

Samezō Kuruma's Assessment of Marx's Hegelianism and the Dialectical Method: A Criticism of Post-War Interpretations in Japan

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Introduction

Samezō Kuruma (久留間 鮫造 1893–1982) was a Japanese Marxian¹ economist, whose work primarily revolved around the theories of value, crisis, and money. His ideas can be placed towards the beginning of the elaborate Japanese tradition of interpretative activities surrounding the work of Karl Marx. Yet, Kuruma has been largely overlooked in the annals of this very tradition.² Therefore, the current paper aims to contribute to this apparent gap.

In 1919, Kuruma joined the Ōhara Institute for Social Research (大原社会問題研究所 *Ōhara shakaimondai kenkyūjo*), moved by its founder's determination to rid society of poverty. Due to the rice riots of the previous year, Kuruma felt the need for the type of intellectual labour that the institute provided.³ It was at the Ōhara Institute that Kuruma encountered Marx's work and became deeply interested in it (Ōtani, 2003, pp. 14–21).

The publication of his *Marx-Lexicon on Political Economy* (マルクス経済学レキシコン *Marukusu keizaigaku rekishikon*), which also bears the German title *Marx-Lexikon zur Politischen Ökonomie*, may be regarded as the summit of Kuruma's efforts. The *Lexicon* is a work comprising of fifteen volumes, each a compilation of passages written by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1820–1895). The *Lexicon* employs a dual language structure, with the original German excerpts printed on the left-, and the Japanese translations printed on the right-hand pages throughout the whole work. Kuruma arranged passages which he deemed important or insightful under suitable titles and subsequently addressed an impressive array of topics from Marx's work, such as competition, method, historical materialism, crisis, and money.

In the explanatory notes (凡例 *hanrei*), printed at the beginning of each volume of the *Lexicon*, Kuruma (1969a) notes that he compiled the work to provide insight into *crucial economic concepts and problems*, as well as providing a reference for studying Marxian economics. Like many other economists in Japan, Kuruma thus saw Marx's work as the pinnacle of economic research. Furthermore, Kuruma mentions that the work can be used as a reference to prevent fragmentary or one-sided interpretations of Marx's theories (p. xvii).

¹ The adjective 'Marxian' denotes the thought of Karl Marx, and mainly refers to its economic and theoretical aspects. When contrasted to the term 'Marxist', the latter carries a broader meaning; it is often accompanied by the wish to abolish the existing capitalist mode of production, and thus lies closer to interaction with the material world, rather than only conceptualising it.

² Recently, renewed interest in Kuruma can be observed. For example, an article was written by Elena Louisa Lange in 2014, discussing Kuruma's ideas, and an English translation of some of his work was made by Michael Schauerte in 2018. There has also been Japanese research on Kuruma in the past, but this exclusively addressed his economic theories, and mostly that of crisis (e.g. Takagi, 1976; Matsuda, 1978).

³ The Ōhara Institute was founded in 1919 by businessman and philanthropist Magosaburō Ōhara (大原孫三郎 1880–1943). He had done so upon realising that simple acts of philanthropy were insufficient to tackle societal problems and instead saw the need for a thorough investigation of society (Ōtani, 2003, pp. 16–17).

The latter remark is significant in the context of the new interpretations that were born in the aftermath of the Second World War. Seemingly, these interpretations relied on drawing out the correspondences between Marx's *Capital* and G.W. F. Hegel's *Logic*. Kuruma (1969b) argued that the new popular interpretations overlooked the contents of Marx's work, and got distracted looking for Hegel to the point that "absurd misunderstandings" arose (p. 1).⁴ In this paper, I will make use of the tension between Kuruma's rather literal interpretation of Marx's *Capital*, and the new post-war popular interpretations, to draw out the connection between Marx and his philosophical predecessor, G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831). This connection has been debated extensively over the past decades. Recently, Hegelian interpretations of Marx have been on the rise again.⁵ Kuruma's insights may therefore once more serve as a guidebook for navigating oneself into new interpretations of the Hegelian Marx.

1. Marx's Indebtedness to Hegelian Philosophy

Kuruma (1969b) argues that "Marx did not take over Hegel as such, but adopted [his ideas] upon fundamentally criticising them" (p. 1). Rather than a direct adoption of a Hegelian thinking pattern—a notion which seems to be held by several post-war scholars⁶—Kuruma thought that Hegel's ideas underwent a radical transformation before being adopted by Marx in *Capital*. This observation is reflected in Marx's own words, which have been emphasised by Kuruma in the *Lexicon*⁷:

My dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite. To Hegel, the life process of the human brain, i.e., the process of thinking, which, under the name of "the Idea", he even transforms into an independent subject, is the demiurgos of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of "the Idea". With me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought.

[...] The mystification which dialectic suffer in Hegel's hands, by no means prevents him from being the first to present its general form of working in a comprehensive and conscious manner. With him it is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell. (Kuruma, 1969a, pp.400–403)⁸

⁴ Kuruma does not mention any names, thus it is unclear which concrete interpretations are meant. However, the characteristics mentioned give a good idea. A likely candidate is Thomas Sekine, who argues for the "homomorphic" structure of Marx's *Capital* and Hegel's *Logic* (Sekine, 2020). Sekine worked closely together with Kōzō Uno, who is perhaps Japan's most famous Marxian economist, and who has been extensively criticised by Kuruma. Sekine's (2020) work is based on the method established by Uno, making it possible that Kuruma also had Uno in mind when criticising post-war "methodologies".

⁵ This is attested by several very recent publication exploring the same Marx–Hegel relation. (E.g. Bartonek & Burman, 2018; Rockwell, 2018; Fareld & Kuch 2020).

⁶ I am basing this conjecture on Kuruma's (1969b) criticism of those who claimed that "this part of *Capital* corresponds to this or that part of Hegel's *Logic*" (p. 1).

⁷ The markings made by Kuruma in the *Lexicon*, that is, the thin and bold underlining, will be preserved in the English translations, rendered from the Marx and Engels Collected Works (MECW). It is my view that these markings make Kuruma's own position clearer, by showing what he thought to be important.

⁸ The source of the English translation will be referenced in a footnote as follows: MECW: Marx, 1996, p. 19.

It is noteworthy that this passage begins with Marx calling his own dialectical method the *direct opposite* of Hegel's.⁹ Another issue is raised by Marx, namely the difference between Hegel's idealism and his own materialism. One need only remind oneself of Plato's allegory of the cave and the world of forms, to understand what Marx is hinting at here: Hegel sees "the Idea" as underlying and constituting the physical world around us. For Marx, the opposite is true: humankind finds itself in a physical environment, and ideas are formed in the mind upon experiencing it. From a contemporary point of view, the latter arguably seems to be the more correct.

But what then, should one picture when Marx speaks about the mystification of the dialectic method? Kuruma (1969a) gives his readers a clue in the second volume of his *Lexicon*¹⁰: in chapter two, he addresses the issue of Marx's method in *Zur Kritik*, a work prior but similar in method to *Capital*, with a quote from Engels. Engels here discusses the difference in method between Hegel and Marx, also emphasising the idealist nature of the former. Still, he argues that the Hegelian method is superior to any prior one, due to its underlying "historical sense". According to Engels, this historical dimension is exactly what Marx had managed to recover from Hegel's method after thoroughly criticising it. Engels furthermore implies that what characterises Marx's work, is precisely his dialectical method, combined with a materialist outlook (pp.6-15)¹¹.

Continuing the search for Hegel's "mystification", it is worth noting that Engels makes a distinction between *method* and *system*. In the *Lexicon*, it is shown that Engels's major problem with Hegel's system is the "absolute truth" which forms its conclusion and holds it together. This is an allusion to the notion of *Absolute Spirit*, which refers to the highest level of knowledge and understanding in Hegel's philosophy. According to Engels, Hegel's system, with its "absolute truth", allowed him to retain some form of finality and dogma, as opposed to his dialectical method, which to the contrary emphasises the developmental and changing nature of knowledge and the world (pp.414-419)^{12,13}. It thus seems that wherever Hegel introduced an idea contrary to "the transitory character of everything and in everything" (pp.416-417)¹⁴, this amounted to a kind of 'pollution' of the dialectical method. It now becomes clearer what Marx meant by "[t]he mystification which dialectic suffer in Hegel's hands". That is, Hegel's idealism and idealist system arguably led to a manifestation of the dialectical method that was out of touch with reality.

Despite there being some truth to Engels's claims about method and system, it may be fruitful to try to understand what point Hegel was trying to bring across with his notion of the absolute. Inwood (2003) explains that philosophers before Hegel had used the term *absolute* to refer to that which is ultimate, often referring to God. For Hegel, however, God was not an external entity looking over the earth. Instead, he understands the absolute as the foundation of both the mind and nature, encompassing the physical world, human knowledge, and as such, itself. The absolute is not a static entity for Hegel, but one that develops together with nature and knowledge (pp.27-28). If one holds to this view, the absolute does not seem to contradict Hegel's dialectical method,

⁹ The dialectical method, a crucial notion in the Marx-Hegel debate, will be discussed in further detail below.

¹⁰ The second and third volume of the *Lexicon* concern the topic of method: 方法 (*hōhō*).

¹¹ MECW: Engels, 1980, pp.472-475.

¹² When only page numbers are mentioned as an in-text citation, this refers to Kuruma, 1969a. This decision was made for easy reading.

¹³ MECW: Engels, 1990, pp.359-361.

¹⁴ MECW: Engels, 1990, pp.359-361.

but rather becomes a part of it. In this case, it becomes difficult to separate method from system as Engels proposes.

2. Kuruma's View

Kuruma's stance towards Hegel and his dialectics seems to somewhat reflect the abovementioned passages by Marx and Engels.¹⁵ Kuruma makes his point clear with the title he gives to these passages, *The Contradiction between method and system : In Hegel, the method is sacrificed to the System*.¹⁶ And indeed, Kuruma (1969b, 1969c) also makes the distinction between method and system himself. Still, irrespective of the possibility of a neat separation, it always remains possible to assess how 'sensible' a specific passage in Hegel's work is, and this is exactly what Kuruma also does.

Hegel is thus not rejected, nor adopted as such, but thoroughly criticised, incorporating only those aspects that benefit the aim of understanding and critiquing *political economy*. This is a crucial point. Hegel and Marx's methods are different because they have a radically different subject of investigation. Kuruma (1969c) argues that Hegel's works end with notions such as the 'Absolute Idea' and the 'Absolute Spirit', while Marx concludes his works with varying topics, each of them concerned with *a critique of capitalist production itself*, and, so Kuruma claims, demonstrating its necessary collapse due to its internal contradictions (pp.9–10). Remember also Marx calling his dialectic method the direct opposite of Hegel's. Still, Marx also calls *Capital* a "first attempt at applying the dialectic method to political economy" (pp.332–333)¹⁷. A certain tension regarding the role of Hegelian thinking in Marx's work is thus visible, and I will argue that this tension can also be observed in Kuruma's own view on the matter.

As has already been alluded to, Kuruma was critical of those drawing similarities between specific parts of Marx's *Capital* and of Hegel's *Logic*. He even explicitly criticises those who claim that *Capital* cannot be understood without reading Hegel. Rather, "because Marx's method is made concrete in *Capital*, it may be said that reading *Capital* obediently and carefully is the best way, devoid of mistakes, to come to an understanding of his method" (Kuruma, 1969b, p.1). Furthermore, Kuruma makes clear that Hegelian thinking can cause one to completely misunderstand Marx. His message is thus to be wary of Hegelian misinterpretations, which completely take the focus away from the matter at stake, that is, "the concrete problems Marx is raising in specific parts of *Capital*, and how he solves them" (Kuruma, 1969b, p. 1).

On the other hand, Kuruma (1969b) notes that Marx learned a great deal from Hegel, and that knowing Hegel should be very helpful for understanding Marx (p.1). The tension which was already present in Marx is thus inherited by Kuruma: why is it that *Capital* can be understood perfectly well (perhaps even better so) without the distractions of Hegel, while Hegel is also supposedly very helpful for understanding Marx?

This apparent contradiction can be solved by looking at Kuruma's (1969b) direct quotation of Hegel (p.5)

¹⁵ It was Kuruma himself, after all, who selected these passages for the volumes of the Lexicon focussing on method.

¹⁶ ヘーゲルにおける、方法と体系との矛盾。ヘーゲルにおいては、方法は体系の犠牲にされている (*Hēgeru ni okeru, hōhō to taikai to no mujun. Hēgeru ni oite wa, hōhō wa taikai no gisei ni sareteiru* ; pp. 414–421)

¹⁷ MECW : Marx, 1987, p.463.

The true shape in which truth exists can only be the scientific system of that truth. [...] (Hegel, 2018, pp.5-6)

A scientific¹⁸ method should thus be systematic.¹⁹ What this means is that it is necessary to realise the interdependent and developing nature of knowledge. Handling each item in an isolated fashion can, in this view, only lead to fragmentary, one-sided knowledge. This is exactly what the dialectical method aims to surpass. Kuruma also quotes the following, more detailed explanation :

A philosophizing without a system can be nothing scientific. Apart from the fact that such philosophizing expresses by itself more of a subjective outlook, it is also random in terms of its content. A particular content is justified solely as a moment of the whole. When separated from it, it represents an unjustified presupposition or a subjective certainty. (Hegel, 2010, p.43)

Thus, the point of Hegel's method is that it takes the form of a process. Rather than establishing static and unchanging concepts, it lays bare contradictions and problems with a specific concept, and as such, leads the way towards an improved understanding. Furthermore, each stage of that process is valuable and indispensable. Elsewhere, Kuruma (1969a) demonstrates how a dialectical exposition can be (wrongfully so) regarded as being arbitrary (pp.335-337).²⁰ Although I cannot discuss his argument in further detail, I want to stress Hegel's point that, on the contrary, the expositions that set clear boundaries for their concepts from the very beginning are the arbitrary ones. According to him, working scientifically requires one to only draw conclusions at the end of an argument, not at the beginning.

Conclusion

Kuruma's criticism of the "post-war tendency" has revealed some notable points about Marx's work and its connection to Hegel. The relation between the two thinkers is a delicate one, and demarcating where Marx stops and Hegel begins is a delicate exercise, much like balancing on a rope : it is easy to fall off. Kuruma stressed that overemphasising Hegel would result in misunderstanding Marx, who, rather than making a philosophical system, aimed to understand the manner in which political economy functioned.

Still, Kuruma selected many crucial passages from Marx's extensive body of work to portray his indebtedness to Hegel accurately. He was careful to draw a nuanced picture, not overemphasising, nor neglecting the relation between the two thinkers. In the course of my argument, the tension within Kuruma's own argument has risen to the surface. It was indicated that this tension was already present in Marx's own writings, who at times praised Hegel, while at

¹⁸ One should be careful not to interpret "science" (Wissenschaft) as meaning "natural science". Rather, it should be understood as : "The systematic pursuit of knowledge, learning, and scholarship (especially as contrasted with its application) "(Lexico) .

¹⁹ At this point, one can once more recognise the tension within the idea of separating method and system.

²⁰ The gist of the argument is that it is crucial to be aware of the difference between Marx's dialectical exposition, and its preceding inquiry. The latter is no longer visible in the exposition, giving a seemingly arbitrary impression. Furthermore, Kuruma (1969b) argues, this is the same reason why Marx's exposition is often erroneously interpreted as an application of Hegel's system of *Logic* (p.9) .

other times criticising him. For Kuruma, as for Engels and Marx, there is an important distinction between Hegel's sensible and his rather nonsensical or "mystified" ideas. The first may be useful in order to understand Marx, the latter only result in "absurd misunderstandings".

In conclusion, Kuruma's warning against overly Hegelian interpretations seems valid, and one can see how the seemingly indiscriminate post-war tendency could become aggravating for a meticulous scholar such as Kuruma. His advice to pay attention to what Marx has written himself, and not to get lost in Hegelian concepts before ever achieving a basic understanding of *Capital* first, is still valid today. Arguably, it is instrumental for coming to grips with a changing and interconnected world, which is still intertwined with a system of global capitalism: a system which may be better understood by studying Marx's analysis of the capitalist mode of production in *Capital*.

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