



# Kōjin Karatani, "Isonomia and the Origins of Philosophy"

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**Kōjin Karatani.** *Isonomia and the Origins of Philosophy*. Trans. Joseph A. Murphy. Duke University Press 2017. 176 pp. \$94.95 USD (Hardcover 9780822368854); \$24.95 USD (Paperback 9780822369134).

By contemporary standards, Kōjin Karatani is a polymath. Although he is most frequently associated with philosophy and literary criticism, his work also draws heavily on the study of politics, economics, and anthropology. *Isonomia and the Origins of Philosophy*, first published in Japan in 2012 and translated into English in 2017, is no exception. Throughout *Isonomia*, Karatani moves swiftly—even abruptly—from reflecting on cosmology, ontology, and mathematics to investigating the significance of coined money, bureaucracy, and phonetic alphabets. Depending on the extent to which the reader has bought into the spirit of specialization, the effect can be either dazzling or disorienting. The sheer variety of the subject matter discussed in this brief volume makes it difficult to summarize. Put briefly, it is a reinterpretation of ancient Greek philosophy and politics from the standpoint of *isonomy*, the social and political principle of non-rule born in the colonies of Ionia.

*Isonomia* is a companion to Karatani's previous book, *The Structure of World History*. In this work, Karatani developed a novel framework for a global interpretation of history. While Marx understood history as a procession of *modes of production* ('Asiatic' tributary regimes, ancient slave societies, feudalism, capitalism), Karatani instead elects to investigate historical transformations from the perspective of four distinct *modes of exchange*. This approach also structures the overarching argument of *Isonomia*, so it is worth outlining in brief. Mode A is the reciprocal exchange of gift and counter-gift, which forms a tribal community among kinship groups. Structures of obligation govern reciprocal gift-giving: an obligation to receive and an obligation to reciprocate with a counter-gift. Its functions are at once economic, social, and political; such exchanges are not matters of utility-maximization but concern the arrangement of relations between persons and the distribution of things equally. Mode B is an exchange of protection for obedience, which institutes a state. This form of exchange corresponds to the *pactum subjectionis* of modern social contract theories. Here especially, it is evident that Karatani understands the category of exchange very broadly, in a way that not only encompasses the exchange of goods but also the exchange of actions. Mode C corresponds to the phenomenon that we most readily associate with the activity of exchange: the exchange of money for commodities among strangers, which constitutes a market. Finally, there is the enigmatic Mode D, the pure gift, which Karatani describes as a recuperation of Mode A on a higher level, freed from the reciprocal ties of clan and kinship. This framework is reproduced in the Appendix of *Isonomia*, so readers unfamiliar with *The Structure of World History* might consider consulting this Appendix before proceeding to the introductory chapter.

While in *The Structure of World History*, Mode D appears only infrequently, as a 'regulative idea' or as something yet to come, *Isonomia* investigates Mode D in its concrete, historical existence. According to Karatani, Mode D was realized in the ancient principle of *isonomy*. *Isonomy* is typically rendered as 'political equality,' but Karatani opts for an unconventional translation. In *On Revolution*, Hannah Arendt distinguished between democratic majority-rule and *isonomy*, which she defined as a relation of *non-rule*, holding that the latter and not the former was the norm of the ancient



Athenian polity. Karatani takes up Arendt's distinction, but rather than localizing *isonomy* in Athens, he instead argues that it originated and in fact was only possible in the colonial polities of Ionia.

One of the most audacious aspects of *Isonomia* is Karatani's critique of democracy, ancient and modern. Like many ancient polities, the Athenian economy featured a class division between a wealthy landowning minority and a majority of impoverished citizens at risk of debt servitude. This arrangement of property caused economic inequalities to compound over time. In response, the impoverished majority periodically backed tyrants who promised to cancel debts or redistribute landholdings. Karatani contends that such redistributive tyrannies should not be understood as episodes that precede or follow the institution of democracy but rather that they are fundamental to democratic majority rule in the context of a class-divided society.

In contrast to Aristotle, Karatani denies that Athenian social conditions permitted freedom and equality to coexist as compatible ideals. He compares this state of affairs to modern liberal democracies, which are divided between a private sphere in which persons contract freely and yet are subjected to economic inequality, and a public sphere in which citizens are equal but unfree insofar as they are placed in a relation of subjection to the state. The impoverished Athenian citizen faced a choice between working for a landowner, and thus exacerbating social inequality, or addressing economic inequality by supporting an authoritarian strongman. A landless Ionian, by contrast, was able to avoid this dilemma. Rather than labour for a landowner or subject themselves to a tyrant, they could instead migrate to the open frontier of the colony and establish themselves as an independent smallholder. Without the availability of labourers 'freed' of their own property holdings, it was impossible for a class of wealthy landowners to materialize. In this way, the nomadic freedom of exit permitted the emergence of economic equality and its civic complement, the equality of isonomic non-rule.

Another provocative aspect of *Isonomia* is Karatani's contention that 'nearly all of what is believed to be distinctive about Greece began in Ionia' (12). Athens may have been the 'school of the Hellas,' but Ionia was the school of Athens. The Solonic reforms that set in motion the establishment of Athenian democracy were an attempt to introduce the principles of Ionian *isonomy* to an incompatible social context. This Ionian influence was not limited to the political and social world. In addition to political freedom and equality, an isonomic society permits the development of a characteristic set of cultural, cosmological, and philosophical innovations. While the Athenians' dependence on slavery encouraged an attitude of contempt for labour, Ionia was a society of merchants, mechanics, and independent farmers who held the labouring activity in higher regard. This practical outlook did not esteem *theoria* at the expense of *techne*, and encouraged a naturalistic approach to philosophy that contrasts with the Athenian philosophers' withdrawn, contemplative attitude. Taking Thales as a representative example, Karatani sketches out the basic principles of Ionian natural philosophy. The core elements of this worldview are:

1. the rejection of an anthropic conception of the Gods,
2. a monistic metaphysics in which matter is dynamic and self-moving,
3. a rejection of teleological metaphysics and forms of explanation.

Following this brief and very broad characterization of the philosophical correlates of *isonomy*,

Karatani traces the influence of Ionian thought on Athenian philosophy. In this retelling, the main stakes of the Athenian philosophical tradition concern its adherence to or rejection of the principles of *isonomy* and Ionian natural philosophy. Heraclitus, Parmenides, Socrates, and the ‘minor Socratics’ Antisthenes and Diogenes are cast as the inheritors of the Ionian tradition, while Pythagoras and the ‘major Socratics’ Plato and Aristotle are depicted as apostates.

Scholars of ancient philosophy and classicists will no doubt find issue with Karatani’s sweeping and bold characterizations of this tradition. The principles of *isonomy* may indeed be a fruitful standpoint for the reinterpretation of ancient philosophy. However, there are points in the narrative where *isonomy* appears as a charm that blesses all it touches uniformly. It is especially here that Karatani will likely invite skepticism, especially from readers more accustomed to drawing out fine points of contrast between ancient thinkers than they are to depicting the broadest similarities. Likewise, historians of ancient society might challenge the idea that the Athenian *demos* held labour in contempt and will likely find many of Karatani’s inferences concerning the structure of Ionian society excessively speculative. However, in *Isonomia*, as with his other works, the value of Karatani’s approach is found more in the big picture than in the details.

In 1906, Max Weber wrote that ‘the historical origin of modern freedom has had certain unique preconditions which will never repeat themselves. Let us enumerate the most important of these. First, the overseas expansions. In the armies of Cromwell, in the French constituent assembly, in our whole economic life even today this breeze from across the ocean is felt ... but there is no new continent at our disposal’ (Oxford University Press 1946, 71-72). In the beginning, all the world was America. Nevertheless, it has been centuries since we first encountered the limits of the frontier. What hope then remains to recover the nomadic freedoms of exit? In the closing paragraph, Karatani states that he used *Isonomia* as an opportunity to outline Mode D more efficiently than he had managed to in *The Structure of World History* (140). Given this admission, it is interesting that in a recent interview in *Crisis and Critique*, he reveals that his most recent book, *Powers and Modes of Exchange* (published in Japan in 2022), likewise includes a further treatment of Mode D. An English translation is expected in 2025, so English readers will have to wait two years to see for themselves if Karatani has found a means of concretizing *isonomy* in the absence of a colonial frontier. Provocative, wide-ranging, and very clearly written, *Isonomia and the Origins of Philosophy* is highly worthwhile to read for philosophers, political theorists, and anyone interested in questions of universal history.

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