

The Uno Newsletter: Rejuvenating Marxian Economics through Uno Theory
(Vol. II, No. 9)
Working Paper Series 2-9-4
20 November 2012

Review of John R. Bell (2009), *Capitalism and the Dialectic: The Uno-Sekine Approach to Marxian Political Economy*. New York: Pluto Press

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http://www.unotheory.org/news_II_9

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Relatively unknown in the English speaking world, Kozo Uno's (1897-1977) work has had a profound impact in Japan. His re-construction of Marxist theory through a 'levels of analysis' approach to understanding capitalism marked interventions in debates on the nature of Japanese capitalism, the scientific status of Marxian political economy and the broader development of the social sciences in Japan.¹ English speaking Marxists who have followed developments in value theory since the 1980s would be more familiar with the work of two Unoists, Makoto Itoh² and Thomas Sekine.³ Sekine taught at York University (in Toronto, Canada) for many years, introducing Uno's work to Robert Albritton, who made his own unique contributions to the development of Uno's theory.⁴ Together they founded an Uno study group that met regularly for several decades, of which John Bell was a member. His book, *Capitalism and the Dialectic*, is the result of many years of close study of Unoist theory, particularly the work of Sekine and Albritton.

This review will be organized in the following way. First, I will highlight some difficult theoretical issues (such as the nature of abstraction and the dialectical method) in the hopes that will enable the reader to gain a deeper appreciation of the Uno-Sekine levels of analysis approach that Bell presents. An understanding of how Bell addresses these issues is fundamentally important for grasping how each level of analysis—the theory of a purely capitalist society (henceforth, 'pure theory'), stage theory and historical analysis—deal with *different* though related objects of analysis. Next, I will examine in a necessarily brief outline each of the three doctrines—circulation, production and distribution—that constitute the theory of a purely capitalist society. I will follow this with a look at Bell's short chapter on stage theory, which is not so much a demonstration of how to theorize this level of analysis but a summary of the basic features of the three stages of capitalist development Uno has identified, drawing on the latter's as yet unpublished work on stage theory, as well as Albritton's (1991) lengthier study. Finally, I will conclude with an examination of the position Bell takes in the final chapter, that we are witnessing a transition away from capitalism in the current conjuncture and that this is a process that has been going on since the end of WWII. Here I will outline the nature of a disagreement within the Uno School on whether or not the post-WWII era can be theorized in terms of a new stage of capitalist development.

Capital's Dialectic: The Value/Use Value Contradiction

Bell's book constitutes a general introduction to Unoist theory, devoting the first three parts (three quarters of the book) to 'The Theory of a Purely Capitalist Society'. The last part (the remaining two chapters) are devoted to outlining Uno's 'Stages Theory

¹ While there are translations in process of two of Uno's key works, on stage theory and crisis theory respectively, the only text currently available in English is his *Principles of Political Economy* (1980 [1952]). On the significance and impact of Uno's thought in Japan, see Sekine (1975), Mawatari (1985) and Barshay (2004), especially chapters 4 and 5.

² See Itoh (1980) and (1988) and his contributions to the journal *Capital and Class* in the 1970s and 1980s. In Japan, Itoh and Sekine would be recognized as belonging to different branches of the Unoist school of thought, a fact understandably overlooked outside it.

³ Sekine's major works are (1986) and (1997). He also contributed several articles to the journal *Science and Society* in the 1980s and 1990s.

⁴ Albritton (1986) and (1991).

of Capitalist Development’ and providing an account of the post-World War II era as a ‘phase of ex-capitalist transition’, respectively. The Unoist approach to Marxian political economy combines three distinct levels of analysis whose ultimate aim is to provide us with an understanding of capitalism in particular historical conjunctures.⁵ In this section, I will focus on the theoretical issues surrounding the construction of the *pure theory* of capitalism and try to anticipate some of the obstacles to understanding the method of abstraction and logic of presentation readers, who are otherwise somewhat familiar with Marxist theory, might face.

The first step to understanding Uno’s levels of analysis approach is to ask a simple question: How does Uno advise us to read Marx? Uno shares with Althusser the view that Marx’s *Capital* is the founding work of a new science. In contrast to Althusser, Uno maintains that it contains a scientific theory of a historically specific object—the capitalist mode of production.⁶ According to Bell, Uno “eventually concluded that the bulk of the content of the three volumes of *Capital* constituted a self-contained, logical system or *genriron*” (p. 4) whose object is not ‘history’ but capital itself. What makes Bell’s presentation of this logical system different from Uno’s, whose *Principles* should be fairly accessible to readers familiar with *Capital*, is his rigorous account of the correspondences Sekine has identified between Marx and Hegel in Uno’s logical reconstruction of the economic theory in *Capital*.⁷ This logical system is divided into three doctrines—circulation, production, and distribution—which correspond to Hegel’s doctrines of ‘being’, ‘essence’ and ‘the concept’ in his *Science of Logic*.⁸

⁵ I will return to Bell’s account of how this approach can be used to study societies in the process of transition away from capitalism, below.

⁶ Aside from their difference on the question the Marx-Hegel connection, there are also differences in their understanding of the theoretical object of Marx’s *Capital*. While Althusser (1969; 1971) sees this object as ‘history’, with historical materialism the science of this object (see, for example, ‘Philosophy as a Revolutionary Weapon’ in the latter text), Uno (1980) sees the object being limited to capitalism and the science as political economy. While Uno treats capitalism as a distinct mode of production (and, in this text, so does Bell), he does not define Marxism as the ‘science of modes of production and their combination in social formations.’ The relevance of our understanding of the capitalist mode of production and capitalist social formations to pre-capitalist ones remains an open question. For an interesting perspective on this question, somewhat sympathetic to Uno, see Miyashita (1986). Bell’s own conception of ‘ex-capitalist transition’ in the post-WWII—which is post-capitalism-II—era sees Uno’s theory as “provid[ing] us with a solid reference point from which we can measure just how far we have departed from a viable capitalism” (p. 17).

⁷ ‘Correspondence’ always implies a difference. Sekine’s work isn’t a simple ‘mapping’ or ‘application’ of Hegel’s dialectic to Marx’s *Capital*. In fact, in his more recent two volume work (1997), Sekine omits discussion of the Marx-Hegel correspondence in order to focus on the presentation of the dialectic of capital alone. Sekine often uses the expression ‘copying-method’ to describe the application of this dialectical method in order to emphasize that capital itself inherently possesses a dialectical structure.

⁸ On the Uno-Hegel-Marx connection, see Sekine (2003). The three doctrines do not directly correspond to each volume of *Capital* (see Bell, p. 4). Only the first two parts of volume I belong to the doctrine of circulation. The rest of the volume and volume II belong to the doctrine of production and volume III to the doctrine of distribution. It should also be noted that there are some differences between Uno’s presentation and Marx’s, which Uno argues are based on a more consistent application of Marx’s method. For example, the labour theory of value is considered by Uno to have been introduced prematurely in the opening chapters of volume I, where its validity can not be demonstrated. This is due to the fact that Marx had yet to explain how labour power could take the commodity form, and for this we would have to turn to the analysis of the ‘hidden abode of capitalist production’ (see Uno (1980, p. 32 n. 2), and Sekine (1986, pp. 293-327). For a list of more of these differences, see Sekine’s appendix to Uno (1980).

How can Marx's *Capital* be read primarily, though not exclusively, as a work of 'pure theory'? Bell invokes Marx often repeated claims on his object of analysis being 'the laws of motion of capital', 'capital's inner logic' or the 'inner nature of capital' and not any particular concrete-historic society (like England in the 19th C).⁹ As Bell notes, Marx explains that his aim is not to "write the real history of the relations of production"¹⁰, that is, to construct a theory of the origins of the capitalist mode of production. It is not that this history is unimportant or that Marx did not regularly venture into conjunctural historical analysis and offer more general historical illustrations of his arguments throughout the three volumes of *Capital*. There is much else in these texts besides a presentation of the logical unfolding of a system of concepts. Marx addresses a range of topics from: observations on pre-capitalist modes of production and comparisons of these to the capitalist mode of production; critiques of classical political economists; examinations of particular pieces of legislation and parliamentary reports; and a variety of conjunctural economic phenomena, like economic crises. Marx also offers crucial insights into the brutal foundations on which the creation of the working class and primitive accumulation rests, and, for Unoists (as well as many other Marxists) these are the most crucial existential conditions (or 'presuppositions') of the capitalist mode of production itself. However, once these historical presuppositions are granted, "[C]apital as such... creates its own presuppositions... by means of its own production process. These presuppositions, which originally appeared as conditions of its becoming—and hence could not spring from its action as capital—now appear as results of... its presence" (Marx, *Grundrisse*, pp. 459-60, quoted in Bell, p. 3).¹¹ In Uno's terminology, Marx's *Capital* contains elements of all three levels of analysis: pure theory, stage theory, and conjunctural historical analysis. His *Principles* constitutes an effort to reconstruct and correct, where necessary, the presentation of the pure theory contained in *Capital* as a level of analysis distinct from the other two levels.

The theory of a purely capitalist society posits that the economic structure of the capitalist mode of production can be theoretically isolated and reduced to a theory of its basic principles. It is a theory of a society subsumed by a commodity-economic logic where all social relations are mediated by commodities and individuals are reduced to being 'bearers' of economic categories. By allowing the self-reifying tendencies of capital to 'complete' themselves, in theory, what is revealed is a society, whose structure is determined by the power of capital, whose mechanism of reproduction takes a commodity-economic form: "it... allows us to clearly isolate or demarcate the *general norms of material (or substantive) economic life*, which must prevail in any viable, sustainable economy, from the commodity-economic logic or laws specific to capitalism, with which they might otherwise be conflated" (p. 17).¹² Pure theory, then, can be

⁹ See Bell's introduction for specific textual references in Marx's work supporting this interpretation.

¹⁰ Marx, *Grundrisse* (1973, p. 460), quoted in Bell, p. 2.

¹¹ For example, despite its initial dependence on something outside itself (primitive accumulation as a historical presupposition), once the first accumulation cycle is complete, capital can produce its own investment funds ('its own presuppositions') to expand production and, hence, (extensive) accumulation.

¹² It seems that this notion of 'general norms of economic life' owes as much to Polanyi (2000) as it does to Marx. Capital's inner logic constitutes an economic system that can, in principle, 'run' a particular kind of (market) society. There are, however, crucial limits to what capital can internalize to its operation and these limits have been breached. To borrow one of Sekine's metaphors, the capitalist software has become incompatible with the economic, social and ecological hardware of societies.

understood as the abstract formal analysis of this structure within a theoretically self-contained and closed system. Given the variety of conceptions of what constitutes ‘Marx’s dialectic’, a familiarity with Hegelian terminology is an asset, and some may also find it useful to consult a guide to different orientations towards ‘Marxian dialectics’ in advance of reading Bell’s work.¹³ As Bell himself notes, his analysis demands more from the reader than Uno’s *Principles of Political Economy* but much less than Sekine’s more mathematical economics inclined *Dialectic of Capital*.

Bell argues that the core theory of *Capital* is a theoretical model of pure capitalism that can be refined, corrected and developed on the basis of an understanding of the ‘dialectic of capital’, which is understood as “a method of theorizing or synthesizing a subject-object ‘from within’” (p. 5). But what does it mean to say that capital is both the ‘subject’ and the ‘object’ of the theory? And what does it mean to ‘synthesize a subject-object from within’? This ‘subject-object’ is capital itself, understood as both a ‘thing’ (commodities, money and means of production) and a ‘social relation’ between those who own the means of production and those who don’t.¹⁴ The process of ‘synthesis’ involves a dialectical concretization and internal differentiation of the value/use value contradiction, which traces out how capital’s logic sequentially overcomes particular use value resistance in each of the three spheres (circulation, production and distribution). The result or outcome of a consistent application of this method to its object is “a complete and objective definition (or specification) of capitalism by capital itself” (p. 5).¹⁵

The ‘raw materials’ that the theorist works with are already provided in historical capitalism: these are the ‘real abstractions’ that are produced when commodity owners confront each other. Bell notes that the source of these ‘real’ or ‘self-abstractions’ is early 19th C England, which, following Sekine, he claims “is the historical society which most closely approaches this pure capitalism” (p. 5). Furthermore, it is “[o]nly when an object like historical capitalism manifests a real tendency to approach its abstract or idealized image by a process of self-abstraction [that] a valid theoretical abstraction or image of it [can] be derived by ‘method copying’” (p. 8). The method of abstraction employed here operates like a ‘theoretical reduction’ of the economic infrastructure of the capitalist mode of production to its constituent elements in an ‘idealized use value space’. An idealized use value space is defined as one where “only those use values appear... that capital, its market and logic would be able to produce without active economic or social welfare policy intervention on the part of the bourgeois state” (p. 8). It is “akin to the space that Hegel provides for the *absolute* in his *Logic*” (ibid.).¹⁶ It is not that the notion

¹³ Shamsavari (1991) outlines three basic orientations in relation to Marx’s work: a ‘logical-historical’ approach; a Hegelian approach; and a structuralist (Althusserian) one.

¹⁴ Alongside the capitalist class and the working class, Unoists include a distinct landowning class (which is not absorbed into the capitalist class, as the Althusserians would have it) within the basic class structure of a purely capitalist society. The capitalist and working classes are grounded in the doctrine of production, while the landowning class appears in the doctrine of distribution.

¹⁵ For a brief introduction to this approach to the dialectic of capital, see Sekine (1998). Among those whose ‘dialectical’ interpretations of Marx’s *Capital* share some affinities with Sekine’s are Banaji (1979), Backhouse (1980) and Arthur (1993).

¹⁶ An ‘idealized use value space’, in Bell and Sekine’s view, defines the limits of variation in the types of use values that can be regulated by capital’s commodity-economic logic with the assistance of the (non-interventionist) bourgeois state. It should be noted that this is a crucial criterion in Bell and Sekine’s

of the materiality of use values (not just those attached to commodities, but also those ‘attached’ to labour power, land and technology as well) is completely assumed away. This is what fundamentally distinguishes the ‘value/use value’ contradiction from Hegel’s ‘being/nothing’: use values within the dialectic of capital do constitute real obstacles that capital must ‘overcome’ to ‘complete’ itself in theory.

The task of the dialectic (more accurately, the theorist who is using it) is then to ‘ask’ capital to reveal its inner structure and define itself. This structure is revealed beginning with an analysis of the commodity form.¹⁷ But this commodity, it must be noted, is not just any good with a price.¹⁸ What is being presupposed at this early stage of the dialectic (and in the first pages of *Capital*) is that the object we have before us, whose nature we are seeking to understand, is a commodity that has been produced capitalistically, i.e. the ‘cell form of capital’ (as Marx puts it) which is already the result of specifically capitalist relations of production. A good that has been produced for sale on the market is a commodity if it is produced by workers, dispossessed of the means of production and control over the labour process, who have sold their only commodity—labour power—to capitalists under whose command and control have been combined with ‘appropriate’ means of production (themselves capitalistically produced and bought ‘on the market’). What is important to emphasize here is that this is a particular (‘logical’, as opposed to ‘historical’) version of the Marxian proposition that capitalism does not develop out of the extension of trade and exchange of objects that have prices (an empiricist abstraction appropriate to neoclassical economics), but out of the specific social relation between capital and labour.

The Theory of a Purely Capitalist Society: Contradiction and Classes

The bulk of *Capitalism and the Dialectic* is a reconstruction of Sekine’s interpretation and development of Uno’s level of pure theory. It is a ‘complete’ theory in the sense that such a systematic reconstruction of the theory of capital’s inner logic takes a position upon all of the fundamental areas of investigation (and debate) associated with Marxian economics, from value-form theory, to the so-called ‘transformation problem’ to crisis theory. In the limited space of this review, I will simply outline how two key ideas—contradiction and classes—are treated within the dialectic of capital.

assessment that the post-WWII era does not constitute a stage of capitalist development: use values production cannot be regulated by capital in this era without an interventionist state (see ch. 9).

¹⁷ This represents another distinction between Uno and the Althusserians (Balibar and Poulantzas, in particular) whose starting point for analyzing the capitalist mode of production is production itself, the combination of the elements labour, non-labour and the means of labour through the ‘double connection’ (property connection and appropriation connection). In the latter instance, the primary contradiction within the economic is that between the relations of production and the forces of production. See Balibar’s essay in Balibar and Althusser (1970) and Poulantzas (1978, p. 18). For Uno and Sekine, this contradiction represents a particular and more dialectically developed and concrete form of the value/use value contradiction as it appears in the doctrine of production.

¹⁸ “Simple use values play no role in the dialectic. Only the use value of a commodity as the negation of its value is germane here” (p. 22). Once we enter the doctrine of production, it becomes clear that this ‘negation’ criterion is true only of commodities that have been capitalistically produced.

Bell argues that “capitalism carries within itself a tendency towards the realization of its abstract or idealized image as a purely capitalist society” (p. 5). Marx indicates that this method of abstraction must begin with the commodity-form peculiar to the capitalist mode of production: “In the analysis of economic forms, moreover, neither microscopes nor chemical reagents are of use. The force of abstraction must replace both. But in bourgeois society, the commodity-form of the product of labour — or value-form of the commodity — is the economic cell-form” (1976, p. 90). Reflecting on the abstraction produced by commodity exchange reveals that the inner nature of the commodity is divided into two mutually exclusive yet internally related parts (value and use value co-exist within the commodity even though one is the ‘negation’ of the other). This ‘dialectical contradiction’ drives the development of capital’s inner logic, taking on more dialectically concrete forms as the dialectic develops. The unfolding of the concepts of commodity, money and capital in the doctrine of exchange is presented through the development of the immanent contradiction between value and use value within the commodity form.

It can be said that the dialectic of capital proceeds by ‘solving’ or ‘sublating’ the recurring contradiction between value and use value inherent in the commodity through each of the three doctrines. In the ‘doctrine of circulation’, “[c]apitalism introduces itself as a circulation economy—an economy in which products must be circulated or traded before being consumed” (p. 21). Here, “[t]he triad of ‘value, use value and exchange value’, which sets the stage for value-form theory in the dialectic of capital, corresponds to the triad of *being, notion and becoming* in Hegel’s work, which prepares the way for the logic of *determinate being (Dasein)*” (p. 23). The dialectic of capital traces out the unfolding of the value/use value contradiction through the commodity form to money, capital and the forms of capital (interest, merchant and industrial) as they ‘externally’ appear in the sphere of circulation. In the doctrine of production: “Once the form of industrial capital is firmly established, the recurring contradiction between value and use value... returns in the form of the contradiction between capitalism’s value augmentation and the use value production which prevails in any viable economy” (p. 54). This ‘contradiction’ periodically results in crisis—a rupture in the accumulation process—where the widening of value augmentation on a particular technical basis becomes incompatible with the provision of use values to society in socially necessary quantities, which constitutes a violation of the law of value (pp. 105-112). While the cause of crisis is identified in the sphere of production, they are manifested in, and accumulation restored through, the capitalist market. In the doctrine of distribution “the contradiction between value and use values arises in another form, as a contradiction between the capitalist indifference to use values and the unavoidable technical variations which accompany their production” (p. 116). A fully developed theory of crisis accounts for how the underlying disruption of value relations appears through, and is enforced by, price relations.

While human agents are present within the dialectic of capital, they are to be understood (as noted above) as the ‘bearers of economic categories’. This means that commodity exchanges, production relations and the distribution of surplus value should be viewed as governed by capital’s inner logic and not the wills of concrete individual-agents. It also means that the theory of crisis does not depend on the presence of class struggle. While Marxism has particular interest in investigating political, ideological and

economic class struggles in history, it does not play a direct role in the dialectic of capital.¹⁹ The ‘definition of capitalism by capital itself’ is a definition of the class places of agents at the economic level within the capitalist mode of production.²⁰ However before classes can be grounded in the dialectic,²¹ the forms of appearance of capital’s logic in circulation must be investigated from the point of view of undifferentiated commodity owners confronting other property owners in exchange while holding capitalist production, and any of the notions associated with it, implicit. Once the transition is made to the doctrine of production, it is as distinct classes that capitalists and workers relate to each other. Finally, in the doctrine of distribution, the capitalist class can be understood as composed of different fractions (merchant, banking and industrial) while a distinct rent-earning landowning class is also determined as essential to the class structure of a purely capitalist society.

Stage Theory: Stages of ‘Material Types’ of Industrial Capital

In chapter 8, Bell, following Uno and Sekine, outlines the basic features of three stages of capitalist development based on dominant forms of capital and material types of use value production. The purpose of this chapter seems to be two-fold: to provide an outline of the general features of each stage and to explain how, in the framework Bell represents, each stage represents a variation within the limits of the capitalist mode of production. This will have important consequences for the thesis of ‘ex-capitalist transition’.

The three stages are mercantilism (17th to mid-18th C England), liberalism (late 18th to early 19th C England) and imperialism. The dominant forms of capital are merchant capital, industrial capital and finance capital and the material types of use value production are represented by the commodities wool, cotton and steel respectively (p. 179). In Bell’s view, each type of capital was capable of regulating use value production by ‘internalizing externalities’ with the assistance of the economic policies of the bourgeois state: “Stage theory describes how the economic policies of the state externally assisted the operation of the commodity economy in its subsumption of a particular type of use value in each stage of capitalism’s development” (p. 204).

The stage of Mercantilism is considered a stage of capitalist development despite the tenuous grasp of the law of value on the social reproduction of English society in this period. Crises were not periodic and their causes were generally contingent and external to capital’s logic, for instance, speculative bubbles and disruptions in financial relations (p. 189). In the stage of liberalism, English society in the first half of the 19th C came closest to approximating a purely capitalist society, which is indicated by the close (though not identical) correspondence between economic crises in history and the theory of business cycles presented in pure theory (pp. 184-91). In the stage of imperialism, the

¹⁹ For a particularly hostile review of the Unoist approach, based, in part, on its affinities with Althusserian approaches, see Lebowitz (2010, ch. 17). For an account of how an Unoist approach deals with the problem of class struggle, see Albritton (2005).

²⁰ I will return to the question of the implicit theory of class and the isolation of the economic structure within the capitalist mode of production in Bell’s work in the final section below.

²¹ Property owners are not internally differentiated into two classes, capitalists and workers, in the doctrine of circulation. It is only with the transition to production that the specifically capitalist relations of production can be seen to determine the two fundamental classes.

advent of heavy fixed capital investments so disrupted the functioning of the law of value that it “reversed the tendency for historical capitalism to dissolve traditional social relations and thus move towards the ideal image of capitalism that appears in the pure theory” (p. 192).

The theory of each stage is developed by abstracting from the distinctively (industrial) capitalist features of leading capitalist nations in each historical era. Stage theory is but a theoretical representation of what can be called the dominant form of capitalist production characteristic of specific periods of capitalist history. Stage theory is not a theory of the historical development of capitalism within a stage or a theory of the transition between stages. In the former case, this would entail the view that imperialism can be derived from the capitalist mode of production. In the latter case, Unoists would affirm the importance of explaining the dissolution of one stage and the emergence of another, but only as a matter for the level of historical analysis. Other modes and forms of production may co-exist with this dominant form and it raises the question of what specific political and economic effects the leading nation might have on other nations at different levels of economic development (whether capitalist or not) as they are integrated within the world economy. Again, the investigation of such concrete conjunctural questions is a matter for the level of historical analysis.

From Theory to History Through Stage Theory

The thesis of Bell’s last chapter (based on an earlier argument developed together with Sekine (2001))—that we are no longer in capitalism, but in a phase of ‘ex-capitalist transition—may appear to most Marxists as particularly controversial. Despite my own reservations, the argument cannot and should not be casually dismissed. The belief that our society (whichever society this may be) is a capitalist society, and that this fact admits no need for demonstration (since it is directly observable in the everyday realities of profit-maximizing/capital accumulating corporations and economic crises), is arguably an obstacle to a deeper understanding of what capitalism *is*. The notion that there are ‘stages’ or ‘phases’ (or both) of capitalist development is shared by Marxists as theoretically divergent as Mandel and Poulantzas. In order to give coherence to a conception of phases, one must have at their disposal a conception of what capitalism ‘essentially’ is. A commitment to a theory of capital’s inner logic or an abstract-formal conception of the capitalist mode of production does not imply that ‘history’ simply develops according to its inherent ‘tendencies’, but simply that a theory of capitalism’s ‘deep structure’ must guide any investigation into the transformations—stages or phases—of capitalist societies.²² Whether one agrees or not with the conclusions drawn by Bell, his argument touches on basic questions that must be faced directly and responded to from within a theoretically rigorous social scientific understanding of ‘capitalism’.

Albritton (1986) situates Uno’s theory in relation to post-Althusserian debates on Marxian political economy and historical materialism. His work on stage theory (1991) provides an elaboration and development of the Unoist levels of analysis approach. Albritton outlines the three stages of capitalist development Uno himself recognized (Mercantilism, Liberalism and Imperialism) and argues for the inclusion of a fourth, post-

²² See Albritton (2004).

WWII stage of consumerism. This marks what some Unoists have argued is a significant departure from Uno, who considered the stage of imperialism to be the final stage of capitalist development.

Why is it not possible to theorize a stage of capitalist development in the post-WWII era? Bell and Sekine do not argue that a new non-capitalist mode of production is now dominant, but that the capital has lost its hold on the social reproduction process of society. Elements of the capitalist mode of production (what they call ‘capitalism-I’) persist in the world economy but capital—whether we consider a particular form of it (finance capital) or the law of value—cannot overcome use value obstacles without a type of state intervention which so disrupts the operation of capital’s laws of motion that it cannot be theorized as a ‘material-type’ of industrial capital (which is what they would refer to as ‘capitalism-II’). Thus it is because of the nature of use-value obstacles (heavy fixed capital investment, complex use-value production), disruption of business cycles and the role of state-intervention that no material-type of industrial capital exists. This is not to say that there is no exploitation based upon the extraction of surplus-*labour* but that this is not the same thing as the mode of capitalist exploitation based upon the extraction of surplus-*value*. Bell and Sekine seem to share with Poulantzas (1978) the view of a great narrowing of what can be called productive labour and the rise in unproductive labour. They would differ, of course, in that Poulantzas (see part II, especially chapter 3) would insist on theorizing the post-war era as a distinct phase of the stage of monopoly capitalism/Imperialism.²³

One way to frame the Bell and Sekine position is to say that the post-WWII era has witnessed such a displacement of dominance from the economic to the political that it is no longer possible to view the law of value as operating.²⁴ If this displacement goes far enough, then it is political considerations—not the logic of capital—which becomes decisive for understanding contemporary economic issues.²⁵ This is what I think Bell is essentially claiming: that it is because economic externalities have grown so large and complex that bourgeois economic policies are incapable of ‘internalizing’ the externalities that would enable capital to viably manage the social reproduction process of society on its own. Whatever one makes of this argument, the question that has been posed by Bell and Sekine is one that has not received sufficient attention within Marxist theory: by what criteria can we judge when a social formation is no longer under the dominance of the capitalist mode of production? Aside from some debates around whether ‘socialism’ should be considered a mode of production or a form of transition

²³ While they may share the terminology of stages and phases, these are constructed quite differently primarily, but not solely, because of the differing criteria employed in periodizing capitalism (dominant capital/material use value types as opposed to periodizing the relations of production). It should also be noted that while Bell (pp. 206-9) treats the rise of a particular type of state intervention, one that goes beyond ‘internalizing externalities’, as beyond the limits of the bourgeois capitalist state, Poulantzas does not—both the non-interventionist and interventionist state are treated as forms of the capitalist type of state (1978, p. 100-1).

²⁴ This is terminology drawn from Poulantzas, according to whom “the imperialist stage, corresponding to the development of monopoly capitalism, is marked by the displacement of dominance, both within the social formation and within the imperialist chain, from the economic to the political (i.e. to the state)” (1978, p. 42).

²⁵ “Capitalism’s flexibility is not great enough to effectively manage the production and circulation of heavy and complex use values on a global scale. Nor can the *law of value* operate when political considerations so greatly affect outputs, prices, investment, trade flows and the mobility of labour” (p. 206).

where the capitalist and communist modes exist in struggle, very little has been said on this subject.²⁶

There are two areas of Uno theory that warrant further theoretical elaboration and development. Firstly, despite an implicit recognition that the capitalist mode of production is not constituted by an economic structure alone, Bell (as well as Sekine) unfortunately devotes little attention to developing a theory of the political or ideological regions of this ‘composite object’. This may be considered secondary to the more pressing aim of advancing the argument, in the current conjuncture, that we are in a phase of ex-capitalist transition. However, given how much this argument hinges on an understanding of interventionist states lying outside the ‘limits of variation’ of the bourgeois state, and hence, outside the scope of a social formation dominated by the capitalist mode of production, it would seem imperative that the theory of the capitalist state on which this claim is grounded is made much more explicit. Secondly, while there is an implicit theory of the classes inherent to Uno’s conception of a purely capitalist society, few indications are given as to its application to both stage theory and historical analysis. It seems to me that, for Bell, an analysis of the economic structure alone is sufficient to place agents within the class structure of the capitalist mode of production. Thus it can be distinguished from approaches like Poulantzas’ (1973; 1978), whose concept of social classes is based on the determination of the entire ensemble of the capitalist mode of production—political and ideological elements as well as the economic. The Bell/Sekine view can be contrasted, partially, with Albritton’s (1991) reconstruction of Uno’s pure theory, since he gives explicit consideration to the functioning of political-legal and ideological dimensions of the level of pure theory as necessary, though passive, background conditions (although they lack the ‘relative autonomy’ of the Althusserian kind). As a result, there seems to be greater room in Albritton’s approach to considering the necessary and relatively autonomous functioning of these dimensions at the level of stage theory.

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²⁶ See Althusser’s ‘Reply to John Lewis’ in (1976).

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