

A Review of Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the idea of degrowth communism

Kohei Saito

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Kohei Saito's work on Marxism, socialism and ecology has become increasingly influential since his first book *Karl Marx's Ecosocialism* won the Isaac Deutscher Prize in 2018.¹ His book *Capitalism in the Anthropocene* has been a bestseller in Japan, selling over half a million copies. Despite its academic nature, his latest English book, *Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the idea of degrowth communism* has received extensive coverage - perhaps because some readers have confused it with the Japanese bestseller. Nonetheless it is remarkable, and pleasing, to see newspapers such as *The Guardian* covering the publication of a book dedicated to exploring the relevance of Karl Marx's ideas to contemporary ecological crises.²

Saito's first book was a convincing demonstration that Marx was a firm ecological thinker. Saito drew out how Marx used the latest scientific work to firmly root his theoretical ideas in the metabolism between humans and the natural world. *Marx in the Anthropocene* takes this a step further with Saito exploring the relevance of Marx's ideas to current debates about how to transcend capitalism. In particular, as the book's subtitle suggests, Saito uses "degrowth" as a springboard to argue that Marx was a "degrowth communist" whose vision of communism was transformed in his later years, through his study of pre-capitalist social forms.

Saito's work, while academic, is engaging and we have found much in this book of interest and use. In setting up his argument, Saito offers a powerful defence of "metabolic rift theory" against its critics. John Bellamy Foster in particular has shown how Marx understood human society as existing in a dialectical metabolic relationship

¹ Saito, 2017. We would like to thank Joseph Choonara and Camilla Royle for their comments on an earlier draft of this article.

² Goodfellow, 2023.

with nature.³ This metabolism is mediated by human labour, by which humans transform nature, and themselves, in order to construct society. Capitalist society has created “metabolic rifts” and Marx “highlighted the need for a qualitative transformation in social production in order to repair the deep chasm in the universal metabolism of nature” driven by capitalist production.⁴ Critics, such as Jason W Moore, have argued that this is an example of “Cartesian dualism” arguing instead that nature and society are inseparable. Saito defends metabolic rift theory from such “monist” critics. He draws on the work of György Lukács and others to argue that “both ‘continuity’ and ‘break’ exist in the course of the historical development of human metabolism with nature... humans are a part of nature and embedded in the universal metabolism of nature (‘identity’) but at the same time distinguished due to new qualitatively distinct emergent properties of society that do not exist in extra-human nature (‘non-identity’)”.⁵

This rigorous defence of the approach of Marx, and the work of John Bellamy Foster in drawing out Marx’s ecological core, is an important aspect of this book. Saito also shows some Marxists have got this wrong, believing that nature could be brought under human control in a communist society through rapid development of the productive forces. Trotsky, for example, argued “man will occupy himself with re-registering mountains and rivers” and will “rebuild the earth according to his own taste”.⁶ Such an attitude fails to appreciate the perpetual “non-identity” of nature, a “material substratum” as Marx called it, which relies on regenerative processes that must be respected to maintain a universal metabolism that can continue to support human development.

Degrowth and Marx’s ecology

Saito sets out an extended challenge to a similarly “promethean” tendency of thought within contemporary eco-socialism. He is particularly concerned to respond to authors, such as Aaron Bastani in his call for “luxury communism”, who draw on Marx’s early work to argue that, by removing the “fetter” of capitalist social relations, rapid development of the forces of production under communism will achieve mastery over nature and free humanity from the drudgery of work.⁷

³ See for instance, Foster, 2022.

⁴ Saito, 2022, p15.

⁵ Saito, 2022, p91. Saito’s engagement with Lukács is important. Lukács is frequently criticised for not acknowledging nature in his work. Saito says, “*History and Class Consciousness* can be regarded precisely as an attempt to exclude the sphere of nature from Marx’s dialectical analysis”. Saito argues that Lukács developed his ideas on metabolism in his later work, in particular in his unpublished *Talism and the Dialectic*. This, Saito argues, showed Lukács “adopted Marx’s own method as well as his theory of metabolism”. Saito, 2022, p74-75.

⁶ Trotsky, 1991 (1924), p279.

⁷ Saito, 2022, p144-145.

While we may quibble with some of Saito's interpretation of Marx's writings in the 1850s, there is no doubt Marx's ecological thought became deeper and more sophisticated through the 1860s and 70s. In the final decade of his life, Marx prioritised in depth research into questions of ecology, natural science and the study of colonised and other pre-capitalist societies, rather than finalising volumes two and three of *Capital*. Saito makes an interesting point that this research was an attempt to develop Marx's critique of political economy, rather than a diversion from finishing *Capital*. The book includes some thought-provoking discussion of the ways that the study of pre-capitalist communal social formations from Russia to Indigenous North America stimulated Marx's imagination about the potential shape of new commons in post-revolutionary societies in the West. While his early work was dismissive of the "stagnation" of such societies, Marx's late writings celebrated the "vitality" of the communal peasant formations such as the Russian *mir*, identifying a nexus between co-operative and sustainable production. In his drafts of letters to the Russian revolutionary Vera Zasulich in 1881, Marx argued that the continued existence of collective ownership and co-operative production in *mir*s could be a "fulcrum for social regeneration" following a revolution, providing Russia an "element of superiority over countries still enslaved by the capitalist regime".⁸

Despite these insights, Saito's insistence that Marx developed a "degrowth" framework in this period is fundamentally mistaken and not supported by any clear evidence from Marx's work. There is a strong case that Marx shared much in common with degrowth advocates today, who recognise the fundamentally unsustainable nature of continued economic growth under capitalism and the need to drastically reduce the extent to which human activity is impacting on the natural world. Much of the contemporary socialist critique of degrowth as a framework, however, has centred on the strong implications of austerity and working-class sacrifice built into the perspective, when the mass movements needed to confront the capitalist system require a positive vision for human liberation. In Marx's writings, there is a different conception of growth we can draw on to inspire this vision, qualitatively distinct from growth driven by capital accumulation. This celebrates the growth of human potentiality to innovate and create use-values, that is, the development of productive forces to produce goods and services that are useful for human beings and improve our lives, serving the needs of society and the planet we live on, rather than valorising capital.

In places, Saito explains well the distinction drawn by Marx between the ever-increasing production of value under capitalism, which destroys the natural world while reproducing scarcity and social impoverishment for the working-class, and his vision for production

⁸ Saito, 2022, p194-195; Shanin, 1983, p123.

in the revolutionary society, based on rational regulation of the metabolism with nature and an abundance of common wealth:

Marx considered the richness of culture, skills, free time and knowledge as the wealth of societies. In other words, the wealth of richness of societies cannot be measured by an ever-greater quantity of commodities produced and their monetary expressions, but rather by the full and constant development of the potentialities of human beings.⁹

Saito provides close analysis of Marx's development of the concept of "common wealth" in *Critique of the Gotha Program* in 1875, and its relationship to his studies of pre-capitalist communes. Here, Marx argued that by taking democratic control of production, workers could drastically reduce the working day, overcome "subordination to the division of labour" and "the antithesis between mental and physical labour", allowing "all the springs of common wealth to flow more abundantly".¹⁰ Saito makes the insightful point that such a re-organisation of the labour process could slow down production and decrease output of material things, even as it increased common wealth. In this writing, however, Marx also argued that communism would "increase the productive forces with the all-round development of the individual", showing he had a far broader conception of the meaning of "productive forces", related to development of common wealth, than the narrow capacity to churn out an ever increasing volume of commodities characteristic of capitalist development. Inexplicably, however, Saito seems to suggest that just a few short years after writing this passage, in the early 1880s, Marx's "worldview was in crisis"¹¹ and he had gone through an "epistemic break",¹² abandoning his earlier conception of historical materialism. According to Saito, Marx now believed that there could be no sustainable "increase in the productive forces" and that communist development would in fact prevent such an increase.¹³ This argument is made alongside Saito's contention that the new position of "degrowth communism" also contained a rejection of Marx's initial view that capitalist development provides a "material foundation" for communist society, because of the inherently ecologically destructive nature of capitalist technologies.¹⁴

There is simply nothing in Marx's work from the period to support these contentions. Marx and Engels' introduction to the Russian edition of the *Communist Manifesto* in 1882 argued that potential communist development based on the Russian peasant commune was premised on a Russian revolution becoming a "signal for proletarian

⁹ Saito, 2022, p222.

¹⁰ Saito, 2022, p230-231.

¹¹ Saito, 2022, p173.

¹² Saito, 2022, p209.

¹³ Saito, 2022, p234-235.

¹⁴ Saito, 2022, p171.

revolution in the West”. In the preparatory drafts for his letter to Zasulich in 1881, the key text where Saito argues he crystallised his “degrowth” perspective, Marx believed a Russian revolution, based on the *mir*, could potentially “appropriate the positive results” of capitalist development, which provided “ready-made material conditions for huge-scale common labour”. Such an appropriation would allow for “transformation of the small rural commune” by replacing “fragmented agriculture with large-scale, machine assisted agriculture”.¹⁵ Surely this is a vision of “growth”, based on deployment of technologies developed under capitalism and an increase in the productive forces of the *mir*, even as such forces are deployed in far more sustainable ways under the collective control of the producers. Saito does have to acknowledge some use of technology in this potential Russian transformation, but doesn’t explain how this squares with his overall argument for Marx’s “degrowth communism”. Saito insists that in Marx’s notebooks, taken from various ethnographic sources in the early 1880s, he developed a perspective that industrialised societies in the West would need to return to the “steady-state” economy of the “communism in living” practiced by many communal societies throughout history, but doesn’t provide any passages from Marx to justify such a view.¹⁶

Ultimately, Saito’s attempts to squeeze Marx’s work into the straightjacket of a “degrowth” perspective is profoundly disorienting, creating a confusion and uncertainty that runs through the book about the role of both technology and the working-class in the revolutionary process.

***Capital* and the forces of production**

At the core of this confusion is Saito’s discussion of the development of the forces of production under capitalism, as it was theorised by Marx in manuscripts written both in preparation for *Capital* and in the published work itself. Marx’s analysis of capitalism did reach new depths of insight in this period, more sharply highlighting the destructive aspects of capitalism and the deeply contradictory character of the forces of production developed under capitalism. However, Saito is ultimately wrong in his conclusions about the implications of a new concept Marx developed in these writings, “the productive forces of Capital”, that Saito argues sowed the seeds for Marx abandoning historical materialism in the early 1880s.

Saito draws important attention to Marx’s analysis of the “real subsumption of labour” for the development of his ecological thought. In the manuscript titled *Results of the Immediate Process of Production*, written between 1863-1864 Marx presented a narrative of the development of the labour process under capitalism in two distinct phases. Firstly, there was an early process he calls the “formal subsumption of labour”.

¹⁵ Marx, 1983 (1881), p110-111.

¹⁶ Saito, 2022, p206-208.

In this phase, as Saito summarises, “capitalist relations of production dissolve the older ones based on craftsmanship and guilds, and replace them with the new social relations of capital and wage-labour without changing the technological composition of production”.¹⁷ Marx provides the example of “the handicraftsman who previously worked on their own account, or as apprentices as a master” becoming “wage-labourers under the direct control of the capitalist”,¹⁸ while still working in the same small-scale workshop with the same tools. Under these conditions, the compulsion to increase the production of surplus-value characteristic of capitalism, can only manifest in the production of “absolute surplus value” through the extension of the working day.

The full development of capitalism as a mode of production, however, demands a profound and thorough-going transformation of the labour process to allow for the production of “relative surplus value”. Here, capitalists strive to reduce the socially necessary labour time required to produce a particular commodity, and thereby increase the surplus-value pumped out of their workforce, by compelling large-scale and constantly evolving forms of social combination by labourers under their control, utilising new technologies and techniques. In the example of the handicraftsman provided by Marx above, isolated labour in a workshop with hand tools to produce a complete product such as a shoe under “formal subsumption”, gives way to large-scale factory production, with workers attending to machines to produce just one component, such as the sole of a shoe, under “real subsumption”.

Marx presents this development as a profoundly contradictory process. On the one hand, the introduction of large-scale “co-operation, division of labour within the workshop, the use of machinery, and in general the transformation of production by the conscious use of science” unleashes an extraordinary new productive power into the world, “socialized (ie collective) labour”.¹⁹

On the other hand, however, this new power only emerges historically for the purpose of valourising capital. Workers are brought together to act as cogs in the machinery of a production process completely controlled by the capitalist, stripped of any independent relation with other workers, or any understanding of or initiative within the broader collective labour process to which they are contributing.

Saito provides useful and interesting examples from Marx’s notebooks to trace the emergence of “co-operation” as an important category of analysis in this period, blossoming into a fully developed chapter (Chapter 13: Co-operation) in *Capital*. This development took place contemporaneously with an intensification of Marx’s studies

¹⁷ Saito, 2022, p146.

¹⁸ Marx, 1976 (1867), p.645

¹⁹ Marx, 1976 (1867), p.1024.

into natural science and is constitutive of a more ecologically grounded analysis, concerned with the unique and powerfully destructive way that capitalism re-organises the metabolism between human beings and nature. By compelling co-operation in the drive for valorisation, capitalism both summons previously unthinkable powers of social labour to reshape the material world, while denying the labourers themselves any control over or even consciousness of the consequences of the exercise of their collective power. Entirely subordinated to the relentless, expansionist logic of capital accumulation, which relies on the exploitation of human labour, the emergence of this newfound power unleashes unprecedented ecological destruction.

Saito complements his interpretation of Marx with analysis from various socialist thinkers, such as Andre Gorz, to argue that technological development within capitalism is premised on increasing despotic control over workers and destruction of the environment. This discussion includes some important considerations about the nature of technology and the enormous challenges facing a revolutionary society that seeks to transform production and establish a sustainable relationship with the natural world. Saito runs into problems, however, when he argues that Marx came to see development under the real subsumption of labour as generating only “productive forces of capital” which are useless for socialist development:

It is clear that the development of productive forces of capital do not prepare the conditions for such a sustainable regulation of the metabolism with nature. In other words, even if the ‘fetter’ of the development of productive forces is overcome through the transcendence of the capitalist mode of production, capitalist technologies remain unsustainable and destructive and cannot be employed in socialism.²⁰

Saito’s position works to obscure the revolutionary role of the proletariat that Marx theorised would need to expropriate the means of production from the capitalist class as the central feature of the revolutionary process, a seizure of resources and power that is barely mentioned in Saito’s book.

Far from arguing that capitalism generates only “productive forces of capital”, Marx repeatedly made the point that capital’s drive to compel cooperation for its own valorisation works to *mystify* the fact that production itself involves what he calls the “productive forces of social labour”, acting on the material world to create use-values. This two-fold character of production means that productive forces may *appear* or *seem* as though they are “the productive forces of capital”, but they are, in material terms, a social power exercised by human beings. In Marx’s analysis, “as co-operators, as

²⁰ Saito, 2022, 158.

members of a working organism” workers are simultaneously “but special modes of existence of capital... isolated persons, who enter into relations with the capitalist, but not with one another”²¹ and revolutionary subjects capable of uniting at the point of production to take collective control.

Marxism without class struggle

There are two elements in Marx’s discussion of the role of cooperation in development of the forces of production under capitalism in Chapter 13 of *Capital* not accounted for by Saito. Both of these build on Marx’s lifelong argument, seemingly rejected by Saito, that contradictions inherent in the development of the forces of production under capitalism are what creates the possibility of socialist revolution.

The first is the creation of proletarians, who through capitalism’s compulsion to expand co-operation, are drawn together in massive numbers in an exploitative and inherently antagonistic relationship with capital. The second element is the extraordinary possibilities co-operative labour creates for human development. Marx argued that “when the labourer co-operates systematically with others, he strips off his individuality and develops the capabilities of his species”.²² It is this aspect of the transformation of the labour process under capitalism that lays the basis for a full flourishing of human creative potential in a communist society. Collective labour is a force *unleashed by capital*, currently acting blindly on the material world, but also a force Marx believed could be brought under rational, democratic control by the producers themselves through a revolutionary process of self-emancipation.

These omissions mean Saito’s presentation misses Marx’s fundamental point about the revolutionary implications of the development of the forces of production under capitalism. Saito says of the proletariat under the real subsumption of labour:

[W]orkers’ autonomy and independence are fatally undermined, and they become much more easily tamed and disciplined under the regime of capital. Exposed to competition for jobs, workers passively follow the strict orders and commands of capital.²³

In Chapter 13, however, while similarly condemning the despotic nature of co-operation under capitalism, Marx also emphasised the resistance of living labour as a constitutive feature. Marx argued that “as the number of co-operating workers increases, so too

²¹ Marx, 1976 (1867), p451.

²² Marx, 1976 (1867), p447.

²³ Saito, 2022, p149.

does their resistance to capital” and emphasised that the nature of capitalist control “is conditioned by the unavoidable antagonism between the exploiter and the raw material of his exploitation”.²⁴

In the *Results*, Marx is explicit that this antagonistic aspect of co-operation is a crucial basis of revolutionary transformation:

On the one hand, it creates the real conditions for the domination of labour by capital, perfecting the process and providing it with the appropriate framework. On the other hand, by evolving conditions of production and communication and productive forces of labour antagonistic to the workers involved in them, this revolution [in the labour process] creates the real premises of a new mode of production, one that abolishes the contradictory form of capitalism. It thereby *creates the material basis* of a newly shaped social process and hence of a new social formation” (emphasis added).²⁵

Despite Saito’s attempts to argue that in the 1880s Marx broke with this materialist, dialectical view about capitalist development providing the material basis for communism, one of Marx’s last published pieces of political writing, a preamble to the program of the French Workers’ Party written in May 1880, reiterated his consistent position that “the material and intellectual elements” of collective production “are constituted by the very development of capitalist society”.²⁶

Marx no doubt understood the need for fundamental transformations in how technology is designed and utilised. He was clear that communist transformation of production would be deep and thorough-going, involving an “uprooting of the economical foundation” as he called it in *The Civil War in France*, “transforming circumstances and men” as workers break through the mystifications created by capital.²⁷

The Civil War, written in response to the Paris Commune, is an important text which shows that Marx’s ideas about the nature of revolution did indeed continue to develop after he completed *Capital*. Given his focus on Marx’s changing ideas, and his allegation that Marx abandons Historical Materialism, it is striking, therefore, that Saito neglects a full discussion of the Commune as it demonstrates Marx’s ideas did change, but not in the way Saito implies. Marx’s development of his revolutionary ideas are particularly important to an ecological discussion as it was through a study of the Paris Commune that he developed his ideas on the need to smash the bourgeois State and

²⁴ Marx, 1976 (1867), p449.

²⁵ Marx, 1976 (1867), p1064.

²⁶ Marx, 1974 (1880), p366.

²⁷ Marx, 1975 (1871), p.334-336.

institute a society based on the mass democratic control of production by “the associated producers”. In 1871 revolution exploded in Paris - the population rose up and took power, running the city and its defence through an innovative system of popular democracy. This democracy was not perfect - women were not allowed to vote, despite their leading role in the revolution and the defence of the city. But the Commune allowed Marx to see a new model of mass, participatory democracy, “executive and legislative at the same time”, and come to a clear understanding that workers’ could not simply seize control of the existing state, but had to smash it.²⁸

The “true secret” of the Commune, Marx argued, was that it “was essentially a working class government, the product of the struggle of the producing against the appropriating class, the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of labour.”²⁹ In other words, what mass participatory democracy facilitates is the rational organisation of production to fulfil communal needs and interests, which would include the impact of production on the natural world. In *Capital Volume Three* Marx expressed the meaning of communist democracy in profoundly ecological terms, as “the associated producers govern[ing] the human metabolism with nature in a rational way”.³⁰

Saito’s attempt to impose a “degrowth” framework on the revolutionary society obscures Marx’s insight that to achieve rational control of production, its nature and direction must be decided democratically by producers themselves. The scale of the contemporary ecological crisis certainly demands a rapid and qualitative reduction in the intensity with which the “material substratum” is impacted by human development. But such a radical transformation of production will require substantive technological and scientific innovation, including leaps forward in the capacity to coordinate knowledge sharing and decision making and produce and distribute sustainable energy. Revolutions in the 21st century will take place in the context of escalating climate breakdown, necessitating dynamic innovation and growth in response to constant destruction of infrastructure and mass migration.

The role of the oil industry, both now and into the future, provides a concrete example of the way even the most destructive of capitalist technologies provides a “material foundation” for communism. Oil workers may currently be atomised and fragmented by the capitalist labour process, but their exploitation provokes resistance and the opportunity to connect with a broader radicalising movement, evidenced this year alone by the important role of oil workers in generalised workers struggles from Iran to France.

²⁸ Marx, 1975 (1871), p.536-537.

²⁹ Marx, 1975 (1871), p.334.

³⁰ Saito, 2022, p60.

The extraction and combustion of oil would need to be rapidly phased out after the overthrow of capitalism, for humanity to stand a chance of avoiding catastrophic climate change. However, the scientific knowledge and technology at the heart of the oil industry, from pumps and pipelines to the capacity to survey beneath the surface of earth and sea, will continue to provide a basis for future sustainable development across a range of other activities. Workers with an intimate knowledge of this industry itself will be crucial for any successful decommissioning of existing infrastructure and redeployment of knowledge and technical skills.

Saito's insistence on a "degrowth" framework is based, in part, on his concern to distinguish the socialism we need to save the planet from the disastrous ecological legacy of Stalinist governments in the 20th century, who sometimes used "promethean" interpretations of Marx to justify destruction. However, despite their formal ideology, these regimes had nothing to do with Marx's conception of socialism as a system based on democratic control of production by the producers themselves. Saito's efforts to recover Marx's ecology are thought-provoking and help us appreciate both the depths of capitalism's destructive power and of the challenges facing the revolutionary movement required to repair metabolic rifts. But utilising Marx's ecology in a way that is capable of achieving this aim must go along with recovering his commitment to working-class self-emancipation.

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