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## **Recalling Tom Sekine and the Uno Study Group in Toronto**

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## **Recalling Tom Sekine and the Uno Study Group in Toronto**

**Written by Jennifer Welsh and John Simoulidis as recalled by Robert Albritton**

Rob often tells the story of first meeting Tom when Tom asked to sit in on a graduate class Rob was teaching on Marx's Capital. This was somewhat unusual at the time, and still is. Tom contributed to discussions, often politely challenging the interpretations of both graduate students and the instructor. While gradually learning more about Kozo Uno's levels of analysis approach, Rob developed a respect for Tom's reading of Capital that would grow into a lifelong collaboration. Together they started a study group in the early 80's at Rob's home on Lauder Avenue. In 1986 the study group moved to Rob and Jennifer's home on Broadway Avenue and would meet regularly, with occasional interruptions, for the next twenty years.

The connections within the group were both scholarly and warm. All the Uno group members were invited to Rob and Jennifer's wedding party at their home in May 1987. Early people with whom we haven't had contact recently included Raphael Indarte and Stephen Stropole. The group with whom we have had contact in recent years includes John Bell, Colin Duncan, Brian MacLean, Stefanos Kourkoulakos, Michael Marder, John Simoulidis, Randall Terada, Marc Weinstein, Dennis Badeen and Richard Westra. Occasionally there were women in the study group: Nchama Miller and Shannon Bell come to mind.

And there were Japanese professors and scholars who Tom invited to join the monthly meeting when visiting in Toronto. They included Makoto Maruyama, Tamiko Kurihara, Tomiichi Hoshino, Shoken Mawatari and Masaru Kasai. These exchanges were intellectually fruitful. Some worked on early translations of Uno's Types of Economic Policies Under Capitalism while others contributed to a collection co-edited by Tom and Rob, A Japanese Approach to Political Economy: Unoist Variations. They also led to new friendships. Rob and Jennifer had visited Japan in spring of 1990. This included a trip to Sendai and a wonderful onsen visit hosted by Mr and Mrs Oouchi.

The group studied diverse readings – not just those of the Uno school—in order to extend dialogue with other schools of thought. Suggestions were made by individual group members for what to read next. The composition of the study group changed over the years as visiting professors returned home and graduate students moved on after finishing their dissertations. The longest group member aside from Rob was Stefanos Kourkoulakos who was in the group from 1990 to 2007. In 2003 Stefanos hosted Tom and Kazuko Sekine as well as Rob, Jennifer and their daughter Sian on a visit to Greece. And in 2008 Rob and Jennifer hosted the Sekines in their rented villa in Provence. The relationships formed through the study group became friendships. And in recent years Jennifer and Shie Kasai have remained in touch through email.

Tom Sekine, of course, was the centre of the Uno study group, even after he returned to Japan. He was highly respected, almost revered. He often pulled people's diverse positions together - a master at mentoring and encouraging deep thought and reflection. Rob doesn't recall Tom ever being in a fight with anyone, although there were respectful disagreements. Engaging with Tom meant that you were safe to take an intellectual risk as it would always prove fruitful.

### **Colin Duncan**

Colin Duncan recalls the meetings as being quite long in duration while at the same time never remotely boring or tiresome. Indeed they were relaxing, which is odd for such a level of discussion of complex, often abstruse points. Even odder perhaps, the group enjoyment went up as the seriousness increased. Whenever some member got unusually earnest about some point, everyone, especially Tom, would start to smile, and we all would lean back in our chairs to savour the moment! One always looked forward to the meetings. And it must be said the diversity of persons attending was substantial, both as to temperament and cultural background, not to mention angle of specific expertise/interest. The point of attending was to broaden one's mind while arguing in a friendly way over whatever was in the unfamiliar material someone had suggested we grapple with. That we all shared a willingness to step back from our shared basic theories kept it always fresh and yet stress-free. It can be said that a similar diverse and yet united group developed around the work of Karl Polanyi under the auspices of Concordia University in Montreal which organized several decades worth of international conferences held all over the globe. It is an apt comparison because Professor Sekine always said he was amazed by the coincidence between Uno's approach and Polanyi's to the most complex world historically important twists in the history of both the theory of political economy and what actually unfolded as people tried to put various ideas into practice in ever-changing circumstances. And it was a complete coincidence as Uno and Polanyi never met or corresponded as they worked away before and during the Second World War as well as after they started to publish their deep reflections and duly attained lasting international fame.

I write this text in recollection of Uno Group meetings with Professor Sekine, almost all of which were held on a monthly basis at the living room of Professor Albritton's home in Toronto, as Professor Sekine's home was outside of Toronto (Oakville) and would have made it less easy for group participants to get there. What comes first to mind about these meetings is not any details I may still remember, but the attendance of the person whose work had inspired these meetings, Professor Thomas (Tomohiko) T. Sekine. For me, the most prominent and significant aspect of these meetings was that they were held in the presence of Professor Sekine, because of who he was (including who he was for me) and what he had achieved.

## **Stefanos Kourkoulakos**

Professor Sekine was one of my two dearest and most highly esteemed mentors during my York University years and beyond.

During the 1980s, he and Professor Albritton formed a dedicated monthly reading group with interested students to study Uno theory and explore its potential relationships with other theories and ways of thought. I was invited to join the group in the fall of 1990 and attended almost all of its meetings until 2007 when the group stopped meeting. Professor Sekine returned to Japan sometime in the 1990s, but he had occasion to attend a few more meetings afterwards during his visits to Toronto.

He taught me formally, when I took a 4th year half-year directed reading course in economics with him and when I audited his full year Dialectic of Capital course, and he also taught me informally, outside the university, in Uno Group meetings, various academic conferences in Toronto and New York City, and a trip to Greece we took together with Mrs. Sekine and Professor Albritton's family in 2003.

His teaching, formal and informal, was carried out by a combination of unusually clear, coherent, and precise speech, a meaningful low-key silence as distinct from his immense capacity for attentive listening, a demeanour of almost ascetic physical near-stillness and self-sufficiency, and a natural, broad, warm-hearted smile in his face.

He taught me the pure theory of capitalism which he had mastered and crafted and he taught me much more than that. With quiet deeds, never direct words, he taught what it means to be a good and humble human being in academia, a generally toxic environment ruled by self-serving mediocrities, exceptions notwithstanding.

In everything he was saying and doing, he was exuding simplicity, gentleness, kindness, and a genuinely deep moderation of character - to the point of self-effacement. And moderation, for ancient Greek philosophers such as Aristotle, is the most exemplary virtue of character and it is on the basis of the structure of moderation that Aristotle understood all other virtues of character, including bravery (as distinct from recklessness), magnanimity, truthfulness, and justice. Moderation, for Aristotle, is also the hallmark of the most important intellectual virtue, wisdom.

Professor Sekine, who was a giant intellectual thinker and had done absolutely monumental and path-breaking work to develop and extend Kozo Uno's difficult contributions to Marxian political economy, and also reconstruct the 3 volumes of Karl Marx's Capital as a rigorous dialectical logic, was the one and only person I have met in life who exemplified the virtue of moderation to the greatest extent, a virtue that, personally, I am still struggling to learn and adopt.

That's exactly how he was in the Uno group meetings too. His conduct in these meetings was, for me, astounding. I don't remember him even once criticizing any other thinker, including those who understood capitalism and the workings of capital differently or less well than he did. He would

only point out and clarify how capital worked. And if we happened to discuss works other than economic theory, he would listen attentively, ask questions, and disarmingly profess his lack of knowledge in other fields of knowledge.

In these meetings he would always sit in a lean and elegant armchair next to Professor Albritton's fireplace, as this was, fittingly, the most "distinguished" seat in the living room. Professor Albritton would serve one or two kinds of herbal tea and Professor Sekine would enjoy having it, as the rest of us did too.

I distinctly recall a recollection of Professor Sekine himself, as he reiterated it happily to us from time to time. It always made him laugh softly as he was relating it to us and it seemed to me that it gave him a certain small and sweet satisfaction. He compared how the secretaries in the Department of Economics at York University would respond to requests to make photocopies for faculty, which was part of their duties. If one of his close long-time colleagues and subsequently co-author in the Department of Economics made the request, they would find all sort of excuses to delay. If Professor Sekine asked, they would do it right away. Ha, ha! I still laugh myself remembering it. Not because I think it was funny (it was not meant to be), but because I remember Professor Sekine always laughing about it.

Professor Sekine was not our peer. His *Dialectic of Capital* is to the theory of capitalism what Yasujiro Ozu's 'Tokyo Monogatari' ('Tokyo Story') is to the history of the cinema. An absolute and unsurpassed masterpiece, a work of the highest beauty in its kind, "a possession of all time" (as the ancient Greek historian, Thucydides, would put it). He was a truly "spoudaios" man in Aristotle's sense of the term, a person of the highest human excellence who knows which things are worth taking seriously and which aren't.

I am certain that Aristotle would have wanted to know him.