

# **A Society in Which People Demonstrate: Karatani Kōjin and the Politics of the Anti-nuclear Movement\***

Alexander Brown, University of Wollongong  
ajb262@uowmail.edu.au

## **Abstract**

In this paper I outline philosopher and literary critic Karatani Kōjin's theoretical reflections on the recent wave of anti-nuclear protests in Japan. Karatani uses the notion of "a society in which people demonstrate" to describe the form of direct democracy he sees emerging in the anti-nuclear movement. I critically engage with Karatani's historiography of democracy and demonstrations in Japan and explain that his sometimes historically inaccurate views are a reflection of his own ambivalent and changing relationship with street politics. I then explore the contradictions between Karatani's stated view that demonstrations are a relatively new and weak part of the Japanese polity and his attempt to ground the broader notion of "a society in which people demonstrate" in indigenous Japanese democratic traditions. Finally, I explain how through his recent studies of ancient Greek political thought Karatani has tried to carve out a pre-history for the form of participatory democracy he expresses through the notion of "a society in which people demonstrate". I conclude by pointing to the centrality of democracy in the face of the clear limitations of parliamentary government exposed by the Fukushima disaster within the context of a global crisis of faith in existing democratic institutions.

## **Keywords**

democracy, anti-nuclear, political theory, demonstrations

## **1. Introduction**

The earthquake, tsunami and nuclear triple-disaster that hit Japan in March 2011 (known as 3.11) has prompted a wide-ranging discussion about the nature and limits of Japan's democracy. One important stream of this discussion concerns the rejuvenation of civil society in Japan by the wave of anti-nuclear protest that erupted after 3.11 (Aldrich 2012:7–10). Previous anti-nuclear movements in Japan (Aldrich 2008) and in countries such as the United States (Morone 1989), have also questioned who has the power to make important decisions about the development of risky technologies. Since 3.11, a diverse spectrum of anti-nuclear activists have used demonstrations (Ogawa 2013), citizen-initiated referendum campaigns (Sato 2012), concerts

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(Manabe 2012), conferences (Brown 2012), art exhibitions (Corkill 2011), social media (Slater, Nishimura, and Kindstrand 2012), and petitions (Penney 2011) to assert greater democratic control over Japan's nuclear industry. The National Diet of Japan's official investigation into the causes of the Fukushima nuclear disaster confirmed that the disaster was "the result of collusion between the government, the regulators and TEPCO<sup>1</sup>, and the lack of governance by said parties" (National Diet of Japan 2012). This damning conclusion confirms the accusations of anti-nuclear activists and scholars who have blamed the undemocratic power of the so-called "nuclear village" (*genpatsu mura*) for the disaster and identified it as the key obstacle to greater citizen control over the nuclear industry. This "nuclear village", Kingston (2012) explains, is made up of the utility companies which operate nuclear power plants, nuclear regulators, local and national politicians, the bureaucracy, and scientists and academics who support nuclear power. The post-3.11 anti-nuclear movement has focused on these structural causes of the nuclear disaster. Sociologist Miyadai Shinji, who has himself been active in organising a citizen-initiated referendum to decide on the future of nuclear power, describes the central question of the anti-nuclear power movement not as "what to do with nuclear power", but, "what to do with a society that cannot stop nuclear power" (Miyadai 2012:101).

The anti-nuclear movement's demand for greater democratic control over nuclear technology echoes similar calls for democracy being heard around the world in 2011. As protesters hit the streets on 10 April, one month after the disaster, a special issue of the monthly journal *Gendai shisō* (Contemporary Thought) focusing on the Middle Eastern democratisation movements known as the Arab Spring appeared in bookstores across Japan. Placing the post-Fukushima anti-nuclear movement within this broader global context enables us to consider it as part of the global upswing of democracy movements that includes the Arab Spring, the European anti-austerity movements and the Occupy movement (Brucato 2012). Commentators in Japan have been acutely aware of this broader context and have analysed the Japanese anti-nuclear movement with reference to the global democracy movements (Gonoi 2012:19–63). This convergence of global social movements around the issue of democracy supports Reitan's (2012) contention that a "global democratisation" movement has emerged out of the alter-globalisation and anti-war movements of the past ten years.

These global democracy movements have prompted a widespread discussion of the limits of representative democracy and experimented with more direct and participatory forms of democracy. One Japanese theorist who has explored the implications of the anti-nuclear movement in terms of democratic political theory is philosopher and literary critic Karatani Kōjin. Since the 3.11 disaster, he has played an active role in the anti-nuclear movement as a demonstrator, writer and public orator. On 11 September 2011, Karatani addressed a large crowd which had gathered in the Alta-mae plaza opposite the eastern entrance of Shinjuku station in Tokyo following a long anti-nuclear protest march through the city. In his speech, Karatani recalled how he had been questioned by many people about his participation in the demonstrations. These critics raised doubts as to whether demonstrations could really be effective in bringing about social change (*demo o shite, shakai o kaerareru no ka*) (Anon 2011). He received a round of applause from the assembled crowd as he argued that demonstrations could

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<sup>1</sup> Tokyo Electric Power Company, the operators of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant where the disaster took place.

indeed change Japan, by making Japanese society into "a society in which people demonstrate (*hito ga demo o suru shakai*)".

What does Karatani mean by this apparently circular statement about the power of demonstrations to change Japanese society? In this paper I explore Karatani's notion of "a society in which people demonstrate" and the theory of direct democracy he has developed in writings and interviews published since the September 2011 demonstration (Karatani 2012a). I begin by outlining the main points of Karatani's thesis that the anti-nuclear movement is making Japan into "a society in which people demonstrate". I then situate these ideas in the broader context of Karatani's thought and the democratic praxis of the post-3.11 anti-nuclear protest movement. I conclude that Karatani's notion of "a society in which people demonstrate" reflects the centrality of the demand for greater democracy in the anti-nuclear movement of post-3.11 Japan.

## 2. Karatani's Speech and the Limits of Post-war Democracy

In his speech at the September 2011 demonstration, Karatani (Anon 2011; Karatani 2012a) introduced a number of ideas about the relationship between street demonstrations and representative democracy. He argued that anti-nuclear demonstrations are changing Japan by making it into "a society in which people demonstrate (*hito ga demo o suru shakai*)". Echoing a widely held, though historically inaccurate, view, he asserted that, outside of Okinawa, there were next to no demonstrations taking place in Japan prior to the 3.11 nuclear disaster. However, he observed, more demonstrations are now taking place and in this sense Japanese society has changed because it has become "a society in which people demonstrate" (Karatani 2012a:64).

Karatani argued that demonstrating is "the right of a people who are sovereign" (*shukensha de aru kokumin ni totte no kenri de aru*). Japan's Constitution does officially recognise popular sovereignty in both the Preamble and Article 1. However, Karatani argues that if people cannot or do not in practice demonstrate then they are not really sovereign. He illustrates this by pointing to South Korea, where popular demonstrations organised by the people brought down the military regime and democratised the republic (Karatani 2012a:65). This historical experience of struggling for democracy, Karatani argues, is the reason demonstrations occur so regularly in South Korea. He contrasts this with the situation in Japan, where, he claims, democracy was introduced by the American occupation forces following Japan's defeat in the Second World War and alleges that the Japanese "have not acquired their rights as a people through a struggle that relies upon their own power" (Karatani 2012a:65). For Karatani, demonstrating is a way for the Japanese people to make sovereignty their own. He does acknowledge that other means of political expression, such as voting in elections, exist in Japan. However, he argues that only when people demonstrate can forms of political expression such as elections become genuinely democratic. Karatani is not arguing that demonstrations are illegal in Japan. Rather, his idea that sovereignty depends on demonstrations concerns the independence and autonomy of a people who exercise their right to demonstrate freely and confidently. Without an active polity in which people demonstrate, forms of democracy such as parliamentary elections don't function (*kinō shimasen*) as means of democratic expression (Karatani 2012a:65). Karatani concluded his speech with a bold and hopeful prediction that anti-nuclear demonstrations will not stop at protesting against nuclear power but will become "a power that can fundamentally change Japanese society" (Karatani 2012a:66).

The tenuous position of political demonstrations within the Japanese polity was revealed at the September demonstration with the arrest of 12 people, including some members of the demonstration's organising group, who were later released without charge. These arrests prompted Karatani, along with a number of other prominent intellectuals including sociologist Oguma Eiji and French literature scholar Ukai Satoshi to issue a "Joint Statement for the Freedom of Demonstration and Assembly" in protest at the "blatantly gratuitous nature of the arrests" (Anon n.d.). The three scholars also held a press conference with activist Amamiya Karin from the September demonstration's organising group at the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan. The three collected signatures in support of the Joint Statement and raised funds to assist the arrestees with their legal defence. The Joint Statement, written by Karatani with input from the other two scholars, described the post-Fukushima anti-nuclear demonstrations as "testament not to confusion or disorder, but to the maturity of Japanese civil society". It noted that the organisation and joining of rallies was protected under Article 21 of the Japanese Constitution which guarantees "freedom of assembly and association as well as speech, press and all other forms of expression" and accused the police of "systematically obstructing the demonstrations" and of conducting "coercive arrests without any reasonable grounds". Rather than enforcing the law, the Joint Statement argued that the arrests revealed the "true intention" of the police were directed towards "repressing all anti-nuclear demonstrations by targeting the particular group that has successfully organised rallies with young people" (Karatani, Oguma, and Ukai 2011).

In an article in the monthly current affairs magazine *Sekai* ('World') Karatani (2012b) explained how writing the Joint Statement had forced him to think more deeply about the language used in the Japanese Constitution. There is no specific mention of demonstrating within the text of the Constitution, he notes, because it is subsumed within Article 21 which covers freedom of assembly (*shūkai*), association (*kessha*) and expression (*hyōgen*). Interpreting the word *shūkai*, Karatani noted that the original English draft indeed used the word "assembly". The English word assemble, he explained, implies the movement of coming together from various locations into one place. However, in Japanese there is a distinction between the words demonstration (*demo*) and assembly (*shūkai*). For Karatani, movement is central to the democratic power of demonstrations. He criticises the separation between "static" assemblies and "moving" demonstrations he claims exists in Japan. Where there is no freedom to demonstrate, he argues, there is no real freedom of assembly. This has long been the situation in Japan, he complains, where demonstrations tended to be made up of small groups of "leaders" while assemblies, while often large and popularly attended, were not connected with demonstrations (Karatani 2012b:100).

Karatani (2012b:100–101) argues that the demonstrations which have been taking place in Japan after 3.11 are neither *shūkai* nor *demo* but true assemblies (*asenburi*). Here Karatani draws on Rousseau's (2011:217) notion of the assembly as an organ of popular direct democracy in contrast to the delegation of popular sovereignty to elected representatives which occurs in parliamentary systems. Contradicting his earlier insistence on the immaturity of Japanese democracy at the September 2011 demonstration, Karatani rejects the idea that the democratic assembly is a political form imported from the West without a basis in Japanese political history. Here he sees the assembly as similar to a form of political gathering which existed in Japan in pre-modern times: the village *yoriai*. This village *yoriai*, as described by folklorist Miyamoto Tsuneichi (1965:44) was a form of assembly in which the members of a village or larger community gathered in one place to discuss and decide on the issues of the day. This political

form, Karatani asserts, existed in all clan societies in one form or another and is the origins of later forms of peoples' assemblies and councils. In modern representative democracy it is this direct democracy of the *yoriai* that has been lost. In order to reclaim direct democracy, Karatani argues, we need assemblies (Karatani 2012b:100–101).

Karatani rejects the idea that demonstrations are simply a means (*shudan*) by which to achieve some particular goal. He is equally critical of two distinct Japanese political traditions: the revolutionary tradition in which demonstrations were regarded simply as a means of making violent revolution and the parliamentary tradition in which demonstrating was undertaken primarily to help parties win votes in future elections. He blames both these approaches, in which the demonstration itself is sub-ordinated to some greater political goal, for the lack of political demonstrations in Japan prior to 3.11 (Karatani 2012b:101). Rather than viewing demonstrating as a means by which society can influence the separate sphere of parliamentary government, Karatani demands that demonstrations be considered as ends in itself because they produce "a society in which people demonstrate". While the anti-nuclear movement has a clearly defined end, Karatani asserts that it is both possible and necessary to see anti-nuclear demonstrations as spaces of democratic discussion and debate which reveal the possibility of a more direct form of democracy. Here he cites Rousseau's idea that in the assembly the people exercise sovereignty directly without the mediation of any representative (Rousseau 2011:217). Karatani defines his notion of a "society in which people demonstrate" once more in this context by explaining that "a society in which sovereignty rests with ordinary people is not brought about via electing representatives but by demonstrating" (Karatani 2012b:101).

### **3. Demonstrating in the Long Shadow of Ampo: The Problems of Karatani's Historiography**

Karatani's argument in the September 2011 speech that Japanese democracy is immature because it was granted by an occupying army rather than won through struggle is easily contested. As John Dower (1999) has argued, during and after the Allied Occupation, the Japanese struggled in a variety of ways to make post-war democracy their own. These struggles affected both the writing of the Constitution and the ways in which it was realised within the polity. Similarly, Karatani's claim that there were few demonstrations in Japan following the decline of the student movement in the early 1970s ignores the growth in less spectacular and more locally oriented feminist (Mackie 1988:62–66) and consumer movements (Eto 2008:133–135) that took place in the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, Aldrich (2008) argues that the growing power of the anti-nuclear movement in the 1980s and 1990s had already become a significant impediment to the construction of new nuclear reactors.

Karatani's historiography reveals less about the history of demonstrations in Japan and more about the trajectory of his own engagement with street politics. In an interview with Koarashi Kuhachirō, Karatani (2012c:30–34) explained how his own turn towards literary criticism was prompted by his disillusionment with the sectarian politics of the student left and represented an attempt to steer a course away from isolation in the academy or in the leftist sects. After winning the *Gunzō* Award for New Writers in 1969, Karatani spent the following decades engaged in literary criticism and teaching in Japan and the United States. However, the death of Emperor Hirohito in 1989, marked a turning point in Karatani's intellectual development. Carl Cassegård

(2007:3–10) explains how Karatani's writings in the 1970s and 1980s expressed his anxiety about what he saw as Japan's "isolation" from the outside world and Japanese society's narrow fixation on economic growth. Since the 1990s, however, Karatani has expressed a more optimistic view of the possibility of social change in Japan and has called for a move away from critique of the existing system towards "transcritique". This notion of transcritique involves the construction of alternatives to what Karatani identifies as the trinity of state, capital and nation (Cassegård 2007:12–13). During this period, Karatani began to re-engage with activist politics. In 1991, with writer Nakagami Kenji, he helped organise the Literary Assembly Against Japan's Participation in the War in protest at Japan's involvement in the first Gulf War (Karatani 2012c:75–76). Then in June 2000 he founded the New Associationist Movement (NAM) in Osaka (Karatani 2000). This marked Karatani's return to a more active engagement in politics.

#### 4. The Demonstration as an Assembly

The politics of NAM were based on the idea that neoliberal capitalism had undermined the basis of historical left-wing political projects based on struggles in the realm of production which had dominated the post-war social-democratic and revolutionary workers' movements. In place of this, he proposed an "associative" idea of an active, engaged sociality in which people participate directly in democratic decision making. The NAM organisation itself dissolved in 2003 but the notion of associationism continues to underpin Karatani's vision of direct democracy. Karatani explains that there are two central principles of the associationist movement. Firstly, it continues to resist capital and the state from within, just as previous social movements have sought to do. Secondly, the movement seeks to move outside the parameters of capital and the state by developing its independence and autonomy (Karatani 2012c:205–206). The notion of "a society in which people demonstrate" is grounded in this trajectory. It involves both resistance against the undemocratic power of the state, capital and the nation and the development of procedures for direct democratic decision making within social movements themselves. Demonstrations, Karatani (2012b:101) argues, are embryonic people's assemblies through which democratic power can be exercised by participants directly, without the mediation of elected representatives.

Karatani's notion of the demonstration as a form of direct democratic assembly resonates with that of the September demonstration's organisers. The September demonstration, at which Karatani was invited to speak, was part of a series of anti-nuclear demonstrations organised by the *Shirōto no ran* network. In a dialogue with Matsumoto Hajime, an activist with the network, Karatani develops the notion that a demonstration is a democratic assembly that goes beyond representation (Karatani and Matsumoto 2012). In the dialogue, Karatani discusses Matsumoto's earlier political activism when he was a student at Hōsei University in Tokyo. At Hōsei, Matsumoto had joined a student activities club called the *Sleeping Rough Research Group* (*nojuku kenkyūkai*). Karatani jokes that the first human hunter-gatherer societies were themselves homeless and that, furthermore, they would gather together and walk about—which Karatani light-heartedly suggests might itself constitute a kind of "demonstration" (Karatani and Matsumoto 2012:118). Matsumoto's university group frequently held *nabe* (hotpot) parties in the grounds of the university. These parties would become a focal point for people to gather and talk about a variety of topics (Matsumoto 2007:52–53). Sharing food was, Karatani points out, an important feature of all nomadic societies. Gathering in one place, moving about together and

sharing food and drink are all ways in which previously atomised individuals can form loose associations with one another that facilitate dialogue and political action. Karatani argues that a demonstration is essentially an assembly which offers opportunities for people to form *associations*. This "associative" sociality provides an alternative to both the atomised individual subject of neoliberal capitalism and the anonymity of the socialist "masses". "A demonstration", he explains, "is usually thought of as something outside of parliamentary politics. However, a demonstration is a parliament. It is a direct-democratic parliament. Having a discussion while noisily dipping into a hot-pot too, is a parliament" (Karatani and Matsumoto 2012:120)

Gathering in one place, sharing food and drink and organising "General Assemblies" in which participants could take a direct role in making decisions affecting the group were all hallmarks of the Occupy movement which attracted worldwide attention following the occupation of Zuccotti Park in New York in September 2011. In October, one month after the Occupy encampment was established, a number of anti-nuclear activists connected with the *Genpatsu yamero* demonstrations, including Matsumoto, visited the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) encampment in Zuccotti Park to take part in and observe the new movement. In a roundtable discussion at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Matsumoto (2012:10–11) described how impressed he was at the diversity of viewpoints present in the occupied park and the way in which the occupiers organised not only meetings, rallies and marches but also provided food, a library, clothing, legal support, Spanish language support and internet services. He acknowledged that the General Assembly itself, the central decision making body of the Occupy encampments, was extremely democratic in structure. However, it was the fact that so many different avenues for participation existed outside the formal General Assembly that appealed to Matsumoto. This is not surprising given his own activism with *Shirōto no ran* has typically rejected the formal apparatus typical of political activism in Japan in favour of an anarchic politics focused on the revolution of everyday life (Matsumoto and Futatsugi 2008). Matsumoto's observations resonate with the broader notion of an "assembly" that he developed in the dialogue with Karatani. This broader assembly of people within the Occupy encampment facilitated participation even by those who are not comfortable taking part in more formalised meetings.

However, when Matsumoto took part in the *OWS Meets Japanese Anti-Nukers* event at the New School for Social Research during the visit to New York, he found that his hosts emphasised the importance of the formal democracy of the General Assembly. Matsumoto (2012:11) on the other hand, jokingly described his own anti-nuclear activism as based on "drinking". Disputes between activists, he explained, tended to be resolved through sitting together and drinking, taking advantage of a more informal atmosphere to try and work out the differences between contending points of view. Echoing the stereotypical view Karatani had put forward in his September 2011 speech, Matsumoto's interlocutors in New York repeated similar ideas about Japan's lack of deep-rooted democratic traditions. Matsumoto countered these assertions by defending indigenous Japanese methods of democratic decision making which, he asserted, had long been a part of Japan's village society.

It is these indigenous traditions of democratic protest, such as the village *yoriai*, that Matsumoto and *Shirōto no ran* (Amateur Riot) have sought to reclaim through their own practice. The group's name itself draws playfully on the peasant *ikki* (uprisings), sometimes referred to as *ran* (riot), which have occurred sporadically in Japan since at least the middle ages. *Shirōto no ran* has frequently used imagery and language drawn from the *ikki* tradition to express its politics. Matsumoto's spoof electoral campaign in Suginami ward in 2007, for example, was given the

grandiose title of the *Kōenji ikki* (Kōenji Uprising). In the aforementioned dialogue, Matsumoto and Karatani discussed the similarities between peasant uprisings (*hyakushō ikki*) and the earliest example of Japanese environmentalism. In the so-called Kawamata incident, peasant farmers affected by pollution from the Ashio copper mine in Tochigi Prefecture walked all the way from Gunma Prefecture to Tokyo. Matsumoto (in Karatani and Matsumoto 2012:129) described how the *ikki*, which often took place over a number of years, involved a transformation of the everyday such that the protest "really becomes one with daily life (*hontō ni seikatsu to ittaika shiteru*)". This broad notion of a demonstration, in which daily life is itself animated by a spirit of resistance, seems cognisant with Karatani's idea of an associative sociality that relies not on the state but on a loose network of associations to counter the atomisation of capitalist modernity.

Matsumoto believes that the anti-nuclear demonstrations in Kōenji in 2011 were able to attract large numbers of people because the organisers' networks were deeply rooted in their local communities. The organisers were connected to many shopkeepers, musicians, thespians and artists and through these contacts they were able to reach out further still to related communities. Matsumoto argues that it is daily life that connect a community and hence can bring people to a demonstrations. Karatani considers this connectedness at the level of daily life to a kind of broad-based "demonstration", which, he insists, is just a kind of assembly or *yoriai* (Karatani and Matsumoto 2012:128–129). The notion of an *ikki* as a demonstration which has become one with daily life resonates with Karatani's notion of associationism and his desire to develop direct democracy. For Karatani, a demonstration, it is not only a means to draw attention to an issue and lobby government but also an end in itself because it creates a democratic decision-making power which lies outside of the official organs of representative democracy.

## 5. *Isonomia* and the Reclamation of Direct Democracy

In Karatani's interventions in the anti-nuclear movement he has argued that demonstrations ought to be considered as ends in themselves. Demonstrations need to be thought of as a form of "assembly" in which to practice direct democracy. These ideas are derived from Karatani's long-term interest in ideas of *associationism* and the democratisation of the means of exchange. In his most recent monograph, *The Origins of Philosophy*, Karatani explores the distinction between the direct democracy he sees evolving in the anti-nuclear movement and the representative democracy of parliamentary government. Arguing that modern representative democracy has its origins in the Athenian polis, Karatani tries to discover a pre-history of direct democracy in the *isonomia* of the Ionian city states (Karatani 2012d:23). Karatani (2012d:24) draws on Arendt's definition of *isonomia* as a form of "no-rule".

This notion of no-rule was expressed by the word *isonomy* [*isonomia*], whose outstanding characteristic among the forms of government, as the ancients had enumerated them, was that the notion of rule ... was entirely absent from it. The *polis* was supposed to be an *isonomy*, not a democracy (Arendt 1963:30).

Karatani's historical investigation of *isonomia* in the philosophy of the pre-Socratics is an attempt to further develop a political alternative to parliamentary government, which he sees as inherently undemocratic (Karatani 2012:13–14). The notion of "a society in which people demonstrate",



involves a broad notion of demonstrations as spaces of encounter between diverse individuals that enable the development of multiple loose associations.

## 6. Conclusion

The notion of "a society in which people demonstrate" is a unique attempt to develop democratic political theory out of the praxis of the post-3.11 anti-nuclear movement. However, his historiography of Japanese democracy reflects his own shifting relationship with street politics in the period between the Ampo struggle of 1960 and the present-day anti-nuclear movement. His participatory concept of democracy, drawn from the practices of anti-nuclear demonstrations reflects an understanding that the development of the kind of *associations* that might permit a form of *isonomia* in present-day Japan is dependent upon the development and spread of a new kind of sociality. This associative sociality, in which people strengthen their connections with each other in multiple loose associations is something which he sees as developing in the practices of the anti-nuclear movement and in groups like *Shirōto no ran*. The popularity of Karatani's utopian vision and the wide readership he has gained for his views indicates the centrality of the debate over Japanese democracy in the wake of the obvious failings of parliamentary government to restrain the power of the nuclear village and prevent the Fukushima nuclear disaster. While Karatani's historiography of democracy in Japan is contradictory, his theorisation of direct democracy reflects the struggle being waged by anti-nuclear activists in Japan against a nexus of corporate and state power that is increasingly unrestrained by existing democratic institutions. The coincidence of these movements with a global democracy movement indicates the importance of a deeper concept of democracy to confront the multiple crises facing today's world.

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### About the Author

**Alexander Brown** is a PhD candidate at the University of Wollongong. His doctoral dissertation "Precarity and Subjectivity in Contemporary Japanese Social Movements" focuses on the relationship between structural change in post-bubble Japan and the emergence of new forms of political activism. He was a MEXT scholar at Hitotsubashi University in Tokyo from October 2011 until March 2013 and is now working towards the completion of his dissertation. His most recent publication is "Precarious Times: The Revolutionary Potential of the Present", pp. 175–

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