metaphysics, but by avoiding the mother, she fails to fully grasp the potential of this new category. In order to respond adequately to the self-enclosed verticality of the Kantian subject, one requires an ethical subject whose primary state of being is relationality. The infant is dependent and vulnerable and it cannot fight back if it is harmed; the mother is the figure of responsibility who responds to this vulnerability. According to Cavarero, she is the ethical actor par excellence.

Cavarero cites criticisms that have been levied against similar arguments made in the past, such as to the ethics of care paradigm in feminist philosophy – for example, the concern that an emphasis on the vulnerability and dependence of the mother reinforces the binary opposition between genders through affirming the most stereotypical characteristics associated with the female sex. This binary view arguably also undermines the emancipatory move towards an equality of men and women, and the concomitant argument that they should be treated the same as workers and political subjects. Further, and Cavarero does not address this adequately, the maternal role is now performed by all genders, by subjects who in many instances did not give birth to the child that they are parenting. Is there a strict relationship between birthgiving and maternity in her model? Can maternity be extended to those who were not designated at birth as female according to Cavarero? These questions are not sufficiently addressed or answered.

As should be clear by now, Cavarero is not advocating an ethics of care model but is instead proposing that maternity and inclination have been effaced by the patriarchal symbolic order which champions the model of rectitude. Cavarero believes that we need a feminine model of human life based on the mother. It seems to me that especially in the discipline of philosophy, which still commonly defaults to the pronoun 'he' and largely retains faith in the moral status of the Kantian 'universal' subject, a new model of the subject is necessary. The mother as the subject of inclination who represents the human condition as relational, vulnerable and responsible is a robust alternative to Levinas's other, as well as many alternative versions in the history of European philosophy, as Cavarero demonstrates. No doubt philosophy would benefit from taking up Cavarero's subject of inclination as a part of dislodging the discipline from its iron commitment to the patriarchal order. The next step, however, is to consider how the notion of maternity can include all genders and locations in such a way that it does make invisible the feminine. For we have already seen how the claim for equality (to be treated the same as men) merely returns us to that old androcentric model that presumes neutrality through the veil of the autonomous subject. Certainly, it is worth considering seriously how, as Cavarero proposes, 'Maternal inclination could work as a model for a different, more disruptive, and revolutionary geometry whose aim is to rethink the very core of community.'

**Willow Verkerk**

# Before democracy

Kojin Karatani, *Isonomia and the Origins of Philosophy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017). 176pp., £70.00 hb., £19.99 pb., 978 0 82236 885 4 hb., 978 0 82236 913 4 pb.

*Isonomia and the Origins of Philosophy* is a far from straightforward book to assess. Its sustained and remarkably coherent re-reading of early Greek philosophy from its Ionian origins to the complex relationship between Socrates and Plato's thought is undoubtedly brilliant. However, this is achieved by means of a superstructure-base argument that, while not unfruitful, also involves some distinctly troubling political implications. This matters because Karatani is not simply producing a novel interpretation of how and why ideas developed the way they did from Thales to Plato: he wants to address the contradictions in modern bourgeois liberal democracy by exploring the gap between Athenian democracy and a rather earlier Ionian isonomia, associating the latter with a concept of no-rule.

Strictly speaking, *iso-* means equal or the same and *nomos* either share/portion or custom/usage. So, isonomia can mean equal shares or something like equal rights, but there is no *kratos* (power or sovereign authority), linked in the case of democracy with *demos* (people). As such, the distinction between democracy

and *isomomia* is reasonable. The superstructure-base argument through which Karatani then frames this distinction is taken from an earlier book, *The Structure of World History* (2014), in which a taxonomy of the different stages in the evolution of human society from nomadic to settled is organised by Karatani around shifts in types of exchange rather than modes of production. The fourth and last stage recuperates but transcends the first three, in particular combining the reciprocal gift and commodity exchanges of the first and third, while avoiding the despotism-protection exchange of the ruler and ruled in the second. Ionian isonomia epitomises the fourth stage, mainly because Ionia was colonised from the Greek mainland without Ionian cities being dependent on specific mainland cities, so tribal ties were broken and there was a form of cosmopolitanism. There was 'virgin territory' beyond the frontier which landless people could occupy and therefore avoid becoming slaves or working for others, which meant it was difficult for gaps between rich and poor to develop. Citizens remained relatively free and equal, and a leisured political or intellectual class did not emerge, as it did in Athens. Trade, crafts, political involvement and philosophy were all interconnected.

Ionian thought would be the superstructure to this socio-economic base, even if Karatani largely has to 'work backwards' from the former to the latter because of the lack of historical or archaeological evidence for early Ionia. The richness of this approach for illuminating the philosophy can be seen in a beautiful moment when he connects a Heraclitus fragment which compares the two relationships beween fire and things and gold and goods (Diels-Kranz B90) to Marx's ideas on how money achieves its status through social exchange. This kind of observation is neither 'scholarly' nor cavalier with scholarship: it fills it out. For example, it is pretty much accepted that the first Ionian philosophers – Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes – did not simply do natural philosophy but were socially and politically involved. However, it is rare to find such a subtle account of their conception of self-moving matter, and this is because Karatani manages to convey a certain non-hierarchical, wholly organic and flowing circulation that is to be found in both social interaction and the cosmos. He is also particularly good on the precise nature of Ionian materialism. Personalised or mythological gods may have been rejected, but there was still a divine element in the cosmos: there is something like deism or *natura naturans* here.

According to Karatani, philosophy arose in Ionia when it did because isonomia was beginning to break down, and he sees later Greek philosophers up until and including Plato as trying to recover it or guard against actual tyranny or the tyrannical side of democracy, the two not being unrelated: one can have a popular tyranny. This means there is no longer an easy fusion between society and thought: individual thinkers are struggling with more intractable circumstances and adopting solutions that sought to preserve Ionian values while sometimes contradicting them in practice. Both the cultic and proto-idealist mathematics of Pythagoras are seen as defenses against what happened in Samos when he was a young man. This will also be true of Plato's idealism and his belief in a philosopher-king, in this case based on his experience of the intense party conflicts in Athens. The atomism of Leucippus and Democritus has implications for social relations as well as physics: discrete irreducible elements are no longer open to the kind of holistic transformational flux one had in Ionian thought. Others resist these developments. Heraclitus is characterised as a patrician in a 'new world' society angry with his fellow Ephesians for not standing up for their freedom – one thinks of Patrick Henry's 'Give me liberty or give me death' – rather than the haughty aristocrat he is usually thought to be. The social commitment of Parmenides, Zeno and Empedocles is emphasised, with the two Eleatic philosophers asserting that there is either nothing but being or that being is indivisible by means of indirect proof, which is now seen as Ionian in its origins. Pythagorian mathematical idealism is countered.

This is a very different narrative from the Platonic-Aristotelian one, in which Socrates breaks with his predecessors and creates a radically new, ethically-aware philosophy. Ionian thought is a kind of 'political physics' intimately bound up with isonomia, whose demise led to a complex philosophic debate, which included Socrates and Plato. Athenian democracy was not isonomia, and it had contradictions

which were very similar in type, if not in precise detail, to those of its modern bourgeois liberal equivalent. Karatani explores them very well: market freedom led to economic inequality because there was the possibility of slave labour, poorer citizens could use their political power to bring about the redistribution of wealth, groups such as women, foreigners and slaves were excluded from citizenship, resident foreigners were financially exploited – there was xenophobia – imperialism was used to create further wealth which could be redistributed, the arts of persuasion could have a dubious impact on electoral process, and there was the extensive infighting and plotting connected with party politics. In Karatani's account, Plato would be a Pythagoras trying to avoid these problems, while Socrates would be trying to restore the values of isonomia. It is interesting to compare, in this respect, Karatani's treatment of Socrates with that of Foucault in *The Courage of Truth*. The scholarship of both is impressive, but while the latter is more incisive and convincing, the former's arguments are potentially more interesting. Foucault's *parrhesia* is a constituent element of properly functioning democracy, but one is never sure how far it could slip into egocentric bourgeois self-righteousness, often of a self-serving kind. (Ibsen would be a valuable corrective to his use of Euripides.) Karatani is trying to associate Socrates with something he thinks existed before democracy, and although much of what he says is very suggestive, his attempt does not quite succeed.

It is here that the disquieting political implications of Karatani's argument come to the fore. Speculation about Ionia may well be necessary, but Karatani's notion of isonomia is based on what he feels is a very concrete later historical example of it: the American colonial township, in particular as it is idealised by Hannah Arendt. The problem is that neither she nor he paint a very accurate picture of it. Slavery was legal in all thirteen colonies, the use of indentured servants and slaves enabled gaps to emerge between rich and poor, and indigenous populations were displaced. Clearly, these tendencies developed enormously after independence, but they were already there before it. Even the 'pure islands' of

townships may have had admirable moral values, such as opposition to slavery, but were often ethnically and religiously homogeneous and conformist, frequently intolerant of other Christian sects. One is tempted to say that this is little more than a small-scale possessive individualism which avoids inequality merely because of the smallness of scale and the room to escape – Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis – but one that will ultimately grow into large-scale free-market capitalist democracy. One is reminded of Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality*, in which there are two moments of comparable relative equality, and for very similar reasons: one in the state of nature, the other about halfway between it and an advanced civilised state. But these are stages in a process of socialisation. What Rousseau has which Karatani does not is a very sophisticated psychological model: humans start with a number of different drives, one of which – the capacity for self-perfection – stimulates socialisation, which, in its turn, radically alters the initial drives, bringing both improvements and corruption. It is not so much the specificity of drives that is important – one could think of different ones – but the fact that they interact and are malleable. This means that there is always the possibility of social engineering to remedy the corruption. Indeed, thinkers influenced by Rousseau, including Saint-Simon and Marx, can still be drawn upon in modern pluralistic democracies, as Honneth has carefully argued in his recent book, *The Idea of Socialism* (2017). There is no such mechanism in Karatani: Ionia seems an irrecoverable golden age unless one repeats the conditions that made it come about. Yet colonisation is simply no longer morally possible.

It is significant that the American subsidiarity so admired by Karatani is much more individualistic than European versions of it. His idea of society seems to be an assemblage of rational free agents who exchange goods and ideas with each other. Yet he fails to distinguish between community and tribalism. This is why he dismisses Heidegger's profound exploration of pre-Socratic thought, which, in an essay such as *The Saying of Anixamander*, provides part of the basis for the later Derrida's thinking on the subtle reciprocities that underly good politics and social justice. Similarly, Karatani is too influenced by Weber's ethnocentric attitude to Indian religious philosophy to see how it could produce a movement like Sikhism, which has many of the qualities that he associates with Ionian thought: a non-personalised god, something like deism or pantheism, a lack of priestly hierarchy, opposition to ritualism and superstition, egalitarianism and communal self-government, a resistence to despotism and a valourisation of hard work honestly pursued. There is however an esoteric power in hymns like *Japji* that is intimately connected with passionate social outreach to non-Sikh and Sikh alike (as the West London gurdwaras' extraordinarily rapid and well-organised response to the Grenfell Tower disaster abundantly showed). Both pre-Socratic thought and Sikhism have quasi-mystical, poetic sides as well as rational ones that help one to achieve solidarity with the actual flesh of others and the universe. Karatani cannot access these because of his Kantianism. Consequently, however many splendid philosophical insights *Isonomia and the Origins of Western Philosophy* may contain, it does relatively little to address the contradictions of modern Western democracy in the way that it intends.

**Nardina Kaur**

# Everybody out!

Yates McKee, *Strike Art: Contemporary Art and the Post-Occupy Condition* (London and New York: Verso, 2016). 304pp., £16.99 hb., £12.99 pb., 978 1 78478 188 0 hb., 978 1 78478 681 6 pb.

Yates McKee's book is concerned with the power of the strike under contemporary conditions. What he understands by 'strike' incorporates, however, a wide range of publicly visible forms of political struggle. Whether it be the occupations of the Zuccotti Park and the Occupy movement in 2011, the occupation of public places like Grand Central Station by smaller groups of Black Lives Matter or the occupation of museums by art groups like G.U.L.F. (both in 2014), it is this kind of symbolic public political struggle that McKee analyses as the 'strike' today. In other words, the strike is no longer what we might call the 'traditional strike' as a strategic and organised attempt of