

## Review

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"In Praise of Dialectics"  
by René Magritte

Robert Albritton, *Dialectics and Deconstruction in Political Economy*. New York: Palgrave, 2001. Softcover. 203 pages.

In *Dialectics and Deconstruction in Political Economy*, Robert Albritton stages a series of encounters with contemporary and classical thinkers. Hegel, Weber, Adorno, Althusser, Derrida, Postone and Gibson-Graham are all evaluated vis-à-vis the Uno-Sekine method of political economy that Albritton champions, and which is outlined in the book's introductory chapters. Albritton asserts the superiority of the Uno-Sekine method in each case, and this allows him both to highlight the finer points of this approach to political economy, and to speculate on its implications for social theory as a whole. In so doing, Albritton seeks not only to advertise the advantages of the Uno-Sekine method, but also to argue for a reformation of political economy along these lines, which would address the epistemological liabilities that have "driven poststructuralists to distraction" and delimit "the latitude for disagreement" amongst practitioners (Albritton 2001, 6, 9).

Drawing as he does on the Uno-Sekine method, a Japanese variant of Marxian political economy, Albritton offers the reader an intriguing glimpse of a relatively little-known and even exotic theoretical alternative within Marxism, yet one that remains at the same time deeply engaged with contemporary Marxian orthodoxy. In what follows, I intend to examine Albritton's presentation of the Uno-Sekine method, and to place it in the context of the present controversy over historical and systematic dialectics. I will argue that, despite its Japanese origins, in an Anglo-American context the implications of the Uno-Sekine approach cannot be understood without reference to poststructuralism and Western Marxism. Only then is it possible to appreciate the extent to which it constitutes not simply part of an orthodox countermovement to contemporary theoretical tendencies, but a genuinely innovative alternative to the same.

### **A Japanese Approach to Political Economy**

The Uno-Sekine method originates in the work of twentieth-century Japanese political economist Kozo Uno (1897-1977). By all accounts, the influence of Uno's heterodox Marxian political economy in Japan has been widespread and varied, but it is primarily through the work of Uno's student Thomas Sekine and a growing circle of collaborators and colleagues, Albritton among them, that his work has become known to an English-speaking audience.<sup>1</sup> Sekine's work has emphasized Uno's methodological innovations in the field of political economy, in particular his levels of analysis approach and the theory of a purely capitalist society, and it is typically to these postulates that Albritton returns in the course of his argument.

The Uno-Sekine approach distinguishes three distinct "levels of analysis" in Marx's theory of capitalism: the levels of pure logic, stage theory, and historical analysis. It is the first of these, the level of pure logic, that grounds the theory of pure capitalism. At this level, capitalism's "inner logic" or "deep structure" is presented in the abstract and "made rigorously theorisable by letting its self-reifying tendency complete itself in theory" (43). This affords an opportunity to "observe" capital's logic unobstructed and therefore to determine its nature or essence. This inner logic of capital corresponds to Marx's general formula and his theory of value; it is "self-valorising value," or "self expansion through the maximization of profit" (34-5). The second level of analysis, "stage theory" or "mid-range theory," assumes a "structural and synchronic" institutional configuration, typically one which approximates a given historical period in the development of capital, such as mercantilism, petty commodity production (which, in view of the defining role of legal-institutional structures at this level, Albritton terms "liberalism"), or monopoly capitalism ("imperialism"). In Albritton's words, "the basic problem of mid-range theory can be formulated as exploring and analyzing all the ways that the motion of value must 'compromise' with existing institutions in order to establish a workable mode of capital accumulation" (8).<sup>2</sup> Finally, at the level of historical analysis all relevant determinate and contingent factors are considered in the analysis of a particular historical conjuncture or event.

This hierarchy of analytical levels rests on the assumption of the distinctiveness and logical purity of capitalism as an object of analysis. As Albritton elaborates in his second

chapter, "The Unique Ontology of Capital," this entails the claim that capital as a social object is analytically separable from any given socio-historical context in which it operates: In order to establish this, Albritton turns, on one hand, to Althusser's account of the theoretical constitution of objects of knowledge and, on the other, to Lukacs' theory of reification, particularly as it is elaborated in the work of Alfred Sohn-Rethel. In terms of the latter, Albritton introduces Sohn-Rethel's concept of the "real abstraction" to establish the objectivity and knowability of abstract forms on Marxian-materialist grounds. To capital is attributed a unique power of abstraction that progressively realizes itself in history, meaning that it both tends to ever greater logical purity, and that its abstractions are possessed of a thinglike objectivity.

Uno organized Marx's work in *Capital* into three "doctrines"--Circulation, Production, and Distribution--and one of Sekine's most notable innovations has been to assert a parallel between these doctrines and the three doctrines of Being, Essence, and Notion in Hegel's *Logic*. At the level of pure logic, this entails a "dialectic of capital." In his third chapter, Albritton argues that Hegel's dialectic begins with a kind of category mistake: The dialectical form of exposition is not appropriate to Being in general, but is rather specific to capitalism as an object of analysis. The overarching contradiction that impels dialectical development is therefore not between Being and Nothing, but between value and use-value. At the level of pure logic, capital seeks to realize an endless cycle of infinitely self-expanding value but, in historical reality, is faced with a panoply of use-value "obstacles"--land and labour constitute two principal and necessary inputs to production that can never be perfectly commodified. Similarly, Hegel's failure to distinguish logic from materiality and history accounts for the fact that his dialectic does not include ontologically stratified levels of analysis.

The correspondence with Hegel's doctrines imputes a high degree of systematicity and coherence to the practice of political economy at the level of theory. Capital as a phenomenon is plainly self-consistent and rigorously knowable, and this permits the political economist to arrive at many regularities and structural tendencies that only vary in terms of their realization in history. Accordingly, Albritton's approach as he addresses his chosen interlocutors is, on one hand, to excoriate theoretical imprecision and epistemological obscurantism; on the other, to implore closer attention to the details of Marx's (and Uno's) own theoretical presentation. A common theme is a lack of theoretical specificity. Adorno, for example, "oppos[es] Hegel's general ontology and epistemology with another general ontology and epistemology" (83). Weber develops a conception of the economic that is not historically specific and conflates a number of distinct tendencies in modern society. Althusser generalizes the circumstances of the Russian revolution. Derrida universalizes the ontology of deconstruction. Postone's work constitutes an advance on Adorno's, but his position is weakened by the fact that he "extract[s] only a few key points from the dialectic" (91). Gibson-Graham fail to realize that "the best antidote to Althusser's universalizing and totalizing structuralism is not to adopt a poststructuralism that proposes opposite universalisms, such as a universal privileging of anti-essentialism against essentialism" "I believe," Albritton continues, "a more fruitful approach for Marxian political economy is really to come to grips with Marx's texts and particularly his understanding of the unique ontology of capital" (177).

## Returns to Hegel?

In his introduction, Albritton notes the widespread "anti-Hegelian animus" extant today, and approvingly cites Fredric Jameson's observation (which dates from 1990) that "any number of straws in the wind point to an impending Hegel revival, of a new kind, likely to draw a revival of Capital-logic along with it" (Jameson 1990, 241; Albritton 2001, 10). In this sense, Albritton's book could hardly be more timely, arriving as it does at the culmination of a decade-long dialogue regarding "systematic" versus "historical" dialectics in Marxian political economy. This new ascendancy of systematic dialectics as a subject of concern in Marxian circles has borne with it the practitioners of the Uno-Sekine method, Albritton included, who have achieved a new place of prominence in the context of this debate.<sup>3</sup> This Hegel revival is perhaps less avant-garde in character than the one that Jameson described--not a new "mathematical" Hegel for a digitized age, but rather a reaffirmation of logical necessity of Marx's political-economic categories and a reassertion of their priority over cultural and other factors.

It is all too easy to understand this new return to Hegel as the final movement in a retrenchment of Marxian orthodoxy following an extended period of struggle with postmodernism and the cultural turn on the academic left, a conservative reaction in which the reemergence of economic crisis and general recognition of a shift in regimes of accumulation have reassuringly asserted the priority of political economy over other domains of inquiry, and according to which it is wishfully imagined that all that really needs to be debated is the nature and extent of Marx's debt to Hegel. Apart from dialectics itself, value and crisis theory have benefited most from this revival, and the consequent shift to a schematic and concept-driven theory of capital should indicate to what extent the influence of social and cultural cofactors have been removed from consideration.<sup>4</sup> Albritton himself describes the contemporary scene as one "where knowledge is reduced to shifting lines in the sand blown by the infinite winds of overdetermination" (10).

The often polemical and uniformly partisan tone of *Dialectics and Deconstruction in Political Economy* would seem, at first, to support a reading of Albritton's project as a reaction to contemporary theoretical shifts. Yet I want to suggest that neither Albritton's work, nor the Uno-Sekine method, nor the broader discourse of systematic dialectics, can be categorized so unambiguously. My own interests are such that I hesitate to comment on the philological correctness of the Uno-Sekine account of the relationship of Marx to Hegel (Arthur [2002] does this), and Albritton's treatment of the thinkers that he examines can be summary and dismissive. What is most valuable and interesting in *Dialectics and Deconstruction in Political Economy* is precisely the manner in which Albritton negotiates his relationship to theoretical tendencies old and new. While the Uno-Sekine method is presented as way to maintain orthodoxy in Marxian political economy, Albritton in fact advances a number of suggestive theoretical innovations in response to dominant tendencies in contemporary theory.

## A New Conceptualism

The Hegelianism espoused by Albritton and other proponents of the Uno-Sekine method is hardly uncomplicated. Historical and systematic dialectics aside, the Uno-Sekine reading of Hegel is neither devoid of idiosyncrasy nor, indeed, unequivocally Hegelian. The very epistemological claims on which the Uno-Sekine method rests, and specifically those ways in which it assimilates Hegel to Marx, transpose the Hegelian framework to a different context altogether. Sekine has cited Karl Popper as an influence on his own epistemological theory (2000), and both Uno's and Albritton's arguments for the epistemological transparency of capitalism at times sound as much Kantian as Hegelian (see for example Albritton 2001, 35). On one hand, proponents of the Uno-Sekine method would resituate Hegel's dialectic in such a way as to negotiate its potential performative contradictions. Sekine's present thesis that we are in a late, advanced stage of capitalism grounds the claim that capitalism's internal dynamic can be fully known to us at present. On the other hand, by specifying Hegel's dialectic as a dialectic of Capital, the Uno-Sekine method realizes a divorce of dialectical logic from the Hegelian phenomenology of human self-consciousness, with philosophical consequences that are perhaps never sufficiently explored.

One of things that is distinctive about the Uno-Sekine method is the logical transparency that it purports to offer. Albritton's arguments as well as those of other proponents suggest that the theoretical attractions of the Uno-Sekine method inhere to a great degree in the intuitive force and stark simplicity of its epistemological claims. To draw clear a parallel between the three doctrines of Hegel's logic and the three circuits of capital is to deploy an analogy that is as persuasive as it is transparent to the understanding. The task of theorizing capitalism becomes one of progressive logical determination, which yields, at the most abstract level, an algorithm which can then be applied to historical regimes at two levels of specificity. To posit three clearly-defined levels of analysis, each possessed largely of its own distinct logic, is to offer a model of clarity and theoretical organization against the loudly declaimed ambiguities of postcontemporary social theory. By thus resting their theoretical framework on a Hegelian foundation, and then systematizing that foundation even further, it would seem that Unoists have arrogated to themselves the theoretical force and sophistication of one of the most formidable thinkers in Western history.

Yet systematic dialecticians are not alone today in their desire to retain the power of dialectical thought for Marxian theory. Most notably, there is Slavoj Žižek's prominent attempt to marry Marxism with Lacanian social theory, the Hegelian roots of which are much in evidence. Žižek too has turned to Sohn-Rethel and his account of the real abstraction in an attempt to ground a theory of capitalism which, like Albritton's, proceeds at least in part from Althusser's anterior structuralism (cf. Žižek 1994). We may speculate that what unites such efforts is not an unreconstructed Marxian fundamentalist impulse, nor resentment in the face of a dominant (if disintegrating) poststructuralism in the social sciences; but rather, as Albritton professes (if sometimes too forcefully), the desire, following decades of poststructuralist critique, to reassert the power and possibilities inherent in the practice of theory.

In the wake of sustained efforts to reconstruct the practice of social theory around quasi-literary modes of exposition (as with Derrida and deconstruction) and anti-conceptual modes of inquiry (as with Foucault and the various discursive genealogies derived from his work), the return to Hegel evident in some quarters may be in fact be representative of a more general and diffuse desire to reaffirm the power of theory and conceptuality in themselves. As such, it is to the extent that they propose conceptual solutions to problems in contemporary social theory that the Uno-Sekine method and other systematic-dialectical Marxian theories constitute a notable response to poststructuralism today.

### **A New Ontology?**

As Albritton suggests, the Uno-Sekine argument for the specificity of capital as an object of theory arguably neutralizes many aspects of the poststructuralist epistemological critique. The posited specificity of capital entails strict limitations on what a theory of political economy can achieve, and this can produce unexpected theoretical results: While on one hand, the pure logic of capital is theoretically transparent, at the level of history, the purview of theory gives way to a much more complex and less axiomatic kind of analysis. This entails not simply a limitation on the purview of theory, but salutary recognition of the claim that different kinds of theoretical objects are possessed of different properties, and will require different methods of inquiry. In turn, this implies a conception of the social totality as variegated and heterogeneous, and untotalizable.

In this sense, the Uno-Sekine method is truly exceptional for the extent to which it explicitly incorporates theoretical multiplicity and ontological heterogeneity into its own framework. Unlike the majority of poststructuralist approaches, the Uno-Sekine method not only expounds the need to incorporate a variety of methods in the theorization of social phenomena, but also explicitly attempts to rigorously theorize an effective practical response to the need for theoretical pluralism. Consequently, Albritton is most successful when he counterposes the specificities of the Uno-Sekine method to the parsimonious claims of his interlocutors: He gets much the better of thinkers such as Hegel, Adorno, and Derrida when he exposes the totalizing aspects of their own theories.<sup>5</sup> But at the same time, the Uno-Sekine method's rigidly hierarchized analytical levels and its reductive theorization of capital's logic threaten to raise as many objections as they might address. In particular, Albritton's exposition of the Uno-Sekine method raises a number of substantive questions regarding the nature of capital and the relationship of political economy to other domains of social analysis.

The assumption of capital as a logically coherent entity that tendentially encroaches on the lifeworld effectively supplies epistemological justification for abstraction at the level of theory. The Uno-Sekine doctrine is explicit that the theory of the pure logic of capital tells us little about how capitalism is actualized at the level of history, yet important questions remain about the ontological dynamics of its historical realization. These are properly questions regarding the reproduction of capitalist social relations. Althusser sought to respond to similar questions with his theory of subject-formation in

the essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (Althusser 1971)--insofar as Albritton invokes Lukacs' account of social reification, there is some indication that his theory of reproduction might also entail a theory of social-subjective interpellation. Yet to the extent that this remains unspecified, and given the asserted prominence of the theory of the pure logic of capital, the question remains: How is capitalism, as a social relation, produced and reproduced?

It seems inconsistent with the Uno-Sekine method that capitalism would somehow be reproduced at the level of totality, as this would resemble too closely the kind of Hegelian "expressive causality" of which Albritton has approvingly cited Althusser's criticism, and would undermine the Unoist claims to heterogeneity at the level of history. But if capitalism is reproduced micrologically, in the midst of existing social relations, this in fact begs further questions about the ontology of capital itself. In this sense, the Uno-Sekine argument regarding levels of analysis does too little to clarify the nature of social structures at the level of history. What kind of purity can capitalism in fact attain? One of the most valuable byproducts of the poststructuralist turn for Marxian theory has been a revision in recent years of the concept of social structure in relation to the fundamental role of its "constitutive outside" (cf. Gibson-Graham 1996). In the absence of an attempt to substantively relate the ontology of capital to other social ontologies, we are left with the implicit assumption of capital's primacy. While the Uno-Sekine method would restrict this primacy to the field of political economy, it remains a possibility that the nature of capitalism simply cannot be understood without reference to other social-theoretical problematics.

Albritton's elaboration of the Uno-Sekine method closely parallels poststructuralism here, insofar as both regard the construction of ontologies at the level of history as a theoretical fallacy. Yet the Uno-Sekine method simultaneously suggests an alternative proposition: That what is necessary for the practice of social theory today is not a ban on ontological theorizing, but rather the proliferation of ontological and other positive theories. In this sense, it is possible that the Uno-Sekine endorsement of ontology, although radical, is not radical enough in its repudiation of poststructuralist common sense.

### **Conclusion: Twenty-First Century Marxism?**

*Dialectics and Deconstruction in Political Economy* constitutes a provocative challenge to many theoretical commonplaces prevalent today. While Robert Albritton frames his argument as a more or less orthodox Marxian polemic against poststructuralism and other contemporary theoretical tendencies, this book is most valuable as an illustration of the prospects for theoretical resourcefulness and fresh thinking in the social sciences, and as a general affirmation of the potential of theoretical invention against a pervasive and undermining poststructuralist critique. Albritton's presentation of the Uno-Sekine method emphasizes the persuasiveness and power of rigorously conceived theory, and offers a unique argument for ontological and methodological pluralism in the social sciences. As I have suggested, these affirmations of theory and ontology over and against poststructuralist skepticism constitute much

more than a kind of Marxian theoretical conservatism, but rather resonate with more general contemporary tendencies in the social sciences reassess the power of and effectivity of speculative conceptuality in the practice of social theory.

In another sense, all of this begs the question as to just what a theory of capitalism might entail. The Uno-Sekine method suggests several possibilities, with its levels of analysis approach and its endorsement of dialectical rigor, yet the specific nature of logic, abstraction, and other key terms remains in question. Similarly, the less tangible qualities, as opposed to the logical properties, of the unique ontology of capital remain largely undeveloped. While intriguing suggestions are advanced on all counts, there is a larger sense in which this reframing of the Marxian tradition fails to leave the reader with a fully-conceived image of a theory reconstructed. Such imaginative gaps are perhaps inevitable, given that Albritton's book is intended less as a rigorous presentation of the Uno-Sekine method than as a dialogue with other theoretical approaches.

Albritton typically succeeds when he emphasizes the strengths of the Uno-Sekine approach as against his chosen objects of critique. His critique is especially effective when pitched against a generalized notion poststructuralism, associated here primarily with Althusser and Derrida--a poststructuralism ostensibly opposed to any determinate form of theorization or positive knowledge. Yet Albritton is not alone when neglects another, more recent movement within what is understood as poststructuralist theory, one centered on a new reading of Althusser, and on Deleuze and the "Spinozist tradition" in Western philosophy, which offers a very different account of the potentials of theory and the possibility of ontological theorizing.<sup>6</sup> Here, perhaps, as much as in the Hegelian tradition, Albritton might have found resources and support for the revised and revitalized Marxian theoretical tradition that he envisions.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sekine introduces Uno's work, as well as his own interpretation, to an English-speaking audience in "*Uno-Riron: A Japanese Contribution to Marxian Political Economy*" (1976). For a more recent treatment, see Sekine (1998); see Albritton (1986) and Albritton and Sekine (1995) for further work in the Uno-Sekine tradition. Another Japanese Unoist scholar who has published in English is Makoto Itoh (1988; 1995).

<sup>2</sup> See also Albritton (1991).

<sup>3</sup> In fact, this debate has developed less between proponents of historical versus systematic dialectics than between advocates of systematic dialectics themselves. See Arthur (1993); Smith (1990); Reuten and Williams (1989); Ollman and Smith (1998).



[4](#) The correlation between the emergence of systematic dialectics and contemporary value-form theory is especially strong. See for example Reuten and Williams (1989) and Smith (1998).

[5](#) Albritton's criticism is less just, however, when he chides Adorno for his emphasis on "barter" as opposed to commodity exchange in *Negative Dialectics*-this has been exposed as an error of translation (cf. Jameson 1990, x).

[6](#) A suggestive starting-point is Deleuze's critical review of continental structuralism (cf. Stolze 1998; Deleuze 1998). On ontology, see Murphy (1998).

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