

## Book Review

Gareth Dale

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth**

**Communism**, by Kohei Saito, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2023, 276 pp., £24.99, ISBN 9781009366182.

In this his latest *tour de force*, Kohei Saito offers a twin invitation: to Marxists to re-think Marx as a “degrowth communist,” and to liberal degrowthers to understand that their antagonist is not growth but capitalism. Much of his case for degrowth is familiar, but Saito’s differs from the usual degrowth accounts in a key respect. For him, the systemic goal of capitalism is not growth but accumulation. The inexorable increase in global energy and resource throughout and environmental despoliation is not the result of states aspiring to higher GDP, but of businesses driven to expand turnover, develop new products, and increase profits. The accounting principles that govern it are not those of states or a “growth culture” but those of the firm; and insofar as rival states competing within a capitalist world economy adopt those same imperatives they too come to function capitalistically. This latter occurred in the Soviet Union under Stalin and his heirs, a set of regimes that Saito conceives of as state capitalist, i.e. they were (and in China’s case still are) just as dedicated to promoting accumulation/growth as capitalist states elsewhere.

In line with the broader degrowth literature, Saito advances a critical case on technology, and on the dynamics of demand and consumption. Technology is not “neutral” but is, alongside the organisation of labour, dictated by the prevailing class relations. Whereas capitalism tends to develop “locking technologies,” to borrow Andre Gorz’s term (2018) for technologies that “enslave the user” and “monopolise the supply of a product or service” (157), their antithesis, “open technologies,” are conducive to a radically democratic i.e. socialist society. At the ideological level, Saito diagnoses left-leaning techno-utopianism as a reflex of “pessimistic ‘capitalist realism’” (160). Where confidence in the course of class struggle declines, technology can appear to “fill the void.” Techno-utopianism also feeds from the mainstream “productivist” interpretation of Marxism, one that “fetishizes the productive forces developed under capitalism, regarding them as if they were neutral forces that can be taken over by the proletariat and utilized for establishing a socialist society” (154).

On questions of demand and consumption, the focus is again on capitalist dynamics: firstly, that market competition produces rebound effects (most famously the Jevons Paradox), and, when coupled with geopolitical competition, generates a steep hierarchy of global wealth, featuring a rich group of countries in a position of dominance whose citizens follow what Saito, leaning on Brand

and Wissen (2018), terms an “imperial mode of living” geared to the consumption of egregiously unsustainable goods (flights, private cars, beef, dairy, etc) and based on resource transfer from, and despoliation of, the Global South. His suggestion that “the working class in the Global North came to exploit others in the Global South,” however, does not jibe well with his otherwise rigorously Marxist account. For Marx, exploitation is a relation between ruling and toiling classes (in capitalism: capitalists and workers) and not a relation among the latter. Brand and Wissen are more circumspect: “For the vast majority” of Northern workers, the need to sell their labour power “forces” them into an imperial mode of living “and at the same time enables them to benefit from it,” including as a secondary consequence of the “over-exploitation” — by capital — of workers in the South. (Brand and Wissen 2018, 98). This formulation (“forces ... benefit”) accords with Saito’s broader argument, drawing attention as it does to the fact that the richest 10% of the world’s population, who bear responsibility for fully half of global carbon dioxide emissions, comprise much of the middle classes and even some workers from the richer countries. Jetting off to New York for a weekend is an act flagrantly out of sync with the human need for a habitable planet. To conceive of communism as hyper-consumption fuelled by super-abundance is to take leave of one’s Marxist fundamentals — starting with materialism and rationality.

What are those fundamentals? Saito’s Marx is a dialectical materialist: his starting point is humanity in its evolving unity-and-difference vis-à-vis the natural world. The term that crystallises this is metabolism. It was the pivotal concept in his previous book, *Karl Marx’s Ecosocialism* (2017). In *Marx in the Anthropocene* he develops the concept, with a focus on its three dimensions: material disruptions of natural processes (such as soil depletion), spatial rifts (such as that between town and country), and the temporal rift between ecological time and capitalist time (Dale 2019). Saito’s account is a meticulous and coherent rendition of Marx’s approach, although the dichotomy around which the theory of the metabolic rift is organised — between a transhistorical relationship of humanity to nature considered abstractly in non-alienated terms and the increasingly alienated relationship of humanity to nature under capitalist conditions — strikes me as somewhat limiting. Where does it leave the distinction between the society-nature metabolism of pre-class societies and that of pre-capitalist class societies (Dale 2022)?

The central case in Saito’s new book is that the more Marx learned of the metabolic rift, the more he embraced ecological and anti-colonial positions until ultimately he arrived at “degrowth communism.” He came to recognise that the productive forces, as Saito puts it (177), “do not automatically prepare the material foundation for new post-capitalist society but rather exacerbate the robbery of nature,” and he looked to non-western societies to inspire new ways of thinking about socialist transition, most famously in his Letter to Vera Zasulich of 1881 (Marx 1881).

That Marx, at least in his final few years, can persuasively be read as a degrowth communist is a revelation. The importance of this book cannot be overstated.

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Gareth Dale

Brunel University, UK

 [gareth.dale@brunel.ac.uk](mailto:gareth.dale@brunel.ac.uk)

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