven and unequal asymmetries are part of the very system that social democracies are pledged to reform, which means they can never be reformed. The same can be said of the state's offer of deliverance. How can the state resolve what it has been so intimately implicated in bringing about?

I fear that the problem will not be answered by real philosophy or theory. It's about the crises, actually.

—*Transcript by Nien-ying Wang, Po-han Yang, and Tsung-hua Yang*

About the Authors

Harry Harootunian is Professor Emeritus of History and East Asian Studies at New York University, Visiting Professor in the Literature Program of Duke University, and Adjunct Senior Research Scholar at the Weatherhead East Asian Institute of Columbia University.

Moishe Postone is Thomas E. Donnelley Professor of Modern History at the University of Chicago and Co-Director of the Chicago Center for Contemporary Theory.

Joyce C. H. Liu is Professor in the Graduate Institute for Social Research and Cultural Studies at National Chiao Tung University, Taiwan.

Viren Murthy is Assistant Professor of History at University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Chih-ming Wang is Assistant Research Fellow in the Institute of European and American Studies of Academia Sinica, the national research institution of Taiwan.

Ming Hung Tu is Assistant Professor in the English Department of Tamkang University, Taiwan.