

Review of Kojin Karatani, *Isonomia and the Origins of Philosophy*.
Durham: Duke UP, 2017. 176 pages.

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Preview

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The argument, in outline, is as follows: the standard understanding of the Ionian philosophers of the two or so centuries preceding Plato and Aristotle—the so-called pre-Socratics—is wrong; this wrong understanding is due largely to the influential revisionist account of them by their arch opponents, the self-same Plato and Aristotle, who make Socrates, and hence Athens, appear to be the origin of philosophy, and in doing so turn philosophy idealist and theological; whereas a rereading of the extant fragments of the Ionians, together with a critical reconsideration of Ionian political economy, leads us to conclude that Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, Heraclitus et al practised philosophy, including ethics and political philosophy, similarly to Socrates (such that it becomes conceivable to say that 'if one wants to properly consider the pre-Socratics one must include Socrates in their number' (134)) and, furthermore, and finally and most boldly, that if philosophy was born in Ionia in the time preceding Socrates, it was born in conditions of nomadic communism, or, in other words, of a culture of migration, handicraft manufacture, trade and the absence or negation of rule (which is Karatani's preferred translation for *isonomia*).

Much is at stake, it seems, in this short book. Let us examine some of its finer parts. To begin, the standard view of the so-called pre-Socratics casts them as somewhat naïve metaphysicians or natural philosophers, affirming visions of the fundamental structure of things on the basis of selective observations of nature and some intuitions and accompanying generalizations. Socrates' ethical practice within the polis of an art of questioning is, so the story goes, completely new and different: Socrates births philosophy proper in a city, Athens, uniquely constituted to allow such a birth. It is, furthermore, something about democracy that makes Athens so suitable for this world-historical event. The standard view is quite patronizing. The standard view elevates the exclusively male, propertied, slave-owning citizens of Athens into the first friends of democracy and the first global manifestation of philosophical reasoning, thereby erasing earlier democratic and democratic-related political innovations—notably in Ionia—and, furthermore, discounting the common, or coincidental, formation of philosophic thinking and universal religion across the globe in the sixth century BCE (see, e.g., 'Figure Intro. 1 – Chronology of Ancient Greek and Asian Thinkers' (x)).

The cities of Ionia were not walled, as Athens was to separate the classes, but Ionian cities were, nevertheless, *poleis* and, Karatani argues, more truly *poleis* in the sense of contracts among individuals than the tribal clan societies of the Greek city-states (35-36). The Ionian cities were founded circa 1,000-800 BCE through a process of serial colonization which negated old tribal and kinship ties: "what was restored in the cities of Ionia was the nomadic existence that preceded tribal society... They recuperated nomadism by the practice of foreign trade and manufacturing" (24). The Ionians were migrants, working with their hands, travelling to trade and to work land, and existing without property in persons or unequal distributions in land. The Greeks were, by contrast, military warriors who scorned manual labour; though formally they were farmers, in practice they owned slaves for such work and devoted themselves to political and military matters (21).

The political economies of Ionia and Greece differed, as did their respective political ideals and aspirations, though the standard view glosses over significant differences and tips the balance to Athens' favour. In fact, Karatani claims, "nearly all of what is believed to be distinctive about Greece began in Ionia" (12); this list of distinctions includes the alphabet, market prices, coin money and foreign trade. Perhaps the most important of the glosses or sliding over of differences is the usual conflation, as old as Herodotus, of democracy, in the Greek sense of majority rule, with the Ionian idea of *isonomia*. Hannah Arendt notes their distinctness in *On Revolution*, Karatani acknowledges, but does little with it (14). Karatani aims to do much more.

Isonomia has been translated into English, and conceived as, democracy, the rule of law, and the equality of the law, to name the main variants. Karatani prefers to translate it and conceive it as ‘no-rule’ (15). No-rule should be clearly distinguished from majority rule (as communist, egalitarian practice is from parliamentary democracy (16)). No-rule makes sense if it is understood as an absence of the need for rule, absence of the need for distinction between ruler and ruled, between a ruling class and a ruled class. Democracy as majority rule operates fully within the dynamic of ruler-versus-ruled: “In Athenian society the struggles between the aristocratic and democratic factions became a feature of life. This took a particularly virulent form during the years of the Peloponnesian War...”(121). Conditions in

Ionia when isonomia flourished were very different, with peaceful coexistence of multiple city-states and something like a cosmopolitan ethos: “Isonomia (no-rule) was not simply an idea but a living reality in the city-states of Ionia. It was only after the fall of the Ionian states to the Lydian empire in the sixth century that it spreads to other regions as an idea” (15). Given that “[t]here are almost no historical or archaeological materials to give us an idea of what Ionian cities were really like... [t]here are two possible approaches to make inferences. First, we can read the work of the Ionian thinkers. ... The second method is to draw inferences in world history from cases that resemble Ionia” (26). The preponderance of Karatani’s argument adopts the first approach. By way of the second, analogical approach, he compares Ionia to Iceland in the tenth to the thirteenth centuries CE and to the North American townships of the eighteenth century. In each case, a settler or colonist community engages in collective self-constitution and decision-making in conditions of equality and free movement.

The free movement of peoples is at the heart of Ionian isonomia. The free movement of matter is at the heart of Ionian natural philosophy. The affirmation and practice of both free movement of peoples and the free movement of matter may be seen as defining the Ionian philosophers as exemplary prophets (12). Stated so starkly, it is pretty easy to see how the metaphysics or natural philosophy of Thales et al might have relevance to ethical and political practice. The standard view dislocates any such unity of thought and practice, insisting instead on the simplicity and apparent irresolvability of the various images of matter—water, earth, air, fire, the unlimited, etc. As Karatani shows, clearly and forcefully, the Ionians considered a broad range of topics in their fragments and in addition to observation and generalization and reasoning by analogy also used methods of indirect proof and hypothetical reasoning attributed standardly to Socratic origin. The key issue, moreover, in the arguments concerning arche or the

first principle is whether arche is immanent or transcendent, within matter itself or outside it in some other, transcendent domain (namely of the gods or the godlike). The difference between materialism and idealism lies here. Hence “[t]he natural philosophers beginning with Thales sought an explanation of the world without reference to the gods” (56) and “what is crucial for natural philosophy is not the identity of *arche*...but rather that it moves itself” (58).

Karatani’s textual net is broader than the Ionian proper (Chapter Three), including, to start with: Hippocrates, Herodotus, Homer and Hesiod, for an understanding of the background of Ionian natural philosophy (Chapter Two); developing through the ‘post-Ionian’ Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Parmenides, Empedocles, Anaxagoras, and Leucippus (Chapter Four); and concluding, with its longest and final chapter, on ‘Socrates and Empire’ (Chapter Five), which brings the analysis to a close with the folding of Socrates into the ken of the ‘pre-Socratics’: “if one wants to properly consider the pre-Socratics one must include Socrates in their number. Socrates was the last person to try to reinstate Ionian thought and politics. In order to refute Platonic metaphysics and theology, it is precisely Socrates that is required” (134).

The movement away from Ionian naturalism and materialism begins with Pythagoras of Samos (582-497 BCE), who turns Ionian thought against itself and prepares the way for Plato (78). Heraclitus is, for Karatani, the pivotal figure: “It seems...to me, that what brought about a decisive shift in Ionian philosophy was Pythagoras, and that Heraclitus and Parmenides were figures that resisted this change” (87). Heraclitus (540-480 BCE) and Parmenides (515-450 BCE) are contemporaries, one reason for Karatani’s disagreement with Hegel and others that Parmenides is responding to Heraclitus:

What Parmenides rejected was the retrospective view introduced by Pythagoras. Retrospectively, one can understand motion to be a combination of number and point...a continuous line can be resolved into number and point, and likewise number and point continue to form something continuous. What Parmenides maintained is that motion is indivisible, that is to say, One. He sought to show this by indirect proof, and his pupil Zeno employed the same method (91).

Heraclitus nominates fire to be the One, to explain all things, as per fragment 55: “All things are an exchange for fire and fire for all things, as goods for gold and gold for goods” (85). This nomination of fire is not, according to Karatani, the somewhat arbitrary elevation of one element to universal status

but, rather, a claim of the universal systemic function of that element, a claim that Karatani holds to be a precursor of Marx's analysis of money as a total system of social exchange (85).

Heraclitus, Ionian and post-Ionian, comes on the scene, at Ephesus, relatively late, at a point when isonomia has begun to crumble:

...people are equal precisely by virtue of being free. However, as the movement of colonists continues, eventually the requisite frontier will disappear. As the frontier attenuates, gaps in wealth and relations of dominance and submission will emerge interior to the polis. Such tendencies became conspicuous in the cities across Ionia in the first half of the sixth century' (68-69).

These years also see the invasion of Ionian city-states by the Lydian empire (581 BCE) followed by the Persian (546 BCE), against which many of the Ionian states unite (except, notably, Ephesus) during the Ionian revolt (499-93 BCE). Heraclitus' Ephesus does not join the revolt; Heraclitus' stance against the citizens of Ephesus (e.g., fragments 143 and 145), which some, like Karl Popper, have interpreted as showing "a hostility toward democracy" (81), must be read in this light as criticism of the political repudiation of isonomia by Ephesus. A political and ethical Heraclitus, who remains in an Ephesus with which he disagrees, resembles Socrates (86).

Aligning Socrates with the pre-Socratics brings Socrates closer to Heraclitus and farther away from Plato and Aristotle; it brings Socrates closer to the Sophist and the foreigner, to the one who chooses their polis: "Socrates was the first person in Athens to attempt to lead his life as an individual. In that sense he was *cosmopolitan*" (36). Whereas Plato and Aristotle showed commitment to the polis and taught rulers, Socrates preferred the *agora*:

In the public square were mixed people who had no chance of participating in public affairs: foreigners, women, slaves. If democracy was operative in the assembly, it was isonomia in the agora. That is to say, in Athens, isonomia was only possible in the agora. Hence, by limiting his activities chiefly to the agora, without consciously realizing it Socrates reinstated an Ionian style of thought (122).

The Ionian spirit is Socrates as the return of the repressed. To the major line of Socratics constituted by the standard version bearers Plato, Aristotle, and Xenophon, Karatani adds a line of minor Socratics who continue the critical cosmopolitan spirit: "The real lineage of Socrates's thought should be traced less through Plato than through such individualist and cosmopolitan thinkers

as Socrates's direct disciple Antisthenes, founder of the cynics, and Antisthenes's disciple Diogenes"(36).

Our young twenty-first century would appear to be in much need of Karatani's shatteringly good argument, as immigrants struggle with democratic nation states and opposition to multinational capitalist Empire is disparate and diffuse, at best, and, according to some, almost impossible to conceive. In such somewhat familiar and also radically new environments, nomadism and communism remain and revivify the compelling critical alternatives.

To understand fully Karatani's contribution to the rethinking of communism and nomadism and their conjunction, we would need to say more concerning the cosmopolitanism of the Ionians and of Kant, for which I refer the reader to Karatani's earlier work on the conjunction of Kant and Marx, *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx*, translated by Sabu Kohso (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2005); we would also need to say more concerning Karatani's primary critical argument with Marx, concerning the relative significance of modes of production and modes of exchange, for which I refer you to the aforementioned *The Structure of World History*, to which *Isonomia* is an outgrowth or child, and also to *Isonomia's* Appendix, wherein Karatani situates isonomia as a form of the mode of exchange D, the fourth and most free of the modes of exchange, that Karatani assembles in the following typology (135):

- MODE A Reciprocity by gift and counter-gift
- MODE B Domination and protection
- MODE C Commodity exchange
- MODE D Mode that transcends A, B, and C

Accordingly, the Ionian so-called pre-Socratics, of which Socrates is one, are the exemplary prophets of Mode of Exchange D, which means that they are the prophets of nomadism and cosmopolitanism and communism, which means that they are the philosophical prophets of no-rule.

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