

No to reform!

Review of *Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism*.
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Sometimes it has seemed as if the ecological movement and the socialist movement are inevitably at odds. While the ecological movement has questioned the endless expansion of production, consumption and the consequent acceleration of resource and energy use, the left has often emphasised the domination of nature not just to meet everyone's needs but to offer a universally high standard of living.

However, there is another left tradition that has always questioned the alignment of social progress with material expansion. At its heart has been an opposition to turning everything into a commodity¹. Socialism is not simply the efficient and equitable management of the existing system but a complete alternative.

So where did the Copernican² thinker of the socialist movement, Karl Marx, stand on this issue? Was he of the brown or the green left? That is what Kohei Saito addresses in *Marx in the Anthropocene: towards the idea of a degrowth communism*. The book was a surprising best-seller (half a million copies), in Japan, which has a distinctive and innovative Marxist tradition³ as well as a long-standing tradition of ecological thought and practice⁴.

Saito has for some years made a detailed study of the notebooks that Marx filled after completing the first volume of *Capital*: these have only appeared in recent years in a collection known by the initials of its German title⁵, the MEGA. Saito's previous book explored the evidence for Marx's "ecological turn" in those notebooks. In this latest one he widens the discussion, connecting with historical and contemporary debates and the work of key thinkers including Frederik Engels, Georg Lukacs, Rosa Luxemburg, István Mészáros, Herbert Marcuse, James O'Connor, Jason Moore, Noel Castree, Paul Burkett and John Bellamy Foster.

Saito's key finding, and key argument, is that the later Marx rethought his earlier positions, both as a result of, and as a reason for, pursuing extensive studies in the physical and biological sciences, on the one hand, and pre-capitalist societies on the other. While comments in earlier texts such as the *Communist Manifesto* and the *Grundrisse*, and indeed some passages in *Capital*, are consistent with socialism harnessing and expanding the forces of production developed by capitalism – 'productivism', Saito finds that Marx thoroughly revised his position. That included abandoning the notion of stages of history and, critically, the idea that socialism must follow capitalism, standing on the pillars it had erected. Saito uses his findings to reconstruct what Marx's new philosophy was – "degrowth communism".

1 Burton, M. (2019). Degrowth: The realistic alternative for Labour. *Renewal*, 27(2), 88–95.

<https://www.lwbooks.co.uk/renewal/27/degrowth-the-realistic-alternative-for-labour>

Wainwright, H. (1999). Raymond Williams and Contemporary Political Ecology. *Keywords*, 2, 81–93.

<https://raymondwilliamssociety.files.wordpress.com/2017/09/keywords2.pdf>

Williams, R. (1982). *Socialism and Ecology*. SERA.

2 'Copernican' in that his insight into the hidden nature of the commodity, and its relations of production under capitalism, revolutionised understanding of political economy. That implies that the neoclassical and Keynesian economists, among others, are rather like flat earthers.

3 Walker, G. (n.d.). *Marxist Theory in Japan: A Critical Overview* | *Historical Materialism*.

<https://www.historicalmaterialism.org/reading-guides/marxist-theory-japan-critical-overview>

4 Brown, S. A. (2013). *Just enough: Lessons in living green from traditional Japan*. Tuttle Publishing.

Edahiro, J. (n.d.). *Toward a Sustainable Society—Learning from Japan's Edo Period and Contributing*

from Asia to the World | *JFS Japan for Sustainability*. JFS Japan for Sustainability. Retrieved 3 February

2022, from https://www.japanfs.org/sp/en/news/archives/news_id035761.html

Natural farming (Fukuoka method) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Natural_farming

5 Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe.

The argument is persuasive. Two key ideas underpin the argument. Firstly, Marx adopted the concept of the “metabolic rift”, the disturbance of the natural regenerative cycles of what we now call ecosystems, as a result of the massive resource and energy transfers occasioned by the capitalist mode of production.

“Its basic thesis is relatively simple: the metabolic interaction of humans with the rest of nature constitutes the basis of living, but the capitalist way of organizing human interactions with their ecosystems inevitably creates a great chasm in these processes and threatens both human and non-human beings.” p. 23

There are three dimensions to the rift, the technological (for example, natural regenerative soil cycles are replaced with polluting artificial fertilisers based on massive fossil fuel consumption), the spatial (e.g. the displacement of pollution from cities to the rivers and ocean) and the temporal (the time lag between a capitalist process and its ecological impact – as in the fossil fuel – climate change relationship).

Secondly, Marx came to revalue pre-capitalist social systems with their land tenure and property arrangements, not uncritically or romantically, but as systems to build upon where capital had not yet dominated, and as sources of insight for how a post-capitalist world might be organised.

“Marx’s call for a ‘return’ to non-capitalist society demands that any serious attempt at overcoming capitalism in Western society needs to learn from non-Western societies and integrate the new principle of a steady-state economy. Marx’s rejection of productivism is not identical with the romantic advocacy (sic) of a ‘return to the countryside’. ... The critique of productive forces of capital is not the equivalent to a rejection of all technologies.” p. 208

Saito’s notion of “degrowth communism” draws on these two sets of understanding and as such it is the antithesis of what the green new dealers, the accelerationists and luxury automation advocates imagine. For me its combination of a progressive critique of capitalist modernism, ecological understanding and a decolonial ethic align it with liberation philosopher Enrique Dussel’s notions of analectics and transmodernism. In analectics, the experience of the oppressed and excluded global majorities dialectically engages critically with the dominant system, negating it yet yielding a positive synthesis. Rather than the rejection of the modern, it transcends it, aiming for an alternative, ethical and sustainable modernity⁶. It is this combination of the ecological, the decolonial and Marx’s Copernican unveiling of capitalism’s dirty secret, the expropriation of surplus labour⁷, that characterise degrowth communism as both critique and utopia.

While the book finishes on the relevance of degrowth communism for today’s impending catastrophe, earlier chapters get into some fundamental philosophical questions. The sections of the book that cover these questions are not the easiest of reading. While the issues might seem arcane they do have some practical relevance.

6 Burton, M. (n.d.). DUSSEL, Enrique. *GLOBAL SOCIAL THEORY*.
<http://globalsocialtheory.org/thinkers/dussel-enrique/>

Dussel, E. (2000). Europe, modernity and eurocentrism. *Nepantla: View from the South*, 1(3), 465–478.
<http://biblioteca.clacso.edu.ar/ar/libros/dussel/artics/europe.pdf>

Burton, M. (2013). The analectic turn: Critical psychology and the new political context. *Les Cahiers de Psychologie Politique*, 23, online.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20160324043518/http://odel.irevues.inist.fr/cahierspsychologiepolitique/index.php?id=2465>

7 The law of (commodity) value under capitalism, is that the average exchange value of a commodity is proportional to the average amount of labour-time that is socially necessary to produce it. Capitalism’s trick is in the discrepancy between the time necessary for the production and the recompense the worker receives. That difference, expressed in money terms is profit, resting on the surplus value extracted from the worker, as surplus labour. Marx’s insight is this hidden secret of the capitalist mode, on which its accumulation of value is based.

The status of nature in relation to human activity under capitalism.

Human activity, so amplified under capitalism's 'great acceleration', has profound impacts on the natural world. That has led some writers to argue that nature and humanity are co-constructed, so intertwined that it is wrong to treat them separately. The options of monism (one category comprising the human world and nature) or dualism (two categories, humanity and nature) themselves can each be divided into two aspects, the ontological and the methodological. What does that mean? For Saito, while it is tempting to argue that there is not a distinction because humans are themselves part of nature, and do not leave it untouched, that is unhelpful when it comes to understanding the ways in which humans have their impact on nature. So he argues that while the stuff is the same – humans are part of nature - it is essential to distinguish their sphere from the natural, analytically, otherwise you can't understand the relations involved. It is precisely because of the contradiction between the social process of capital's self expansion, based on the appropriation of value from commodified human labour, and the physical and biological laws of the natural world, that we have the multiple ecological and planetary systems crises that face us today under very late capitalism.

Formal and real subsumption

What would happen were capitalism to be defeated? In what ways would a socialist (or communist) society be different? A strong tendency on the left (whether in the shape of luxury communism accelerationists, green deal social democrats or Leninist productivists) is to see the new society picking up the industrial systems and technologies developed under capitalism and turning them to serve the working class, and people as a whole. However, a more radical (i.e. to the root) perspective understands this to be both naive and a betrayal of socialism. Why?

Marx distinguished between two forms of "subsumption".

"Historically, in fact, at the start of its formation, we see capital take under its control (subsume under itself) not only the labour processes as it finds them available in the existing technology, and in the form in which they have been developed on the basis of non-capitalist relations of production. ... at the beginning it only subsumes it formally, without making any changes in its specific technological character."

Marx, Economic Manuscripts of 1861-63 (quoted by Saito, p. 146, his emphasis).

So the actual character of the labour process doesn't change at first but the relations of production do, replacing things like craftsmanship and guilds with capital and wage-labour. Those changes were bad enough, increasing the working day and reducing incomes as surplus labour was extracted under the new ownership system. Real subsumption then introduces further transformations in the mode of production.

"With the formal subsumption of labour under capital a complete (and constantly repeated) revolution takes place in the mode of production, in the productivity of the workers and in the relations between the workers and capitalists."

Marx, Capital v1. (cited by Saito, p. 147).

Capitalism has not just modified the labour process through the application of science and technology but also through the social application of labour, the way workers work, which is now outside their control. Everything has changed, and that everything soon goes beyond the workplace, into the homes supplying workers and consumers, and into the territories supplying materials, and more workers and consumers.

To get off the road to ecological catastrophe requires such fundamental changes that we can only partly imagine them, being mentally colonised by the capitalist imaginary, whether we like it or not. As I have noted before,

“Capitalism is a global system. Like the life of an animal it exists at the micro (workplace, shop, household - molecular and cellular) level, at the meso (firm, community - organ) level and at the macro level (conglomerate, industry, economy, State - whole animal) as well as existing over time from generation to generation and through nested cycles of energy transactions, production, consumption, reproduction. Everywhere you turn it is there before you. More than that it is you – in your food, your thoughts, your emotions and the systems that tie these together. Around you and in you and beyond you.”

Sustainability: utopian and scientific (2009)⁸

Just taking over its technology and making it green will not solve the problem.

Engels

Finally, Saito has an interestingly nuanced view of Engels and his contribution. I had come to see Engels as a proto eco-socialist, and this is not exactly wrong. The argument is well put in John Bellamy Foster’s monumental *“The Return of Nature”* which places Engels at the beginning of a line that includes scholars as diverse as William Morris, Nikolai Bukharin, J.D. Bernal and Rachel Carson⁹. Saito, however, finds differences between the ecosocialisms of the later Marx and Engels.

To summarise an argument that appears, focussing on different dimensions of the difference, across the length of the book, Saito argues that Engels did not appreciate fully either the full significance of the metabolic rift or the impact of real subsumption. Putting these two things together, with his insights on pre-capitalist and indigenous communisms, Saito’s view is that the late Marx, as a degrowth communist, did not see the possibility of transforming society and its relationship with nature, solely on the basis of changing the ownership of the means of production. Altering the relations of production would be insufficient to change the form. Engels on the other hand, did promote this view, with some justification since his project was the pragmatism of the complex theoretical insights of the two thinkers, for the use of the socialist working class movement. Marx was still reworking his ideas, drawing on his extensive studies, at the end of his life and that, together with his failing health, is why he never published his revised framework. It was left to Engels to deliver a reconstructed set of texts, putting his own researches to one side, and in so doing there was some misrepresentation. That is why the socialist movements deriving from the long twentieth century have often been at odds with that other radical and critical movement, the ecological movement. Yet both radical movements have at their core the critique of capitalism as a self-expanding system that tramples all before it: all that is solid turns to air, and all that is green turns brown.

Inevitably Saito falls short, as another reviewer concluded¹⁰, when it comes to drawing out the implications of his researches for political praxis. There is much to do there, but also much to build from, in the burgeoning literature and practice of the degrowth movement, in the work of scholars and activists who continue to explore Marxism as an open-ended approach to inquiry, and in the practice of the most inspiring, and, let’s be clear, extreme, social movements whether badged under environmentalism, community or indigenous and workers rights.

8 In the collection, Burton, M. H., Kagan, C., Vandeventer, J. S., & Riddell, M. (2021). *A Viable Future? Explorations in post-growth from Steady State Manchester*. Steady State Manchester. <https://steadystatemanchester.net/a-viable-future-contents/>

9 Bellamy Foster, J. (2020). *The Return of Nature: Socialism and Ecology*. Monthly Review Press.

10 Johnstone, B. (2023, February 8). *Thinking About Ecology with Marx—A review of Kohei Saito’s Marx in the Anthropocene*. <https://iso.org.nz/2023/02/08/thinking-about-ecology-with-marx-a-review-of-kohei-saitos-marx-in-the-anthropocene/>

* This review is the personal view of the author.

Steady State Manchester <http://steadystatemanchester.net>

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