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Isonomia and the Origins of Philosophy
by Kōjin Karatani*

The collapse of Marxism was the most salient, and significant, intellectual-historical process of the twentieth century. Once hailed as an actual science of human conduct and an objective analytical tool for interpreting the unfolding of human events, Marxism signally failed to deliver on any of its promises or premises.

It promised, for example, to be the midwife to a new age in which the means of production had been seized by the long-suffering proletariat. It also promised that, after a cataclysmic clash of antagonistic classes, a new, unending day of peace and equality would dawn over the ruins of old mankind. Time and again, however, peoples throughout the world chose allegiance to kith and kin over fealty to the German ideology. In Vietnam, China, Romania, France, Great Britain, Cambodia, North Korea, Cuba, and even Russia, local politics and the demands of the ancient homeland trumped the prerogatives of the worldwide socialist revolution that Marxism held out as salvation for mankind. Today, the “Marxist” megastate of the People’s Republic of China has become a full-fledged authoritarian-capitalist, ethno-chauvinistic

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* Kōjin Karatani, *Isonomia and the Origins of Philosophy*, trans. Joseph A. Murphy (Durham, N.C., and London: Duke University Press, 2017).

industrial powerhouse. And yet, far from owning the means of production, the Chinese people do not even have the right to vote.

The premises of Marxism also failed. As the initial stirrings of dialectical materialism peeled away from Hegelianism and gathered along the emerging lines of what would later be termed “Marxism,” Marx and other thinkers developed an elaborate system of epistemology that refounded human experience as a function, not of humanity in general, but more narrowly of class membership. In literary criticism and historiography, for example, Hungarian Marxist György Lukács argued that dialectical materialism explained human life on the basis of class consciousness. Lukács’ erstwhile employer, the Leninist revolutionary and short-lived Hungarian dictator Béla Kun, tasked Lukács, as the “People’s Commissar for Education and Culture,” with using any means necessary to destroy the remnants of the hated bourgeoisie.

For Lukács, this naturally meant dismantling bourgeoisie culture at its source: the ways of thinking of actual members of the ownership class. Lukács set about corrupting bourgeoisie morals, notably by instituting gender education in Hungarian primary schools. Others in Lukács “Western Marxism” school followed suit, with Antonio Gramsci, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and others later known as “Cultural Marxists” working to demolish the inner workings of Western civilization as a service to the emerging, totalist Marxist epistemology.

However, the writings of Catholic and other Christian philosophers, most notably Karol Wojtyła in his treatises on the nature of the human person, exposed Marxist epistemology as an intellectual dead-end, a self-defeating set of propositions that dismantled human integrity even as those propositions were proffered as a way to clear the ground for a more humane society. Marxism failed economically, then, and also philosophically.

And to top it all off, Marxism as an organizing principle of communist societies also failed. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and

the stunning collapse of the Soviet Union just two years later, Marxism, once the thought-system touted by the vanguard of the intellectuals worldwide, lay in political, historical, and philosophical ashes. Societies that Westerners had seen as hidebound communist strongholds raced to throw off the suffocating, stultified claptrap with which at least three generations of their countrymen had been indoctrinated. For those who had believed in the thing, the rout of Marxism was an unprecedented and unmitigated disaster.

What to do when a world-system dies? Adherents generally have three options in the face of a failed ideology.¹ First, they can change course. Many intellectually honest people saw the errors of Marxism somewhere along the way—perhaps with Stalin’s signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, perhaps with the hideous Red Terrors that have gripped every communist society, or perhaps with the eventual downfall of the entire Marxist edifice itself at the close of the twentieth century. Of those people, many turned to other ideas: former “red diaper babies” in the United States subscribed to *Commentary* magazine, for example, while reformed Communist Party members in Japan now spearhead much of mainstream conservative politics in the archipelago. Like St. Augustine breaking with the Manichaeans, many former Marxists have seen the error of their ways and had the courage to pursue truth elsewhere.

The second tack is to deny that truth exists in the first place. This is a considerably less courageous course for the disaffected Marxist to take. Unable to admit that Marxism failed, many people simply began arguing that *nothing* is really true. These people are called “postmodernists.” If the “modern project” was about constructing grand narra-

¹ A similar line of thought is taken up by political economist Albert O. Hirschman in *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970). Cited in Jason Brennan, *When All Else Fails: The Ethics of Resistance to State Injustice* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2019), 2.

tives, overarching architectonics of explanation and interlocking epistemological processes, then postmodernism is the insouciant rejection of all of this, the assertion, as popularized by such thinkers as Richard Rorty and Jacques Derrida, that, in the end, there is really nothing to assert. One of the most famous postmodernists, Fredric Jameson, was at one time a devotee of the same Cultural Marxists who had been the oracles of High Modernism. Bitterly disappointed by the failure of these thinkers and their ways of thinking, postmodernists such as Jameson retreated into a fogbank of absurdism, the better to disguise from themselves, perhaps, and certainly from others the ignominy of Marxism's intellectual defeat.

While most people who once embraced Marxism chose either the first response to its demise, intellectual honesty, or the second response, intellectual contortionism, there are a very few who chose the third response: doubling down. While vanishingly rare today—indeed, I have never met one outside of a handful of academic departments (where, ironically, they often draw salaries several times higher than the local average)—there remain a scant remnant of people who were not only unfazed by the fall of Marxism, but who were, conversely, inspired by that development to drill down even deeper into the “base” in order to find out how to set *what must be true* on more solid ground.

Perhaps no Old Believer Marxist has achieved such fame as Kōjin Karatani. A native of Japan and a graduate of the University of Tokyo (Japan's version of Harvard), Karatani is a prolific scholar. He has dozens of books and articles to his name and has held appointments and given lectures at institutions around the world. A colleague of postmodernist Fredric Jameson, the disillusioned Marxist who chose the path of obfuscation in the face of Marxism's collapse, Karatani has conversely sought to expand the reach of Marxism, taking the whole of intellectual history in his vast purview in an attempt to find the key to unlock the u-

niverse to his favored ideology, just as the alchemists once searched for the philosopher's stone.

In his latest work in English, *Isonomia and the Origins of Philosophy*,² Karatani builds on his earlier major work, *The Structure of World History*,³ in “giv[ing] more detailed consideration to ancient Greece.”⁴ *Isonomia*, a thin volume of just 165 pages, appears unassuming enough at first, but it is, in fact, a book of startlingly big ambition. What Karatani is doing in *Isonomia* is no less than attempting to re-found the West itself in an entirely different version of ancient Greek history and philosophy. Divided into an Introduction, five chapters, and an Appendix, *Isonomia* is a complete rethinking, along quasi-Marxian lines, of Greece, not as mainly a struggle between the Greeks and the unfree Persians, on the one hand, and the imperial Athenians and their put-upon allies during the Peloponnesian War, on the other, but as a much older eclipsing of Ionia by what Karatani sees as the imperialist interloper and distorter of subsequent Western potential, Athens.

For Karatani, Ionia, which cherished isonomia (“even-lawedness,” or what Karatani identifies as complete equality), had found the true recipe for freedom. Socrates, for Karatani, presents the paradox of the post-Ionian, anti-isonomian polis, where, as in Socrates' Athens,

direct democracy [had not] transcended the division between civil society and the political state. Civil society in Athens was riven by deep class conflict, and the majority of citizens were poor. Democracy in Athens meant the seizure of power by the majority and the redistribution of wealth through taxation of the nobility and the wealthiest members.⁵

² First published in Japanese in 2012 as *Tetsugaku no kigen (The origins of philosophy)*.

³ Translated into English by Michael K. Bourdaghs and published in 2014 by Duke University Press; originally published in Japanese in 2010 as *Sekaishi no kōzō*.

⁴ Karatani, Author's Preface to the Japanese Edition.

⁵ Karatani, *Isonomia and the Origins of Philosophy*, 117.

In other words, Athenian democracy had not only failed to solve Marxist class warfare, it had exacerbated it. Socrates pointed up this failure by inverting Athenian life, Karatani argues,

recogniz[ing] no value in participation in the assembly and courts and the attainment of power. The art he taught was not for the purpose of action in the public sphere; rather, it was a means of severing one's ties to it. . . . What Socrates brought about was an inversion of the value associated with public and private capacity.⁶

Karatani's Socrates is thus a subtle condemner of the Athens which, as Karatani sees it, strayed from the true isonomian path (here he seems to be following the interpretation of Hannah Arendt, whom he cites in another context) of equality and embarked on a fatally flawed anti-politics of unfreedom and ever-expanding empire.

For Karatani, of course, this is all ultimately a Marxist set of questions. Indeed, Karatani draws on Marx's own writings⁷ in which "the thought of the Ionian school is revived . . . in Marx's materialism."⁸ What Karatani is at pains to say in *Isonomia* is that Marx was right, and about more than most Marxists realize. To mix metaphors, Karatani wants to make Marx his Beatrice in a kind of reverse *Aeneid*, going back to the beginning and finding a different origin for the modern world.

Socrates as we know him, on this reading, is not Socrates as he really was, not Socrates standing for what he really stood for. Karatani seeks to correct this, radically reinterpreting Socrates in order to make him softer putty in Marx's ideological hands. Here is how Karatani sit-

⁶ *Ibid.*, 114–115.

⁷ Beginning with Marx's PhD dissertation, "The Difference between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophies of Nature."

⁸ Karatani, *Isonomia and the Origins of Philosophy*, 67.

uates Socrates within his (Karatani's) new Marxo-isonomian reading of Greek life and thought:

To understand the inversion of values brought about by Socrates, it is illuminating to refer to Kant in *What Is Enlightenment?* For Kant, to act in accord with the position of the state is the private, while the universal standpoint (of the citizen of the world) is the public. To truly be public, one must take up a private station that transcends the state. Of course, such a cosmopolis transcending the state as such does not exist. What Kant is saying is that while existing as an individual within the state, one should make judgments and act as a citizen of the world. That is to say, Kant's inversion of value between public and private is neither Plato's nor Diogenes's, but rather Socrates's position.

A second point of reference is the early Marx's *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. Hegel placed the state atop civil society. Civil society here is conceived as a system of desires, while the state transcends this at the rational level. That is to say, in civil society people function in a private capacity, while in the state they become private citizens; that is to say, they assume their true form. Marx inverted this proposition. If people exhibit their real form in a private capacity, there is no need to assume a public sphere. To put it in Marx's terms, if people exhibit their "species-being" in civil society, there is no longer any need for the political state above that. That is to say, if one can dissolve the class antagonisms within civil society, the state as a political entity will be superseded.⁹

The subtext here is, in the style of the master subtextualist Karatani, almost entirely subterranean. Karatani rarely comes out and says exactly, and everything, that he means in one go. But this time he gives the game away. The footnote to this passage is key. At the end of the two-paragraph segment reproduced above, Karatani quotes Marx:

⁹ *Ibid.*, 116–117.

Human emancipation will only be complete when the real, individual man has absorbed into himself the abstract citizen; when as an individual man, in his everyday life, in his work, and in his relationships, he has become a *species-being*; and when he has recognized and organized his own powers (*forces propres*) as *social* powers so that he no longer separates this social power from himself as *political* power.¹⁰

What Karatani is about here, then, is what he has been about for years, namely, reimagining Marxist collectivism in a way other than it has always been argued and put into practice before.

Karatani, one must understand, is the intellectual father of something called the New Associationist Movement (NAM), which, as Japan scholar Harry Harootunian describes it, seeks to bring about what Karatani calls “possible communism,” a communism that overcomes the (rather glaring, one must admit) flaws of all other iterations of the thing, thereby ushering in the socialist glories that Marx foresaw.¹¹ Karatani’s championing of the Ionians turns out to be a kind of intricate code for Marxifying Western philosophy, and as such carries a frisson of Marxist revivalism at every turn. In particular, Karatani is concerned with undercutting the Platonist Idealists and the Aristotelian empirical-moralists and returning to a Heraclitan, Parmenidean materialism, which Karatani is at pains to manifest as the real source of Western culture.

Just as Karl Popper indicted Plato for allegedly betraying Socrates, Karatani is particularly harsh here on Pythagoras, whom he sees as a traitor to the isonomian cause. Originally from Ionia, Pythagoras “departed Ionia after a series of political setbacks,”¹² and settled in Italy,

¹⁰ From Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 46.

¹¹ Harry Harootunian, “Out of Japan: The New Associationist Movement,” *Radical Philosophy* 108 (July/August 2001), available online—see the section *References* for details.

¹² Karatani, *Isonomia and the Origins of Philosophy*, 83.

where he began expounding “number as the principle of all things.”¹³ This numerical abstraction “led him to discard Ionian materialism and turn to a world of ideals. . . . The Platonic dual world (consisting of the sensible world of illusion and the eternal world of reason) has its origins here.”¹⁴ In setting up Heraclitus as the righteous nemesis of Pythagorean numerical idealism, Karatani spirits snatches of Marxism into this piecemeal intellectual-historical Frankensteinism. Heraclitus sticks with matter (in his case, fire) as a motivating and organizing principle, unlike Pythagoras and the later Platonists who place principles beyond the realm of the sensible. But, as with his intervention into the *Crito* and *Apology*, for Karatani this is all just Marxism *avant la lettre*. “According to Heraclitus,” Karatani writes,

fire occupies a position in relation to all things just as money (gold) does. However, his point is not that fire is special and different in kind from all things. Fire too is a member of the set. The transcendence of fire notwithstanding is through social exchange with the totality of things. This reasoning is identical to Marx’s analysis of money in *Capital*. That is to say, gold becomes a currency not through its intrinsic properties, but through a social exchange with all things that places gold in the position of general equivalent.¹⁵

If this seems like a stretch, that’s because it is. Heraclitus was a natural philosopher, not a German pseudo-economist, and Karatani goes beyond his warrant by leaps and bounds (a new reading of *hic rhodus, hic saltus*, perhaps) in pressing Heraclitus to dance to the neo-Hegelian dialectical materialist tune.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

But economics is not the only area into which Karatani attempts to shoehorn Marx's philosophical musings. Elsewhere, Karatani even challenges modern physics along neo-Marxian lines:

The thinking of the Ionian school, which sees no separation between motion and matter, has been regarded as magical. Indeed, modern physics is built upon their separation. However, as Descartes showed, such a separation is premised on God, or else a godlike perspective. That is to say, on this point modern physics inherits an Aristotelian metaphysics or theology. Quantum mechanics decisively displaces this perspective. In some sense, it recuperates the Ionian position that matter and motion are inseparable. That is to say, the quantum (light, or the electron) is at the same time both particle (matter) and wave (motion).¹⁶

The parallel to this rejiggering of Western philosophy's origins is Karatani's insinuation of a new kind of Marxist sociology into the current debates. The scope of what Karatani is really about becomes ultimately clear in the Appendix, for it is there that he lays out his four-stage theory of world development. For Karatani, "the world system"¹⁷ proceeds in three chords, as it were. The first chord is the "mode of exchange" chord, whereby societies progress from "reciprocity of the gift (gift and counter-gift)" to "plunder and redistribution (domination and protection)" to "commodity exchange (money and commodities)" to a future modality "X (yet to be realized)." From this arrangement follows the "structure of capital" chord, with "the nation" giving way to "the state," which in turn gives way to "capital," which culminates also in "X (yet to be realized)." Finally, the "world system" chord moves from "mini-world system" to "world empire" to "world economy (the modern world system)" to "world republic."

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁷ He gets this terminology from Immanuel Wallerstein (see, e.g., Wallerstein's *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction* [Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004]), of course, whom Karatani duly acknowledges in his text.

What Karatani is doing, overall, is reworking Marxist anthropology at the root in order to allow Marxian man to be repurposed, not as a collectivist cog as envisioned by Marx, but as a new kind of “individual,”¹⁸ amenable to life in a “world republic” which has transcended “the modern world system” and “commodity exchange.” This is a very laborious process, because while Karatani is going back and reinventing Western intellectual history, he is also, by necessity, going back and reinventing Marxism at the same time.¹⁹ Marxism failed, so for Karatani it was back to the drawing board to redesign the system from the ground up, or at least as best as he is able given the considerable limitations imposed upon him by actual intellectual history.

From a more critical perspective, one that seeks to understand Karatani both on his own terms and in the context of his intellectual milieu, what we have here, in *Isonomia* and in Karatani’s oeuvre tout suite, is a kind of Cultural Marxism driven up to the hilt and even the handle, a Lukascian Western Marxism taken to the nth degree. Just as the Cultural Marxists tried to unravel the West by attacking it at the level of its mitochondrial DNA, Karatani is trying to go into the Marxian double-helix and find some way to purify the genome so that it will stop producing the kind of monsters that, in practice, it always has and always will.

Seen in another way, this is also a work of liberalism, as Karatani here is attempting a marriage of Marx and Rawls in finding an “original position” within the Western tradition that clears the ground for the real Marxist dialectical materialism to emerge, organically as it were, from the neglected and unchosen path squelched out, as Karatani sees it, by

¹⁸ Cf. here Karatani’s “New Associanist Movement,” mentioned supra.

¹⁹ If “world-system theory” is correct, then this makes perfect sense, as Marxism, which emerged from Western intellectual history, should not be separable from it. The Zizekian critique of Althusser, in other words, namely that there is no externality to ideology from which to understand it, applies beautifully to Karatani, as well.

the rise of Athenian imperialism at the expense of absolutistically-equal Ionian isonomia. At a finer grain, and returning to Karatani's narrower arguments, the radical individualism that Karatani appears to be advancing here could be conceived just as easily as a chess-move sop to neo-liberalism. Karatani has seen that capitalism did the old Marxism in, and so he is trying to rebrand Marxism into a version 2.0 capable of making an end-run around the currently-dominant "world system."

Perhaps. In reality, however, Karatani's *Isonomia*, and his entire project to boot, is most likely a poison pill, an attempt to slake the entire array of idealism from within Western philosophy and put Marxism on a dialectical materialistic footing once and for all. Marxism failed, and so, as a true believer, Karatani has arrived at the only logical solution, which is to destroy everything that stands in Marxism's way. In sum, this is a Lukascian Marxism of pure process.

But even if Karatani were to succeed in refounding the West to make dialectical materialism the default mode of philosophy, swapping Aristotle and Plato for Heraclitus and the Ionians, there would yet remain one final obstacle to Marxism's triumph: God. Thus, Karatani's real adversary, Yahweh, makes an appearance shadowed as the incipient agent limned in the works of Plato. Go as deep as one likes into the West, even into the pagan Hellenic past, and one will always eventually arrive, alas, not at Athens, but at Jerusalem. Before the Ionians, there was the godhead. Here is where Karatani makes his most audacious move, snatching the crown from the deity's head and trying to recast Him, not as a Creator, but, in a kind of proto-Mormonism, as coeval with His creation, as nature itself:

In one of his final works, *Timaeus*, Plato essentially declares opposition to Ionian atheism and materialism. However, as discussed before, it is a mistake to see the Ionian natural philosophers as atheist. They believed that the One God exists, as nature. What they rejected were the personified gods. The Ionians

discerned at the origin of things matter in motion. The gods are discovered when one posits a purpose based on one's retrospective observation of matter and its motion. Thus, the rejection of the personified gods by the natural philosophers is the rejection of a teleological worldview.

From this perspective, it is clear what Plato was trying to accomplish. This was of course not the naïve restoration of the personified gods; it was rather the securing of a teleological worldview. This was why he had, at all costs, to refute the Ionian doctrine that matter moves of itself. In Plato's thought, there is an agent that originally brings about the motion of matter, which is God. The world does not arise through the motion of matter, but is a creation by God as the demiurge. Plato criticized Protagoras's notion that "man is the measure of all things," citing precisely God as the measure. However, Protagoras's attitude is not anthropocentric. Anthropocentrism rather resides in Plato, who posits a creator God based on his human perspective.²⁰

In dethroning God, and thereby man, Karatani takes the final pass of his sally into the ancient Greek past. It is not isonomia that Karatani is in search of after all, but the conditions for making man pure material. If he could only accomplish this, if he could only show that, despite what Socrates and Plato and Aristotle and their heirs, the Scholastics and the Church Fathers and Etienne Gilson and the godly line of the Western intellectual tradition, all taught and believed—that man's destiny is not his mortal coil—he could finally pave a lot suitable to the construction of real Marxism. If only he could remake the world in Marxism's image, Karatani could show, at long last, that the master's teachings were really true.

It is here that the cunning of history catches up with this neo-neo-Hegelian, however. For, it is precisely here that Karatani, hailed as the

²⁰ Karatani, *Isonomia and the Origins of Philosophy*, 127.

voice of a new Marxism and the prophet of “possible communism,” shows himself to be, ironically, just a garden-variety Marxist after all.



***Isonomia and the Origins of Philosophy* by Kōjin Karatani**

SUMMARY

This paper is a review of the book: Kōjin Karatani, *Isonomia and the Origins of Philosophy*, trans. Joseph A. Murphy (Durham, N.C., and London: Duke University Press, 2017). According to the author, Karatani’s book is an attempt to refound the West in a Marxist version of ancient Greek history and philosophy.

KEYWORDS

Kōjin Karatani, isonomia, philosophy, Marxism.

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