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Critique and Morality:

Claude Lévi-Strauss and Umemoto Katsumi

> Between the Marxist critique, which frees man from his initial bondage—by teaching him that the apparent meaning of his condition evaporates as soon as he agrees to see things in a wider context—and the Buddhist critique which completes his liberation, there is neither opposition nor contradiction. Each is doing the same thing, but on a different level.
>
> —Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*

1. The Marxist Critique and the Buddhist Critique

Let us start from the epigraph cited above, in which Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009) compares the "Marxist critique" and the "Buddhist critique" and contends that they are the same in terms of human liberation. Lévi-Strauss made this remark when he visited Chittagong in India in September 1950. His emotional experience of seeing pious Buddhist rituals moved him to make such a remark.

Then what kind of "liberation" does the "Buddhist critique" complete? It is liberation from "injustice, poverty and suffering" with which this world is filled (Ibid.). Also, it is liberation from "persecution by the dead, the malevolence of the Beyond and the anguish of magic" that seems to spread the agonies of this world to the Beyond (Lévi-Strauss 1973, 408). Thus, according to Lévi-Strauss, "For Buddhism, there is no Beyond" (Ibid.). This is a crucial difference between Buddhism and other religions such as Christianity and Islam that assume the existence of the Beyond and give meanings to this world, based on it.[1]

1. In this last part of *Tristes Tropiques*, Lévi-Strauss harshly criticizes Islam. Regarding this,

But does not Buddhism negate this world itself? Lévi-Strauss states that Buddhism is a "radical criticism of life," and leads "the sage to deny all meaning to beings and things," and "abolishes the universe, and abolishes itself as a religion" (Lévi-Strauss 1973, 408). If so, by rejecting all meaning, it simply nullifies "injustice, poverty and suffering." In that case, it might be completely different from the "Marxist critique" that intervenes in this world and tries to change the human condition that gives rise to "injustice, poverty and suffering."

To this question, Jacques Derrida responds in *Of Grammatology* that the "Marxist critique" and the "Buddhist critique" are completely different, and states that Lévi-Strauss should have discussed them not on the same level, but in the "original strictness of the Marxist critique" that is differentiated from the "Buddhist critique."[2]

However, Lévi-Strauss does not distinguish these two forms of critique because of his understanding of Marxism. In a passage that Derrida omits, Lévi-Strauss refers to the "Marxist critique" as follows: "by teaching him [human being] that the apparent meaning of his con-

see Nakajima 2010.

2. Derrida writes as follows:

> In *Tristes Tropiques*, Lévi-Strauss is aware of proposing a Marxist theory of writing. He says it in a letter of 1955 (the year the book appeared) to the *Nouvelle critique*. Criticized by M. Robinson in the name of Marxism, he complains:
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> > If he [M. Robinson] had read my book, instead of confining himself to the extracts published a few months ago, he would have discovered—in addition to a Marxist hypothesis on the origins of writing—two studies dedicated to Brazilian tribes (the Caduveo and the Bororo), which are efforts to interpret native superstructures based upon dialectical materialism. The novelty of this approach in the Western anthropological literature perhaps deserves more attention and sympathy.
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> Our question is therefore no longer only "how to reconcile Rousseau and Marx" but also: "Is it sufficient to speak of superstructure and to denounce in a hypothesis an exploitation of man by man in order to confer a Marxian pertinence upon this hypothesis?" A question that has meaning only through implying an original rigor in Marxist criticism and distinguish it from all other criticism of suffering, of violence, of exploitation, etc.; for example, from Buddhist criticism. Our question has clearly no meaning at the point where one can say "between Marxist criticism […] and Buddhist criticism […] there is neither opposition nor contradiction." (Derrida 1976, 119–120)

dition evaporates as soon as he agrees to see things in a wider context." In other words, Marxism for Lévi-Strauss is to reconsider the human condition at a point where its apparent meaning evaporates. Then what is it?

2. Marxist Morals

Here, let us look at Watanabe Kōzō's work *Fighting Lévi-Strauss* that sheds light on the young Lévi-Strauss as a socialist activist, before his appearance as an anthropologist. In 1933, two years before his visit to Brazil, Lévi-Strauss contributed a book review to *Socialist Students*. At the very end of the review, he writes as follows:

> We revolutionaries lack a moral system at the present moment. We reject current values. Values that we insist on creating are not yet real, but will become concrete when we have a socialist society. Thus, in order to constitute our "current morals," that is to say, morals that give us practical principles of life, we must go to the "fundamental activity" that is solely justified and realized and defines human values. It is a dominant contact with nature. At least, I interpret the affinity between the revolutionary spirit and naturalistic neo-romanticism as what is so deep and must be confirmed as a fact.[3]

As indicated here, Marxism for Lévi-Strauss is a conception of a society that is based on morals, which are based on new values. But these morals have not yet arrived. What is necessary now is to invent "current morals, that is to say, morals that give us practical principles of life." In this respect, Lévi-Strauss goes to nature, because he thinks that morals are born only from a dominant contact with nature. Watanabe says that here "his most fundamental awareness of the problem during this period, which is to consider the relation between the revolutionary spirit, a human being, and nature, in particular, from the viewpoint of morals" (83). But why must morals be considered in terms of the

3. Quoted by Watanabe 2009, 85.

contact with nature? Also, why must they be mentioned in terms of Marxism? In answering these questions, Watanabe points out that there is a concept of the "dominance of natural power" in Engels's Dialectics of Nature that Lévi-Strauss quotes in *Les Mythologiques* (86); however, this is not a satisfactory answer to the question of founding morals.

Let us go back to the end of *Tristes Tropiques*. Here, Lévi-Strauss mentions the opportunity of "liberation" where "the apparent meaning of the human condition evaporates:"

> The possibility, vital for life, of *unhitching*, which consists—Oh! fond farewell to savages and explorations! —in grasping, during the brief intervals in which our species can bring itself to interrupt its hive-like activity, the essence of what it was and continues to be, below the threshold of thought and over and above society: in the contemplation of a mineral more beautiful than all our creations; in the scent that can be smelt at the heart of a lily and is more imbued with learning than all our books; or in the brief glance, heavy with patience, serenity and mutual forgiveness, that, through some involuntary understanding, one can sometimes exchange with a cat. (Lévi-Strauss 1973, 414–415)

In short, the human condition, which is shown or washed out by "*unhitching*" or "liberation," is that a human being is not alone in this world and is with nature. In other words, the morals to come are to fundamentally co-exist with nature and other human beings. If we say this in a Marxist way, morals are based on fundamental "exchange."[4]

4. Watanabe Kōzō states:

> The relation between freedom and constraint suggested in such a way, that is, a way of thought that finds an a priori principle in the basis of empirical varieties of rules, might be one answer to the question that the young Lévi-Strauss in his twenties considered using the terms in Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*.
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> If so, then was there an answer to the subject that he obtained from Marx? Such a question or answer cannot be found in the works of Lévi-Strauss. But perhaps the claim that "exchange" in human beings creates "values" of women, or the claim that "the role of kinship in the making of human beings from apes" is the source of "exchange" and "value," could be an answer. (Watanabe 2009, 131–132)

But, human beings have created many levels of "institutions, morals and customs" (Lévi-Strauss 1973, 413) which bear upon the "co-existence" or "exchange" with nature and other human beings and are headed toward our "enslavement" (414).

Then how can this "enslavement" be stopped? To do so, we need the "Buddhist critique" that "abolishes the universe, and abolishes itself as a religion" (408). But this is not to jump straight to "*unhitching*" or "liberation."

> The complete denial of meaning is the end point in a succession of stages each one of which leads from a lesser to a greater meaning. The final step, which cannot be achieved without the others, validates them all retroactively. In its own way and on its own level, each one corresponds to a truth. (412)

Even in Buddhism, it is the final step to "abolish the universe, and abolish itself as a religion." Thus, it must accomplish each step before the final step. What is necessary is to take the "opposite course to that leading to enslavement" (414) and to head toward morals as a regulative ideal in the Kantian sense. In this regard, the "Marxist critique" is also effective. As Watanabe discerns, Lévi-Strauss's understanding of Marxism consists in its combination with a Kantian reading by way of morals (Watanabe 2009, 59–60).

3. From the Buddhist Critique to the Marxist Critique: The Case of Umemoto Katsumi

Here, let us look at the case of a Japanese Marxist. Tosaka Jun (1900–1945) tackled the problem of morality when the young socialist activist Lévi-Strauss struggled with that of morals. At the core of Tosaka's thought, there was a combination of Marxism and Kantian morals. This combination occupied an important place in Japan after

According to Watanabe's conjecture, the most important idea that Lévi-Strauss finds in Marx is "exchange," and from this notion, he tries to found morals.

this prewar period, in particular, in the discussions concerning postwar Japan. The representative of these discussions is Umemoto Katsumi (1912–1974), who was a leading player in the debate on subjectivity in postwar Japan.

Umemoto's point of departure is Buddhism. His graduation thesis, "Shinran on the Logic of *jinen hōni*" written in 1936 under the direction of Watsuji Tetsurō, is a "Buddhist critique" that intends to "negate all self-affirmation of this world" (Umemoto 1978, 41) by listening to the "voice from the Beyond" that calls out to us. But, because it is a too hasty "absolute negation of reality" (50), it entails the "dangers of over-hasty resignation" that Lévi-Strauss refers to (Lévi-Strauss 1973, 411). In short, it may accept the status quo of this reality as "absolute negation qua absolute affirmation" (Umemoto 1978, 50). Umemoto's conclusion is this:

> Thus, in *jinen hōni*, human beings self-consciously return to their original being or state. There, all in one, one in all. Human beings have a dual character that is an individual and a whole at the same time, and absolutely obey this reality. This is their original state. Thus, because it is original, it is natural. (68)

Nevertheless, we cannot say that Umemoto's conclusion does not have a critical viewpoint on reality. The reality, which human beings are supposed to absolutely obey, must be "saturated," through negation, "by something new" and must appear as a "completely new world." But what sustains this subtle critical viewpoint? It is "moral ideals."

> [Tathāgata's] arrangement is found in reality, in reason, and in conscience as nature and necessity. Thus, without devoting oneself to moral ideals of *Sanzen* and *Jōzen*, one would have never participated in this arrangement. (51)

Sanzen and *Jōzen* are the self-cultivation of morals before reliance upon others by prayer to Amitabha. Umemoto contends that "devoting oneself to moral ideals" is necessary for one to "participate in Tathāgata's arrangement." If we can say that Umemoto's position at this point is

unique, its uniqueness consists of this idea. Umemoto kept it even after his conversion to Marxism.

4. The Debate on Ethical Subjectivity

Umemoto's essay, "The Limits of Human Freedom," which triggered the debate on subjectivity, was written in 1946 and published in 1947.[5] In its beginning, Umemoto writes:

> Now we need to recover the true human beings, which are abstracted and floating in the air, in real human beings. To borrow Rousseau's words, we must change this isolated physical being and make it a social and ethical being. This can be done by the sublation of a capitalist society that is based on mercantilist mode of production. There, a "moral personality" which was isolated from real human beings is recovered in them, and "it is not until this happens that human liberation is accomplished" (*Zur Judenfrage*). When this happens, liberation of individuality is possible. When it is possible, an individual obtains a "means to develop one's aptitude in all directions," and thus this "makes personal liberty possible" (*Die deutsche Ideologie*). According to Engels, this personal liberty is that a human being "*consciously* becomes a protagonist" of him/herself. Although this short essay intends to consider one area where a human being consciously becomes a protagonist of him/herself, this presupposes that each person materially becomes a protagonist of him/herself, first of all. For that reason, I think, it was said that it is not until social contradictions are sublated, and even the memory of the class domination is lost that a true human morality is revived. (Umemoto 1977a, 10–11)

Here Umemoto tries to realize the "true human morality" under the ideal of Marxism so as to "make Rousseau and Marx compatible." Furthermore, claiming that "science that rejects all easy resignation and

5. As Kunio Takei points out, before this paper Umemoto wrote a paper "Marxism and Ethics" and sent it to Watsuji (Takei 1977, 55). This title suggests Umemoto's interests.

the deception of fantasies and uncovers all mysteries could be the true word of God," he still overlaps Marxism as a science with the "Buddhist critique."[6]

Now, let us look over another important paper in the debate on subjectivity, "Materialism and Human Beings: Marxism and the Religious" (1947). As one of the words in the subtitle, "religious," suggests, the framework of this paper is to repeat what we have thus far examined. But what makes this paper important is that it redefines the problem of the "religious" or morality in terms of the concept of "relation."

> To sum up, love or selflessness is born of "relations" between human beings, and all relations are created by production. But the "relation" is self-consciously realized as the one between human beings by what it produced. Although consciousness and language are its products, the "relation" that does not produce them does not become the one between human beings. Ethics is its necessary consequence, and its antinomy has the same origin as the formation of the relation itself. (51)

In short, Umemoto tries to figure out where "human moral consciousness"[7] shows up in the terms of the "relation" which could be defined as "exchange" by Lévi-Strauss, while keeping the idea of morality as a regulative ideal in the Kantian sense of the word.

Then, we could call the subject that Umemoto argues for in the debate on subjectivity the "ethical subject." However, Matsumura Kazuto, one of his opponents in the debate, does not understand it properly. With some reservations, Matsumura regards Umemoto's argument as "revisionism, in particular, ethical revisionism in Marxism" (Matsumura 1948, 25) (in other words, "neo-Kantian revisionism"

6. Ibid., 24. As a Buddhist critique, Umemoto has in mind Shinran's *sangantennyu* (Ibid.).

7. Umemoto states: "The relation that differentiates human beings [from animals] in the strict sense of the word is a social relation, only it can produce consciousness and language. Furthermore, by producing them, the relation can objectify and realize itself as the one. Thus, the view that regards human moral consciousness as an extension of animal instinct should have no relation with Marx. We could say that it is almost the same as considering human beings without them" (Ibid., 40). As this passage shows, Umemoto stresses that human moral consciousness emerges not from instinct, but from relationality.

(Ibid.) such as "Cohen, Stammler, Staudinger, Vorländer, and others" (23) and criticizes it on the grounds that it "completely loses a viewpoint of class" because it tries to "found socialism on norms, values, and oughts [*sollen*] that are validated by themselves beyond human beings" (27). But Umemoto's argument does not "seek such a beyond-class, abstract 'subjectivity'." (37)

Let us look at Umemoto's response to Matsumura in "Subjectivity and Class: In Response to Matsumura Kazuto's Critique" (1948). According to Umemoto, "the Marxist logic of human liberation" is "beyond a proletarian, instinctive perspective of self-liberation" and is based on morality that is beyond "natural interests" (Umemoto 1977, 166). This is because here it is a question of "how a human being can abandon one's life for future generations." (67)

> Here is not only a spatial sense of solidarity, but also a temporal and historical sense of solidarity. In other words, history itself resides at the basis of one's life. Our selves are given their existences by individual and natural lives. Naturally, they cannot be separated from limited consciousness. Thus, the final state of forming the subject is in the area of transfer from an individual to history. In this area of psychological dialectics, the position of the "I" that employs the dialectics of nothingness must be modified; however, it is no doubt that these two are not united in a natural, quantitative extension. From such a perspective, the duty to class is differentiated from a Kantian position, that is, a position that sees self-satisfaction in accomplishing the duty itself. Insofar as we take the latter position, unrewarded self-sacrifice inevitably calls for the Beyond. But history does not require the Beyond. When one has such consciousness, a human being finds a reason he/she may die in this world. At least as one of world views, here is an aspect of subjective comprehension of historical materialism. This is not to sanctify or mystify historical materialism. A world view is, in short, a place where human being can find a reason to die. (174–175)

As clearly shown here, Umemoto states a moral position or world view that a human being dies for at the limit of a natural position and is

based on a "temporal and historical sense of solidarity." This is morality that is exclusively rooted in this world. It is not based on the Beyond, but on future generations.

5. The Critique of the State and Reconciliation with Nature

But we have to ask here how Umemoto's morality differs from the ethics of Watsuji Tetsurō (1889–1960) who was Umemoto's mentor at the University of Tokyo, if its fundamental conditions are given by a "relation" and if it conceives the "ethical subjectivity" that is formed in the "transfer to history." Let us look over Umemoto's "fundamental critique" (347–348) of Watsuji in his essay "State, Nation, Class, and Individuality" (1966). Umemoto refers to Watsuji's *Climate* [*Fūdo*] as "a work that squeezes, from a hermeneutic perspective, all the juice of a historical materialist conception of nature that has been formed from Feuerbach to Marx, and splendidly gives it a Japanese expression" (359–360). He states as follows:

> Nature that surrounds us is not a mere physical nature, separated from human beings. Feuerbach once said that "both sun and moon call on us to know ourselves." Marx's view of nature places the sensitivity of social human beings who are historically constructed behind such nature, and captures nature in a correspondence with such a human sensitivity. In other words, "we find ourselves as beings in relationship [*aidagara*] to climate." [Watsuji, *Climate*]
>
> When we find ourselves in nature, "ourselves" here are not isolated, abstract individuals. We are individuals in a certain social relation. We are human beings as *aidagara*. The term "*aidagara*" is not as successful as "climate." But there is no doubt that the term is a Japanese discovery—a hermeneutic discovery—of the term "relation" [*Verhaltnis*] to which Marx gives a special meaning in distinguishing between animals and human beings. When Marx says that "generally speaking, animals have no relation with anything. Only human beings have relations [*sich verhalten*]" (Marx, *Die deutsche Ideologie*), how should we translate this into Japanese? The expression "*sich verhalten*" means

> "behave," and "behave" means having a certain attitude. We could call such a relation aidagara. (360–361)

Umemoto says that *aidagara*, the fundamental idea in Watsuji's ethics, is a refinement of Marx's idea of "relation." This implies that Watsuji succeeds Marx, who criticizes "the modern view of human beings" that takes an individual as an "isolated self," and contends that "human beings are the totality of social relations" (363). But Watsuji diverges from Marx at the very moment of succession. On the one hand, from this conception of human beings as the "totality of social relations," Marx goes on to clarify the "physical basis" which is behind the "totality of social relations of human beings" and defines it, discusses the "relations of production" (369), and "fundamentally criticizes modern capitalism" (371). On the other hand, Watsuji goes on to found a "multilayered structure of Japanese culture" and "Japanese character" by regarding the "physical basis" as "climate" (364) and modifies Marxism by "hermeneutically interpreting labor as a medium of accomplishing community."

As a result, Watsuji's ethics finally splits with the moral Marxism that Umemoto stands for, and in the following sense: consent to or critique of the state. For Watsuji, the state is "a moral system in its original sense, and if it is exposed to an external threat, it is natural that we should sacrifice our lives and properties to protect the state from the threat."[8] Furthermore, "an individual can return to the ultimate totality by devoting himself to the state" (505). The state as the summit of these moral systems is one of possible termini for an ethics that starts not from an isolated self, but from *aidagara* or relation. To borrow Umemoto's words, this is one of the answers, or the best answer for thinking about "how a human being as a limited one can go beyond his limitation by accomplishing co-existence and how he can accomplish himself through negating oneself." (Umemoto 1977b, 371)

But how does Umemoto try to oppose Watsuji's ethics? Umemoto's critique is to declare that "the state is a non-moral system in its original

8. Watsuji 1942, 496. The earlier version of the *Ethics* published before the second world war (1942) greatly differs from its later version published after the war (*Ethics*, in *Collected Works of Tetsurō Watsuji*, vols. 10–11 [Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1962]).

meaning" (349) and to reject the principle of the state not only locally, but also internationally (347). This view is supported by the Marxism that Umemoto attempts to understand in his way.

> Marxism always confirms solidarity in all individuals' battles against the principle of the state that regards war as necessity. (392)

For Umemoto, the state is an "illusionary community."[9] But "a human being does not believe in the illusion due to violence" (191). If an individual is simply coerced by others, this cannot explain the emergence of the illusion. Marx's argument is important because it "clarifies the process by which the illusion is formed, in terms of the economic and essential structure of the process of production" (190). To criticize the illusion, it is enough to change the "economic and essential structure."

If so, then Umemoto does not have to appeal to morality. It is sufficient to take the route of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the extinction of the class without appealing to morality. If he does not appeal to morality, he could avoid the confusion between Watsuji's ethics and his own. But why must he appeal to morality?

Umemoto does not clearly state this point. But we could find a faint ethics beyond the domain of Watsuji's ethics. It is morality that is based on a more fundamental "relation" with nature which is before the relation with human beings and on a level different from "climate." In the end of "State, Nation, Class, and Individuality," Umemoto writes as follows:

> Marx himself says that when a human being recovers him/herself from alienated labor as a subject of production, he/she reconciles, in the process of recovery, with the deep root of nature as something that defines the individual. Even if it is a difficult route, we would be subsumed under a more irrational and a more disgusting illusion—if we lose hope of such a possibility. Communism is a symbol of human possibility taken to its extreme. (391–392)

9. "An Interpretation of the Feuerbachian Thesis and the Discussion of the State: Focusing on the Problem of Alienation" (1961), in Umemoto 1977b, 190.

Reconciliation with nature is a regulative ideal, even for Marx. That is, it cannot be accomplished in so-called Marxism. Umemoto claims that Marxism would "not likely solve the historical mystery that is a conflict between human beings and nature or between human beings themselves" (Ibid.). But for him, only Marxism can point to the mystery and criticize its process.

We could not say that the "Buddhist critique" returns here. Nevertheless, it is significant that the Marxism that Umemoto and Lévi-Strauss understand goes beyond the limit of humanism and tries to find morality in a more fundamental "relation" with nature. It is a thinking that thoroughly extends the "Marxist critique" to its extreme possibility.

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