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THEORY CAUGHT UP IN DIALECTICS: SOME REFLECTIONS ON ASGER SØRENSEN'S CAPITALISM, ALIENATION AND CRITIQUE¹

ABSTRACT

This paper presents three interconnected examinations of Asger Sørensen's arguments in *Capitalism, Alienation and Critique*, which thematize Sørensen's overarching understanding of the relationship between theory and practice: his general methodological perspective on critical theory, its distinctive epistemology and its anchoring in the empirical world. The paper authors each try to push Sørensen on these crucial points by considering how Sørensen's variant of critical theory actually operates, scrutinizing in more detail the particular relationship between the 'experience of injustice', which for Sørensen constitutes the empirical foothold for critical theory, and the theoretical diagnosis of social reality which the critical theorist should formulate against the backdrop of this experience.

KEYWORDS

dialectics, determinate negation, Foucault, Degrowth, Bataille

Introduction

This paper brings together three inter-imbricated examinations of some of Asger Sørensen's arguments in *Capitalism, Alienation and Critique* – Marjan Ivković's, Srđan Prodanović's and Milan Urošević's. The unifying thread of the three contributions is the thematizing of Sørensen's overarching understanding of the relationship between theory and practice, in other words his general methodological perspective on critical theory, its distinctive epistemology and its anchoring in the empirical world. Sørensen argues for the preservation of the original, first-generation critical theory which postulates the 'predominance

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of theory over practice’, meaning that critical theory should operate by negating, de-naturalizing not just the social reality as it appears to the everyday observer, but also the conventional, positivist epistemological approach of the social sciences to this reality. Instead, critical theory should rely on the Hegelian conception of the societal “totality” which presents a dynamic mediation of the universal and the particular in all social phenomena and the dialectical method of determinate negation which, according to Sørensen, is able to “grasp conceptually reality in motion” (Sørensen 2019: 141). Ivković, Prodanović and Urošević each try to push Sørensen a bit further on this crucial point by considering how this variant of critical theory actually operates, scrutinizing in more detail the particular relationship between the ‘experience of injustice’, which for Sørensen constitutes the empirical foothold for critical theory, and the theoretical diagnosis of social reality which the critical theorist should formulate against the backdrop of this experience.

The three contributors share a certain reservation for Sørensen’s notion of the ‘predominance’ of theory over practice as they all point toward the constitutive importance of the dynamics and contingency of empirical reality, not just as an initial impetus of social critique, but also as a necessary prism through which theory has to be refracted. In that respect, Ivković poses the question whether the dialectical method of critical theory, the determinate negation, is in fact the negation of our immediate experience of injustice which must preserve (‘sublate’) the element of this immediacy in its theoretical diagnosis if it is to inspire political action; Urošević turns the dialectical argument ‘against’ Sørensen, so to say, as he reflects on the constitutive dependence of critical theory’s central concepts, such as justice and alienation, on the very social totality that should be measured against them; and Prodanović asks whether Sørensen’s own pragmatist inclination to grant the realm of everyday collective problem-solving a key role as the impetus of theoretical dialectics does not compel him to re-examine the notion of the “predominance” of theory. Each of the contributors also link their general examinations of Sørensen’s perspective on critical theory to more concrete themes addressed by the book – Ivković is interested in Sørensen’s understanding of social democracy, Urošević ponders on Sørensen’s view of Foucault as a ‘nihilist’, while Prodanović draws attention to the importance of the work of George Bataille – a central figure for Sørensen – for the contemporary de-growth political movement.

Fighting for Social Democracy through Determinate Negation?

Marjan Ivković

My tentative remarks concern the concept of determinate negation as the method of social critique in Sørensen’s perspective, as well as the contours of Sørensen’s political ideal of social democracy that take shape in *Capitalism, Alienation and Critique* and some possible lines of its elaboration. Sørensen gradually presents aspects of his own political ideal throughout the book, and

at one point he introduces the concept of social democracy in the chapter on dialectics from Plato to Hegel. Sørensen argues that social democracy can be elaborated within a critical-theoretic perspective, but this remains a remark in that chapter, and I would like to try to connect it more tightly to his discussions of totality, dialectics and *Bildung*, to see what Sørensen's conception of social democracy is in light of these fundamental theoretical premises, as my intuition is that this is not a conventional understanding of social democracy, as basically a set of restrictions on the logic of the market and commodification, a redistributive social order that tries to tame capitalism, reign it in to some extent and humanize it. It seems to me that Sørensen has a somewhat more ambitious understanding of social democracy which brings him closer to the political perspectives of John Dewey (as well as one of his primary targets in the book, Axel Honneth).

Let's start from the idea of totality, another very important concept that Sørensen introduces, which deserves slightly more elaboration. Sørensen bases his conception of totality on the German tradition of dialectical thought which does not conceive of totality as a static entity, as something oppressing social actors and stifling dynamics. On the contrary, Sørensen quotes Helga Gripp in emphasizing that totality is not just the sum of all parts, rather it is the continuous dialectical mediation between the universal and the particular, and this for me is a very important point (Sørensen 2017: 37). My first sub-question is: does Sørensen conceive of capitalism as this kind of dynamic totality, as the constant mediation between the universal and the particular, meaning that whenever we encounter a particular phenomenon, an instance of injustice or domination, we are in fact encountering the dialectical movements of universality and particularity within this phenomenon? This would mean that this instance of injustice can be traced to capitalism as a constantly expanding principle of exchange, the principle of commodification. What is the role of determinate negation when encountering this kind of dynamic totality?

Is the determinate negation an operation though which we negate the immediate particularity of the phenomenon we are criticizing? Let us take as example the *Belgrade Waterfront* project – a mega-project of urban renewal in Belgrade conducted jointly by the neoliberal-authoritarian government of Serbia and a consortium of foreign investors. We encounter some instance of injustice there which is easily empirically observable, the fact that the land has been leased to a foreign investor under shady circumstances, and people have been evicted from their homes. This would be the immediately given experience of injustice that we have. Does the determinate negation in this context mean that we do not stop there, that we distance ourselves from our immediate experience of injustice and try to understand the logic of the interplay between the universal and the particular in this phenomenon, and thus ultimately expand our experience of injustice and arrive at a more adequate understanding of how this particular instance of injustice fits into the broader picture? We would in that case start realizing how the societal totality of capitalism is instantiated in this particular experience of injustice.

Would this be the kind of critical operation that Sørensen has in mind when he argues for Hegelian dialectics as the diagnostic tool of critical theory? If yes, then it seems to me that a crucially important aspect of this dialectical movement is precisely the ‘sublation’ - the fact that we preserve an element of the immediate experience of injustice while we at the same time negate the ‘finality’ of this experience as we reach a higher level of abstraction in our diagnosis of the injustice involved in phenomena such as the *Belgrade Waterfront* project. Would Sørensen consider this preserved, sublated element of experience that provides the empirical ‘anchoring’ of critique an important factor in the capacity of critical theory to connect to the actual social struggles of today and provide orientation to them?

The second sub-question that follows from this also concerns this critical operation, which is very similar to what we are trying to define here at our Institute as *engagement*. For us, critique as engagement means precisely the distancing from an unreflective following of certain rules and norms of social action and problematization of these which can then lead to some kind of practical question or to further reflection and expansion of insight. In my opinion, we share this understanding of critique as dialectical movement, a distancing, a determinate negation. But the sub-question that follows from the previous example with the Belgrade Waterfront project is then: is a determinate negation enough, precisely because of the fact that we are confronted with something that is a totality? And that as such presses us, challenges us to come up with an alternative vision of totality, otherwise we easily fall pray to the apologists of capitalism who claim that we, the critics, are purely negative, that we are acting out of resentment, out of anachronistic understandings of what society should be like, a static Keynesian social-democratic perspective which is outdated. The system pressurizes us to come up with a ‘totalizing’ comprehensive vision of the good society.

However – and there lies another trap it seems to me – the standard critique of capitalism which tries to invoke a comprehensive vision of the good society then invokes an abstract and static vision of the good society, which cannot compete successfully with capitalism as a dynamic empirical totality, as the mediation of the universal and the particular. And there I think one can locate the relative impotence of contemporary criticisms of capitalism which rely on static comprehensive visions of the good society. What would an alternative way of challenging a societal totality politically be – an adequate alternative totality that we can employ once we have engaged in the sort of critique which Sørensen argues for in the book?

The final subquestion concerns the chapter on Bataille, which seems to give some indications of what Sørensen might actually mean by social democracy. Sørensen says on page 154/155, “Instead, inspired by Bataille’s dialectics one could understand the basic contradiction in and of human life as a conflict, a tension inherent in human and social being, and as such an ontological condition that is dealt with and solved practically every day. The point to discuss politically is therefore not whether we could resolve what the dialectical tradition called the contradictions of the existing solution and reach the truth of

the social being in question. The contradictions are always already solved practically, and the question is only how to make these practical solutions better” (Sørensen 2019: 154–155). There it seems to me like the author is pointing in the direction of a social order which is based on some form of democratic experimentalism and a kind of radical-democratic polity in which citizens are constantly engaged in a deliberative process of detecting and solving the contradictions that are already present in the existing order. This perspective is pretty close to neo-pragmatism and its own visions of what democracy should be, inspired by John Dewey, but which can also be found in one of Sørensen’s main targets in the book – Axel Honneth, who conceives of democracy as “reflexive cooperation” (see e.g. Honneth 2007, 2009).

Would this be the direction in which Sørensen is trying to argue when he says that social democracy can be a viable alternative, and what specifics would this include? In terms of economy of course, do we really have to stick with the idea of the market economy? And finally, would this social democracy really be a totality in the sense that capitalism would be, or would it allow greater room for particularity which is not mediated through universality? That is an important issue because Sørensen also relies on the idea of *sovereignty* in Bataille. This ideal is something that we as moderns cannot easily do away with, the conception of sovereignty, of autonomy not in a rigid, Kantian sense, but precisely of Sørensen’s sovereignty which has important Adornian implications – in Bataille’s conception of sovereignty this is freedom from instrumental reason, from the imperative of self-preservation, but also from the omnipresence of ‘systemic thought’, of the logic of social action directed toward collective self-preservation (Adorno 1981). This ideal of sovereignty, it seems to me, is not easily reconcilable with the idea of societal totality as Sørensen envisages it. So would a social democracy in this radical sense, in the sense of collective problem solving that is oriented toward the Bataillean/Adornian ideal of individual sovereignty, actually have to in a way overcome this interplay of universal and particular as it exists in capitalism, and would it even be theoretically possible to envisage? It seems to me that the most insurmountable challenge for critical theory – a dialectical one for that matter – lies in the fact that capitalism pressures us to come up with an alternative comprehensive vision of the good society which is a dynamic totality, on the one hand, while on the other hand true societal emancipation is only possible once society is no longer structured as any kind of totality.

A Critical Theory which Transcends Societal Dialectics?

Milan Urošević

In this part of the paper we will deal with some problems concerning Sørensen’s ideas about dialectics and, in relation to it, some of his ideas about justice. These problems will be considered through comparing Sørensen’s ideas with some claims made by Marx and Foucault. We will claim that Sørensen tries

to hold on to some notions of “transcendent” norms of knowledge and justice and thereby limits the reach of his dialectics.

Sørensen’s idea of critical theory can be understood as having ‘scientific and political’ aspects as he calls them (Sørensen 2019: 26). The first aspect is epistemological and deals with developing a framework for understanding the nature of the social world, as he says it accesses the “limits of knowledge and science” (Sørensen 2019: 26). The second aspect is critical and deals with the aspiration of critical theory to contribute to a positive change in society, as Sørensen claims it “consciously opposes existing social injustice and alienation” (Sørensen 2019: 25). We will reconsider both of these aspects simultaneously and try to show the limits of Sørensen’s arguments. For Sørensen the main methodological tool used by critical theory is dialectics understood as a movement of thought through which it tries to capture the ‘true’ nature of historical change in society (Sørensen 2019: 43–44). As he claims, the truth of the social world is a ‘whole’ and dialectics develops concepts that try to capture the relation a certain phenomenon has to the social totality (Sørensen 2019: 40–42). For Sørensen dialectics is a process that progresses through ‘testing’ concepts theoretically or practically in reality and subsequently changing them if they don’t show to be adequate (Sørensen 2019: 44).

While analyzing Honneth’s ideas Sørensen criticizes him for relying on Nietzsche’s and Foucault’s nihilistic rejection of all transcendent standards of science and ethics (Sørensen 2019: 73–74). Namely, he claims that Honneth is wrong in saying that every idea of a phenomenon as ‘pathological’ implies a standard that can’t be justified (Sørensen 2019: 74). For Sørensen this implies that critical theory is for Honneth just one choice among others and that critical theory doesn’t have any other point of departure but nihilism (Sørensen 2019, 74). Sørensen’s critique of Honneth is a good point for considering his ideas of the normative aspect of critical theory and dialectics. He argues that the role of critical theory is to contribute to the realization of a just society without alienation and inequality (Sørensen 2019: 25). The problem with this claim is precisely the aforementioned ‘standard’ which he uses in trying to argue for such a society. The only way Sørensen tries to define the standard he uses for claiming that a certain social arrangement is unjust is intuition. He claims that we can say *prima facie* that inequality is unjust because those deprived of property over the means of production are exploited (Sørensen 2019: 238).

Here we can see that Sørensen tries to equate injustice with inequality, he also stresses that “the experience of injustice produces alienation” (Sørensen 2019: 80). Therefore we can conclude that inequality is Sørensen’s primary measurement of injustice while intuition and experience are the standard by which injustice is evaluated. This seems contradictory to some claims made by Marx but also to some of Sørensen’s ideas about dialectics. Namely, in his *Critique of the Gotha Program* Marx claims that the ideas of ‘justice’ and ‘equality’ formulated within the capitalist social system will inevitably mimic the logic of this system. More precisely, he claims that these ideas reproduce the ‘value form’ as a main principle of the capitalist mode of production through the

idea of a single standard of evaluation by which goods would be redistributed 'equally' (Marx 1989: 86–87). Sørensen seems to be making the same mistake, which can explain his reliance on Bataille's criticism of political economy rather than Marx's since Bataille criticizes capitalism from the perspective of distribution of value rather than from the perspective of its creation (Sørensen 2019: 109–110). Since Sørensen claims that dialectics works by trying to understand social phenomena as part of a larger whole that changes historically there doesn't seem to be a reason why a certain notion of justice couldn't be dialectically analyzed as well. We can note that Sørensen tries to limit his notion of dialectics in order to keep the transcendent notion of justice a part of his critical endeavor. Although Sørensen could be referring to a standard of justice that tries to transcend the logic of the capitalist system's totality he doesn't explicate this standard, and by critiquing inequality his standard of justice inevitably stays within this logic.

Similarly to his idea of justice, Sørensen also tries to ground the epistemological foundation of his dialectics in transcendent norms. We can see this in a contradiction between the two aspects of his understanding of critical theory. On the one side he claims that the epistemological use of dialectics depends on its correspondence to universal criteria of knowledge and that dialectics can be understood as ontology of being translated into thought like logic (Sørensen 2019: 168–169). On the other side he claims that critical theory must rely on some truths that depend on a "historical process yet not completed" and that even fundamental categories can be changed during that process (Sørensen 2019: 47). Here we can see a contradiction between scientific truths, that critical theory aims to reach through the method of dialectics, that are according to Sørensen supposed to be in accordance with the universal criteria of truth and his omission that all concepts used by critical theory are subject to change since they are not outside of the historical process.

A good example of this contradiction is Sørensen's discussion of Mao's notion of dialectics. Namely, Sørensen claims that Mao is wrong in understanding dialectics as a practical tool for guiding political practice and claims that dialectics should primarily be understood as a theoretical endeavor for understanding social and historical processes (Sørensen 2019: 47). For Sørensen theoretical criteria of validity take primacy over the practical application of truths formulated by the dialectical process while for Mao it is the opposite. A question can be posed, since Sørensen claims that all concepts used by critical theory are subject to the historical process, what exactly are the ultimate criteria of truth? Sørensen cites Hegel's idea that truth and knowledge are processes that develop through history and are never finished but constantly progressing, so we can never know how they will look like in the future (Sørensen 2019: 45–47). Sørensen also claims that the 'truth' of society hasn't yet been realized and that its truth is its unalienated and just form (Sørensen 2019: 82). Since Sørensen claims that the political ideal of critical theory is the development of this society we can conclude that a certain knowledge developed through dialectics is true if it contributes to the historical process that moves

society closer to that goal. But this conclusion tells us that for Sørensen the ultimate criterion is also a form of practical application just like it is for Mao. Therefore, for Sørensen the ultimate criterion of knowledge for the scientific aspect of critical theory is developed out of its political aspect even though he doesn't admit this outright and states that this criterion is actually formal logic (Sørensen 2019: 168). We can say that Sørensen understands critical theory as a reflection on modes of action that try to bring about an unalienated and just society in the future. But since he claims that the ultimate criterion for knowledge developed by critical theory is formal logic we can only conclude that for him critical theory should reflect on political action that tries to bring about a just society and point to where this action defies formal logic. This means that for Sørensen political action which is in accordance with formal logic will necessarily bring about a just and unalienated society. The problem with such an understanding of critical theory is that it tries to avoid viewing formal logic as a part of the social totality in which it originated and therefore it is seen as outside the historical/dialectical process. Therefore, Sørensen's idea of dialectics relies on an undialectical standard.

In his debate with the Maoists Foucault criticized their claim that the 'People's Army' could represent the third party in the people's conflict with the ruling class, being a conduit for the will of the people in that conflict. Foucault gives an example of the 'court' during the French Revolution and the way that it presented itself as a neutral third party giving just verdicts while actually it continued the repression from pre-revolutionary times (Foucault 1980: 7–8). His claim is that the idea of a neutral party in a class conflict is a form of "bourgeois" ideology reproduced through an idea of neutral and objective norms of justice. Our claim is that Sørensen limits his notions of critical theory and dialectics in the same way by trying to hold on to transcendent norms that provide epistemological and ethical certainty. Thus he seems to be struggling with the same problem that he mentioned Honneth does, but tries to avoid nihilistic conclusions which results in him setting up standards in such a way that they can't be justified.

Beyond Degrowth – From Bataille's General Economy to Dewey's Instrumentalism

Srđan Prodanović

In his book *Capitalism, Alienation and Critique*, Asger Sørensen manages to walk the fine line between, on the one hand, a wide scope of addressed issues and, on the other, precise argumentation – which is a rare trait in modern social theory. The common thread which goes through the diverse and complicated theoretical themes of this book is Sørensen's articulation of social change which would be situated within the everyday experience of injustice and still fuelled by dialectics in "which theory predominates over practice" (Sørensen 2019: 170). One particularly important aspect of this goal is to provide a new,

broader view of economic activity, which will not entail the displacement of “economy in an ordinary sense” (97).

In that regard I found the chapter dedicated to Durkheimian and Bataille-an accounts of value and economy particularly instructive. The main idea of these chapters is to persuade us to move away from the (dangerously) widespread particularistic insights into economic activity which are usually fostered in positivist neoliberal econometrics and to try to base our understanding of value on more relational premises, as advocated by Durkheim and Mauss. This sets the stage for Sørensen’s more detailed analyses of Bataille’s work and introduces the idea of the *generalized economy* which emerges from the interplay between “unreduced desire and the flow of energy in nature” (Sørensen 2019: 128). Here we once again encounter a well-known problem raised by heterodox approaches to economics which is based on insights from thermodynamics. Namely, in nature a vast majority of systems are not in equilibrium, which means that they continuously dissipate energy and change states. This is of course not compatible with mainstream economics which holds that human interactions and transactions are part of a system which in fact tends to be in some sort of equilibrium (usually provided through the free market). Therefore, according to Bataille, this continuous flow of energy implies that a more general economy is not aimed at solving the problem of the scarcity of resources, but rather at the problem of managing excess, the surplus of energy that needs to be squandered (as is the case with consumerist societies). Moreover, this unavoidable surplus is reflected in our inner life through subjective desire which is not reducible to particularistic needs, and remains to a great degree undetermined and oriented towards those objects that are withering away as the given system inevitably moves on to the lower level of entropy.

However, Sørensen points out that Bataille never successfully synthesized subjective desire and the dissipation of energy which mutually guide our interaction with the environment. According to Sørensen, Bataille’s aporias are revealed in the following way: “on the ontological level he [Bataille] clearly oscillates between the universal economy of energy and the individual experience of desire, and [...] in his normative recommendations he oscillates between moral appeals to the individual and a wish for a world government to control the flow of energy on and in the earth as a whole” (Sørensen 2019: 127). In other words, complete fulfilment of human desire would exacerbate the dissipation of energy and ultimately lead to the absolute exhaustion of environmental resources. Thus, according to Sørensen, although Bataille was not successful in his attempt to reconcile subjective desire and the more general approach to the economy, he nonetheless articulated the urgency of constructing a more holistic understanding of political economy.

Now, there are a couple of issues that could be raised here regarding Sørensen’s account of Bataille. The first one pertains to the so-called degrowth movement. Namely, Bataille’s general economy is used as one of the theoretical frameworks which support the critique of growth-obsessed economics (D’Alisa, Demaria, and Kallis 2014). But what is often overlooked is that environmentalist

(degrowth) movements are still too much focused on scarcity, and Bataille's general economy – if taken as an epistemological basis of their account of social reality – could in fact provide a way to go beyond reformist proposals. Somewhat more importantly, one could ask if degrowth as an approach has the potential to resolve some of Bataille's aporias which Sørensen so insightfully observes. This especially pertains to the problem of reconciling the ontological extremes of individual desire and the universal flow of energy, since degrowth as a practical implementation of the general economy could serve as a basis for everyday reflection on the fact that our desires are incompatible with (over)production and (over)consumption and thus only understandable against the backdrop of the more abstract processes of entropy and the flow of energy?

This brings us to the second, more general, issue which refers to the relation between theory and practice that is advocated by Sørensen. Namely, the way to deal with practical problems according to Sørensen is to embrace the Hegelian determinate negation which entails “[...] that denying something implies affirming something else. A negation is thus determinate, since it negates something specific and leaves the rest of the totality as a basis for the negation in question” (Sørensen 2019: 171). However, if negation and dialectics are inherently generated within the realm of concrete problems and thus arguably articulated within everyday life, then it is not quite clear why – or more importantly how – theory should predominate over practice. If there is no movement in Hegelian logic without this practical impetus, then there is some autonomy of our concrete everyday common-sense articulation of social issues which makes predominance too strong a term to describe the relationship between theory and practice. Moreover, throughout the book Sørensen has a rather critical stance toward pragmatism even though it could be beneficial for his theoretical goals. For example, Dewey's instrumentalism which aims “to bridge the gap between reason and experience” (Brodsky 1969: 52) by using the liberating effect of abstraction in order to connect distant elements of our experience would at least to some degree be compatible with Sørensen's theoretical goal to maintain the “positive concept of dialectics” which takes into account “the importance of validity, formal logic and strong epistemological concepts of knowledge and truth” without imposing any kind of predominance over everyday practice (Sørensen 2019: 174).

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Marjan Ivković, Srđan Prodanović i Milan Urošević

Teorija uhvaćena u dijalektiku: neke refleksije o Kapitalizmu, otuđenju i kritici Asgera Serensena

Apstrakt:

Ovaj rad predstavlja tri povezana ispitivanja argumentacije Asgera Serensena u *Kapitalizmu, otuđenju i kritici*, koja tematizuju Serensenovo generalno razumevanje odnosa teorije i prakse, drugim rečima njegovu metodološku perspektivu u pogledu kritičke teorije, njene specifične epistemologije i njene ukorenjenosti u empirijskom svetu. Marjan Ivković, Srđan Prodanović i Milan Urošević nastoje da problematizuju Serensenovo stanovište razmatrajući način na koji Serensenova kritička teorija zapravo funkcioniše, analizirajući detaljnije odnos između ‚iskustva nepravde‘, koje za Serensena predstavlja empirijsko uporište kritičke teorije, i teorijske dijagnoze društvene stvarnosti koju kritički teoretičar formuliše na temelju tog iskustva.

Ključne reči: dijalektika, negacija neposredno datog, Fuko, od-rast, Bataj