

Review

“Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism”

By Kohei Saito¹

Anay Katyal²

Introduction

In 2016, Japanese Marxist scholar Kohei Saito published *Nature versus Capital: Marx's Ecology in his Unfinished Critique of Capitalism* — later translated for the English-speaking world as *Karl Marx's Ecosocialism* — which led to being awarded the Isaac Deutscher Memorial Prize in 2017, an annual prize given in honor of books that exemplify “the best and most innovative new writing in or about the Marxist tradition.”³ Primarily based on his doctoral dissertation conducted at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, this work in particular examined Karl Marx's notebooks following the publication of his first volume of *Das Kapital*, mainly concerning his critical interests in the natural sciences. Saito sought to demonstrate that rather than such notes being distractions from *Das Kapital's* larger project, they are in reality a necessary framework for understanding Marx's critique of capitalism in the contemporary age. Within the notebooks, Marx ruminated over his disillusionment with growth-centric techno-optimism, interrogating the environmental adversity of industrialism. They illustrated a version of Marx palpably fearful of a future without livable communities — and the eventual inability to realize class revolution and collective ownership of production as a result. In studying the notebooks, Saito comes to a conclusive interpretation of Marxism that demands a reimagining of our production structures from scratch.

Marx in the Anthropocene further builds on Saito's work, but rather than focusing solely on academic analysis, Saito engages in a theoretical dialogue with other contemporary Marxist theories. Specifically, Saito aligns with John Bellamy Foster's metabolic rift theory from the 2000s and defends it against opposing views, such as post-humanist theories of the Anthropocene like Bruno Latour. He takes on academic concepts such as “Marxist social constructivism” and the growing popularity of notions like “fully automated communism” popularized by academics such as Nick Srnicek in a similar fashion. Though laudably polemic in their creative interpretations of Marx's work, Saito's own positioning separates himself from the rest as a possibly new intellectual bellwether in current Marxist thought.

According to Saito, Marx's concern with the disruption of the “metabolic interaction” between humans and the Earth is evident in the first and second volumes of *Das Kapital*. However, Saito argues that this concern is indicative of a broader change in Marx's thinking, as demonstrated in previously unpublished works. In Marx's notebooks, there is evidence of an ecological critique of capitalism that encompasses references to metabolism. Saito presents a compelling case for this

interpretation.

Marx views nature not as an inactive foundation for human activity, but as a dynamic ecosystem where diverse species and materials interact to produce thriving habitats. However, unlike other species, human beings consciously contemplate their engagement with nature and construct social structures to govern these interactions. Unlike instinct-driven animals, human societies intentionally regulate the labor process, which involves the intersection of human action and natural phenomena. This coordination demands constant fine-tuning between the social metabolism of human groups and the natural metabolism of their living surroundings. In order to promote stable lifestyles, the interplay of social and natural processes must align harmoniously.

As Saito argues, capitalism can create “metabolic rifts”, or misalignments, because the pursuit of profit takes precedence over the natural balance of the ecosystem. In this system, both human and non-human entities are used to increase economic value, without regard for their well-being. Anything that doesn’t contribute to profit is discarded as waste, leading to pollution, soil depletion, and biodiversity loss. This clash between the social metabolism of capitalism and the metabolism of nature results in damage to the environment. Eventually, the expansion of capitalism leads to its own downfall, as it stretches the limits of nature beyond sustainability. Saito’s theory of metabolic rift shows how nature is a dynamic force, yet it still confronts humanity with physical boundaries that cannot be surpassed.

As per Saito’s analysis, Marx’s outlook on communism underwent a transformation after 1868 due to his ecological critique of capitalism and its limitations on growth. Towards the end of his life, Marx is said to have embraced the idea of “degrowth communism” (Saito 173). Although Saito acknowledges the contrasting viewpoints of the environmental and socialist factions of the left, he identifies some key areas of overlap. Notably, environmental movements are turning away from the idea of “green capitalism” and expressing greater openness to revolutionary activism, while socialists have grown increasingly skeptical of Promethean techno-solutionism and abandoned the idea of proletarian salvation through labor. The convergence of anti-capitalist environmentalism and post-work socialism leads to the emergence of degrowth communism, as argued by Saito.

In the notebooks and correspondence he wrote after 1868, Marx examined the works of natural scientists and ethnologists who were studying the economic systems of non-Western and rural communities. These communities organized their economies around collective ownership and commons-based use-value production, which allowed them to maintain sustainable economic systems without creating any damage to their natural environments. Such economies were essentially stationary and operated through collective ownership of the means of production. Earlier in his life, Marx would have dismissed these communities as obsolete remnants of a primitive past that would soon be absorbed into global capitalism. According to his previous views, pre-capitalist communities needed to assimilate into capitalism and industrialize completely before they could transition to communism.

The later views of Marx embrace a multilinear perspective of historical materialism. While the general laws of capitalism persist, they interact with specific local conditions, resulting in diverse historical trajectories. Therefore, the path to socialism can differ for different societies. Marx acknowledged the Narodniks’ rural communes in Russia as active resistance against capitalism. These communes fostered sustainable interaction between economic and ecological processes, aligning social and natural metabolisms. Their social system prioritized meeting the collective needs of its members over maximizing capital accumulation, resulting in economic abundance

achieved through a commons-based agricultural regime, rather than technological advancements.

The idea that Marx promotes a return to subsistence farming is incorrect. Instead, he considers what the West can learn from agrarian communities. Marx suggests that by imitating certain aspects of these communes’ production process, the capitalist metabolic rifts can be overcome. The problem with capitalism is that it values everything based on profit and disregards exhausted nature and surplus populations. Instead, the focus should be on producing use-values in a way that is communal and sustainable, without putting undue pressure on the environment. These examples indicate a possible future where human potential can be fully developed in a sustainable and free manner.

In *Marx in the Anthropocene*, Saito presents an innovative and compelling interpretation of Marx’s ideas. Saito’s work not only illustrates the relevance of Marx’s lesser-known works, but also uses them to construct a thought-provoking criticism of capitalism that brings together environmentalist and socialist concerns. The book’s notable accomplishment is its ability to create a shared critical framework for both movements. This is no small feat, given the lengthy and heated debates that have taken place between socialists and degrowth activists over the years. However, in order to satisfy both groups, Saito’s ultimate vision of degrowth communist politics is not entirely fleshed out. The book concludes with a list of programmatic demands, such as a shift in investment towards sectors that promote use-values instead of economic value (such as education, healthcare, or the arts), a reduction in the workday, an increase in workplace democracy, and a curtailment of technologies that disempower workers by limiting their ability to coordinate their own labor. These general policy suggestions are broad enough to accommodate both socialist and environmentalist demands, yet they are not particularly detailed. It is this reviewer’s primary critique of Saito’s book that it lacks specificity in its programmatic vagueness.

The analysis of *Marx in the Anthropocene* is adept at identifying the inherent contradictions between the principles of capital and the natural processes of the environment. The author provides a compelling explanation of how the general structures of capitalism conflict with the metabolic processes of nature. However, this theory alone fails to provide a comprehensive understanding of the current ecological challenges we face. It lacks an analysis of the complex power dynamics and diverse subject positions that exist today, as well as how these relationships can be leveraged for a more sustainable future.

Saito acknowledges that the general laws of capitalism interact with unique local environments, resulting in varied outcomes. Therefore, degrowth communism must take into account these localized variations to effectively articulate its political agenda. For instance, while reducing the workday may be appealing to overworked professionals in the Global North, those in the Global South who lack regulated working hours may not benefit as much. Similarly, while indigenous populations may welcome a movement that honors their ancestral rights and opposes industrialization, the working class in developed countries, who have benefited from exploiting resources in the Global South, may view degrowth communism as an imposition that restricts their freedom to travel or consume meat. To implement degrowth communism successfully, we must align these varying subject positions and social demands. In doing so, we can create an ideology that can address the needs of diverse groups while promoting a sustainable future.

To develop a successful political strategy, degrowth communism cannot solely rely on the objective logic of capital and its metabolic rifts to guide people toward a better future. It must also focus on the libidinal economies of oppressed groups, in order to create a desirable and collective

vision of a post-capitalist, non-growth, commons-based economy. In order to achieve this, there needs to be a shift in the libidinal metabolism of desires. Unfortunately, this is not addressed in Saito’s current framework, which is a blind spot. While Saito has highlighted the importance of the struggle for an ecologically sustainable future, the task of crafting a degrowth communist manifesto requires further ideological work. The goal is to enable people to experience degrowth as a form of radical abundance, rather than painful asceticism. Saito has laudably and sharply shown what is critical in the struggle for an environmentally sustainable future, but the ideological labor of constructing a Marxist degrowth communist manifesto is something the discipline must continue.

Notes

¹Saito, K. 2023. *Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

²Anay Katyal is a MA candidate in Global Studies at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. His research interests concern political parties, electoral systems, statecraft and contemporary Indo-Pacific politics. He completed his Bachelor’s from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor and has previously conducted coursework abroad at the University of Pretoria, Jawaharlal Nehru University and the City University of Hong Kong.

³About the Deutscher Memorial Prize. The Deutscher Memorial Prize. (2022). Retrieved March 3, 2023, from <http://www.deutscherprize.org.uk/wp/>

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

