

Was Karl Marx a Degrowth Communist?

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In a recent issue of *Monthly Review*, Michael Löwy observed that the last few years have witnessed “a growing coming together of ecosocialism and degrowth: each side has been appropriating the arguments of the other, and the proposal of an ‘ecosocialist degrowth’ has begun to be adopted as a common ground.”¹ The rationale behind this convergence is relatively straightforward. On the one hand, a central tenet of ecosocialism has been that any viable socialist project will need to pursue ecological sustainability and substantive equality as two interdependent parts of a dialectical unity.² In the context of the twenty-first century, this entails reducing the global social metabolism’s total material and energy throughput while satisfying universal social needs. This in turn requires bringing about a convergence between different regions and social segments through reductions in the profligate waste propping up the capitalist system, redistribution of social wealth and decision-making, the free dissemination of ecological knowledge and socially beneficial technological innovations, and operationalisation of principles of self-determination and autogestion.³ On the other hand, advocates of degrowth have increasingly recognised that any attempt to break with the fixation on economic growth and establish an alternate, more equitable conception of social wealth requires a decisive break with capital accumulation as the ordering principle of society, and therefore a viable alternative to the capitalist mode of social metabolic control. The resultant convergence,



Monument to Karl Marx in front of the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow (October 13, 2019). Image credit: [Txetxu](#) (Flickr).

¹ ↪ Michael Löwy, “Nine Theses on Ecosocialist Degrowth,” *Monthly Review* 75, no. 3 (2023): 156.

² ↪ István Mészáros, *The Challenge and Burden of Historical Time* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008).

³ ↪ John Bellamy Foster, “Planned Degrowth: Ecosocialism and Sustainable Human Development—An Introduction,” — The Jus Semper Global Alliance, September 2023; Brian M. Napoletano, Pedro S. Urquijo, Brett Clark, and John Bellamy Foster, “Henri Lefebvre’s Conception of Nature-Society in the Revolutionary Project of Autogestion,” *Dialogues in Human Geography* 13, no. 3 (2022): 433–52; Brian M. Napoletano, Brett Clark, John Bellamy Foster, and Pedro S. Urquijo, “Sustainability and Metabolic Revolution in the Works of Henri Lefebvre,” *World 1*, no. 3 (2020): 300–16.

ecosocialist degrowth, indicates two important correctives to widespread misconceptions. On the ecosocialist side, the degrowth modifier indicates a conscious, planned project of metabolic restoration, while on the degrowth side, the ecosocialist modifier points to a transformative project rather than a simple, one-sided negation of growth.

It is in the context of this convergence that the English-language translation of Kohei Saito's Japanese bestseller, *Capital in the Anthropocene*, has just been published as *Slow Down: The Degrowth Manifesto*.⁴ This comes more than a year after the publication of the English translation of Marx in the Anthropocene, which—confusingly—was originally published in Japanese after *Capital in the Anthropocene*.⁵ Marx in the Anthropocene has been described as an “academic text,” and is aimed at Marxists, whereas *Slow Down* targets a broader audience, selling over five hundred thousand copies in Japan alone. The two books largely overlap in their general argument for what Saito has dubbed “degrowth communism,” but aspects of his argument that are mentioned only briefly in one book sometimes receive fuller treatment in the other. For instance, Marx in the Anthropocene offers virtually no discussion of how degrowth communism might emerge from existing social struggles and movements, leaving the issue of transition virtually untouched. *Slow Down*, in contrast, identifies a handful of movements that prefigure or point to aspects of degrowth communism, including municipalism (his primary source of inspiration), rebellions by care workers, Buen Vivir, and food sovereignty. Citing the well-known 3.5 percent rule of Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan that helped inspire Extinction Rebellion, he argues that only a small part of the population needs to “rise up sincerely and nonviolently to bring about a major change to society.” Saito suggests that this number could easily be met by the kinds of movements he mentions together with “people sincerely concerned with climate change and passionately committed to fighting it.”⁶

What Is Growth?

For Saito, the historical influence that Karl Marx's thought exerted on ecology and anticolonial struggles is “not sufficient to demonstrate why non-Marxists still need to care about Marx's interest in ecology today.” Rather, the significance of Marx in this respect is that he carried his ideas forward in order to develop a more concrete “vision of post-capitalist society”—one we cannot afford to ignore today.⁷ Saito therefore advocates a degrowth communism that he claims is neither his invention nor the outcome of dialogue between movements for ecosocialism and degrowth, but rather constitutes Marx's own vision of post-capitalist society. In claiming this, Saito contends that he is going further than his 2017 *Karl Marx's Ecosocialism*, which built on the analysis of Marx's theory of metabolic rift introduced almost two

⁴ ↪ Kohei Saito, *Slow Down: The Degrowth Manifesto*, trans. Brian Bergstrom (London: Astra Publishing House, 2024).

⁵ ↪ I read the two books in the same order that they have become available to English-language readers, starting with Marx in the Anthropocene and then reading the Spanish translation of *Capital in the Anthropocene*, which retains the original title, *El capital en la era del Antropoceno*, translated by Víctor Illera Kanaya (Barcelona: Penguin, 2023). I read this before the English translation was published, and so drew most of the quotations in this review from Marx in the Anthropocene to avoid the problem of double translation. Marx in the Anthropocene is the more developed theoretical work, while *Slow Down* is the more popular study, so my critique naturally focuses on the former, and refers to *Slow Down* mainly where it goes beyond the analysis in the former.

⁶ ↪ Saito, *Slow Down*, 231–32. It is not clear here that Saito actually read Chenoweth and Stephan's book, rather than the adulatory review by David Robson (“[The ‘3.5% Rule’: How a Small Minority Can Change the World](#),” BBC, May 13, 2019). A brief perusal suggests that, rather than achieving any sort of lasting, fundamental, and global transformation, the authors are primarily concerned with advocating liberal principles of nonviolence to bring about regime changes in individual countries (the authors are affiliated with the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at the University of Denver/Peace Research Institute of Oslo and the U.S. Department of State respectively, and the book is part of the Columbia Studies in Terrorism and Irregular Warfare series), with outcomes somewhat questionably (and in some cases I am familiar with, incorrectly) classified as success, partial success, or failure. My brief search did not yield anything regarding a threshold of 3.5 percent, which Robson seems to have drawn from some of Chenoweth's other work; see Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011). Even granting, *ab argumentum*, Saito's claim that 3.5 percent constitutes a sufficient critical mass in a global population of 8 billion people, this comes to 280 million, which is roughly twice the entire population of Japan, or equivalent to Indonesia's population in 2024.

⁷ ↪ Kohei Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 172–73. Unless otherwise indicated, all emphases are in the original text.

decades earlier by John Bellamy Foster and Paul Burkett.⁸ Despite being awarded the prestigious Isaac and Tamara Deutscher Memorial Prize in 2018, Saito considers his earlier book inadequate because it “stopped at noting how a call for sustainable economic development was part of Marx’s ecosocialist thought.” This, like Kevin Anderson’s work (following on the work of others) demonstrating the non-Eurocentric development of Marx’s ecosocialism, “allows Marx to edge closer to a contemporary version of political correctness,” but does not, in Saito’s view, provide a sufficiently detailed schema for the society of the future built on the foundation of degrowth and deceleration, something that he contends can be found in Marx’s last writings.⁹

By going farther, Saito also indicates that he views degrowth communism as inherently more radical than ecosocialism. This is because “ecosocialism does not exclude the possibility of pursuing further sustainable economic growth once capitalist production is overcome, [while] degrowth communism maintains that growth is not sustainable nor desirable even in socialism.”¹⁰ This seemingly simple distinction immediately raises a vital question that Saito never answers: What does “growth” mean, especially under socialism? Not only does Saito fail to answer this question, but he frequently moves between the concepts of growth, economic growth, productivity, and development of humanity’s productive forces as though they all signified the same thing, which they do not.

If by growth Saito means economic growth as it has been defined since the mid-twentieth century as an increase in world Gross Domestic Product (GDP) or income, then asserting that ecosocialism endorses this is a category mistake. One of the first principles of ecosocialism is the abolition of GDP as the universal standard in favor of qualitative indicators of human development and economic activity.¹¹

If by growth Saito means increases in material or energy throughput globally (or at other scales), then the admissibility of such growth depends not only on its biophysical sustainability, but the social needs it is meant to meet under particular historical circumstances. These criteria can be neither categorically affirmed nor categorically rejected in advance, but depend on natural dynamics and the democratic decisions made by the future community of associated producers to which we are referring. This requirement applies with equal vigor to degrowth communism and ecosocialism; to proclaim all growth as an unmitigated evil is simply to fall into the obverse of the ideology that proclaims all growth as an unmitigated good.¹² In both cases, growth becomes an empty abstraction, devoid of any connection to reality.

If by growth Saito means increases in productivity—that is, increases in labor output per unit of production—then his characterisation of degrowth is erroneous. Modern theories of the steady-state economy, such as that of Herman Daly, require continual improvements in productivity to ensure continued opportunities for qualitative development.¹³ The current correlation between productivity gains and material and energy throughput reflects the way that capital employs productivity

Improvements in labor productivity and overall efficiency are crucial to reducing the throughput of material resources and enhancing human welfare, as vital in a degrowth as in a growth economy, though serving different ends.

⁸ ↪ Paul Burkett, *Marx and Nature* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999); John Bellamy Foster, *Marx’s Ecology* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000); Kohei Saito, *Karl Marx’s Ecosocialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2017).

⁹ ↪ Saito, *Slow Down*, 122–23.

¹⁰ ↪ Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, 209.

¹¹ ↪ Mészáros, *The Challenge and Burden of Historical Time*; Paul Burkett, *Marxism and Ecological Economics* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2009).

¹² ↪ Henri Lefebvre, *Toward an Architecture of Enjoyment* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2014); Mészáros, *The Challenge and Burden of Historical Time*.

¹³ ↪ Herman E. Daly, *Steady-State Economics* (Washington, DC: Island

gains and technological improvements as a means toward new capital formation, yet increases in productivity do not automatically feed into growth. They could be used, for example, to shorten working hours or reduce material requirements. Improvements in labor productivity and overall efficiency are crucial to reducing the throughput of material resources and enhancing human welfare, as vital in a degrowth as in a growth economy, though serving different ends.

Sustainable human development is not only a necessity, but the fundamental objective of ecosocialism and, one would hope, degrowth.¹⁴ Technological development is a qualitative factor that can be used for expansion or for doing more with less. Condemning humanity to stagnation of its productive forces, even in an ecosocialist context where this is removed from the accumulation of capital, would deny the subjects of Saito's future utopia the possibility of being what István Mészáros calls "genuine historical subjects. For they could not be in control of a life of their own, in view of being at the mercy of the worst kind of material determinations directly under the rule of incurable scarcity."¹⁵ Indeed, for Marx, human beings themselves are the most important productive force, and their development is essential to any genuine social advance. While even in the more restricted sense of those means of production separated from the actual producers, the productive forces under socialism could not afford to remain static, but would need to develop in accord with humanity as the self-mediating being of nature. Jason Hickel contends that "degrowth scholarship embraces technological change and efficiency improvements, to the extent (crucially) that these are empirically feasible, ecologically coherent, and socially just."¹⁶ To see productivity increases or advances in humanity's productive forces resulting from human social development or technological improvements as somehow inherently productivist and geared to exponential growth, and thus opposed to ecosocialism or ecocommunity, as Saito appears to suggest in his argument, would be to equate degrowth with actual stagnation.

As the status of degrowth communism as a superior alternative to ecosocialism is a central pivot of his entire argument, Saito's failure to clarify what he means by growth, and, by extension, degrowth, renders it extremely difficult to

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determine, let alone assess, what precisely he is proposing. A categorical rejection of growth, applying to all historical circumstances, is insufficient even at the strategic level, let alone as a guiding principle of communism, which is concerned with securing the opportunities for the sustainable human development of every social individual. The Anthropocene crisis is not a product of growth as an abstract principle.

As the great French Marxist sociologist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre pointed out, a society cannot actually operate with growth, or production for the sake of production, as a guiding principle; "if it seems to do so it is really producing for power and domination."¹⁷ The aforementioned ideology of growth appears to elevate growth to a principle, but in reality subordinates it, together with humanity's productive forces, to capital accumulation.

Saito's flat rejection of growth in the abstract, therefore, does not render his version of degrowth communism more radical than ecosocialism or ecocommunity, but rather less, in that it remains bound to the idea that either growth or its inverse constitutes a coherent principle rather than a strategic objective. He is correct that growth in the sense of further

¹⁴ ↪ Nicolas Graham, *Forces of Production, Climate Change and Canadian Fossil Capitalism* (London: Brill, 2020).

¹⁵ ↪ Mészáros, *The Challenge and Burden of Historical Time*, 289.

¹⁶ ↪ Jason Hickel, "On Technology and Degrowth," *Jus Semper*, September 2023. Hickel is not an outlier in this respect; see also Giorgos Kallis, Christian Kerschner, and Joan Martínez-Alier, "The Economics of Degrowth," *Ecological Economics* 84 (2012): 172–80.

¹⁷ ↪ Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1971), 47–48.

increases in total global metabolic throughput is neither sustainable nor socially necessary now, but this has not always been the case, nor will it necessarily remain the case indefinitely, while unlimited exponential growth has been and remains an impossibility theorem. To the extent that a project of ecosocialist degrowth does indeed permit growth, this is not for its own sake, but because the associated producers have decided that such growth is both sustainable and socially necessary. Similarly, such a project would be expected to pursue degrowth or a steady state wherever this is deemed sustainable and socially necessary. In short, both growth and degrowth are strategies in response to material conditions rather than absolute principles.

Marx's Path to Degrowth Communism

The claim that it was Marx who first championed degrowth communism raises another important question: if Marx's vision of postcapitalist society was characterised by a categorical rejection of growth in any one or more of the senses mentioned above, then why has virtually every current of Marxism overlooked this important (and potentially fatal) aspect of his thought until now? Much of Saito's argument in both *Marx in the Anthropocene* and *Slow Down* is directed to this question, and the answer he offers is nothing if not original. To summarise, Saito argues that Marx himself did not arrive at the vision of degrowth communism until after the publication of the first volume of *Capital* in 1867. Saito contends that, prior to his exposure, while writing *Capital*, to the work of Justus von Liebig and other natural scientists, as well as new anthropological research, Marx's thought was characterised by a combination of Prometheanism and Eurocentrism. These constitute the two pillars of the economism that Saito, drawing on Karl Popper, ascribes to historical materialism.

Saito defines Prometheanism, which he uses interchangeably with productivism (rather than confining the former to an extreme version of the latter), as "an optimistic endorsement of capitalist modernisation because technological and scientific inventions and innovations introduced under market competition lead to the elimination of poverty and shorter working hours." Perhaps in implicit recognition of the absolute absurdity of suggesting that Marx ever claimed that capital would eliminate poverty or shorten working hours without the working class forcing it to do so, Saito often conflates Prometheanism and productivism with a "progressive view of history," as though to believe in progress itself is inherently Promethean and productivist. It is suggested that in Marx's analysis these categories somehow refer to the same thing.¹⁸ Similarly, the logical counterpart to Prometheanism, for Saito, is Eurocentrism, which "presupposes a linear progress of history" that "regards the Western capitalist countries with higher productive forces as located on a higher stage of history," such that "other non-capitalist countries must follow the same European path of capitalist industrialisation in order to establish socialism."¹⁹ Marx, he suggests, even in his mature works, was Promethean because he was Eurocentric and Eurocentric because he was Promethean.

In Saito's account of historical materialism, which is based almost entirely on analytical Marxist G. A. Cohen's technological-determinist interpretation of Marx's preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, these two beliefs of Prometheanism/Eurocentrism translate into the idea that a mode of production consists of the productive forces plus the relations of production, with the former acting as the independent variable whose perpetual increase triggers changes in the latter. This is the same notion of economic determinism that liberal thinkers have erroneously attributed to Marx. For Saito, following in the footsteps of Cohen, this allegedly led Marx to make the mistaken

¹⁸ ↪ Saito, *Slow Down*, 101–2. Notably, Burkett explicitly discusses how Marx recognized that not even natural limits would compel capital to reduce the working day; see Burkett, *Marx and Nature*, 133–43.

¹⁹ ↪ Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, 177; see also Saito, *Slow Down*, 1

assumption that “the increase of productive forces is a necessary and sufficient conditions [sic] for a post-capitalist society,” which in turn “results in a productivist view of historical progress that treats the productive forces as the main driver of history and aims to unlock them from their capitalist fetters.”²⁰ In this account, Marx naïvely believed that “a socialist revolution could simply replace the relations of production with other ones after reaching a certain level of productive forces.”²¹

Cohen’s long-since discredited interpretation of Marx, which is based almost entirely on two paragraphs of the short 1859 preface to *A Contribution*, was subjected to withering criticism by such thinkers as Ellen Meiksins Wood and Terry Eagleton. Far from the “traditional” reading of historical materialism that Saito portrays it to be, this interpretation generally is regarded as an extreme version of a crude technological-determinist caricature of Marx’s thought, whose penetrating insight rather highlighted the way that capital simultaneously expresses a creative and a destructive side.²² Similarly, Saito’s allegation that Marx’s thought was Eurocentric up through the 1860s ignores much of the available Marxist literature on this, most notably Samir Amin’s classic *Eurocentrism*, in which the term was first introduced. Whereas Saito conflates European ethnocentrism with actual Eurocentrism, Amin more precisely defines Eurocentrism as a culturalist distortion that views European culture as inherently superior.²³ Although some of Marx’s earlier writings contain traces of a certain ethnocentrism, at no point could his views be legitimately considered Eurocentric. Rather, Marx’s entire perspective is historical, not culturalist.

Saito claims that Marx’s view changed fundamentally in working out his analysis of cooperation and of the real subsumption (as opposed to formal subsumption) of labor by capital while preparing the first volume of *Capital*. Saito’s claim here is an odd one, as, by his own admission, Marx discussed “the productive forces of capital in relation to cooperation and division of labour” in the *Grundrisse*, and there is no clear explanation of why cooperation there was less an “elementary form” of capitalist production than in *Capital*.²⁴ Moreover, the concept of the real subsumption of labor, in which power over the conception and organisation of production was removed from labor and centralised in management via science and technology, was not actually addressed in any of the editions of volume one published in Marx’s and Frederick Engels’s lifetimes. Rather, this concept was developed in the *Resultate* (the originally drafted part seven to volume one of *Capital*), which Marx himself decided to exclude from the book, and which was not published until 1933.²⁵

Nevertheless, Saito, reading between the lines, claims that Marx saw a historically specific form of cooperation and the real subsumption of labor by capital, with its debilitating effects on labor, as together making it impossible to simply take over the existing capitalist forces of production in the transition to socialism. This leads Saito to contend that Marx in writing *Capital* broke with his earlier historical materialism, no longer (allegedly) privileging the forces over the relations of production. In fact, we are told that Marx finally arrived at a formulation in which he recognised the need to “radically reverse the traditional historical materialist view”—defined as the economic and technologically determinist

²⁰ ↪ Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, 154.

²¹ ↪ Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, 156.

²² ↪ Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1995), 108–45. See also Terry Eagleton, *Why Marx Was Right* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 49, 242–43; Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, 195.

²³ ↪ Samir Amin, *Eurocentrism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009). It is noteworthy that Saito fails to refer to Amin’s *Eurocentrism* in either *Marx in the Anthropocene* or *Slow Down*, preferring to rely on Edward Said’s critique of Marx in *Said’s Orientalism* (1978) and ignoring Amin’s warning on “the dangers of applying the concept of Eurocentrism too freely” (Amin, *Eurocentrism*, 176; Edward Said, *Orientalism* [New York: Knopf, 2014; original publication date 1978]).

²⁴ ↪ Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, 150.

²⁵ ↪ See Ernest Mandel’s introduction to the appendix on pages 942–47 of Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (New York: Penguin, 1976).

view which Saito, following Cohen, claims that Marx himself adhered to prior to *Capital*—“about the actual relationship between productive forces and relations of production.” Marx is now seen as claiming that the relations of production determine the productive forces, rather than the other way around.²⁶ (Here, Saito, in his exposition of what he calls Marx’s “methodological dualism,” fails to consider the more dialectical possibility that both the relations of production and productive forces might codetermine one another, even as one term in the relation exerts a stronger influence on the other.)

The only evidence Saito provides for what he sees as a dramatic reversal in Marx’s overall outlook with respect to relations and forces of production is part of a single sentence in the preface to *Capital*, in which Marx couples “relations of production” (and “forms of intercourse”) with the “mode of production,” while not explicitly mentioning “forces of production.” (Saito ignores the fact that “forms of intercourse” is used interchangeably with “forces of production” in Marx’s analysis.²⁷) Saito admits that this might be dismissed as a “minor philological quibble,” especially as there is nothing else to back it up. Nevertheless, he insists that it implied “a decisive break with the traditional view of historical materialism,” marking “a radical shift in Marx’s evaluation of the progressive character of capitalism,” leading him to the ecosocialist transitional stage.²⁸ The fact that Marx quoted favourably from his 1859 preface on the forces and relations of production in volume one of *Capital*, without suggesting any fundamental change in perspective, is completely ignored in Saito’s argument.²⁹

Saito describes this now newly discovered transitional stage represented by *Capital* as marked by important advances in Marx’s thought, as he allegedly began to realise that “the productive forces developed under the capitalist mode of production do not provide a material foundation for post-capitalism,” but instead need to “disappear together with the capitalist mode of production.” In the process, “the productive forces of social labour [that is, cooperation] are diminished as well.”³⁰ Saito seems to disregard the fact that, for Marx, all historical transformations work with what came before, that even in a revolution there are no clean breaks. If socialism has to transcend particular forces of production such as modern industry, it is for the most part to change them, and not to abandon them altogether.

Even at this point, however, when Marx is said to have largely abandoned his earlier historical materialism (the determinant role of productive forces), Saito claims that Marx’s perspective was still mired in latent Prometheanism and Eurocentrism. Thus, despite the overtly anticolonial posture evident in his writings in the 1860s, Saito asserts that Marx continued to accept “colonial rule from the perspective of the progress of human history as a whole,” contending that Marx’s Prometheanism cum Eurocentrism is not entirely displaced by his theory of metabolic rift, and is particularly evident in his continued Eurocentrism and growth-oriented perspective.³¹

As supposed evidence of the Eurocentrism to be found in *Capital*, Saito points to Marx’s warning in the preface to the first edition of *Capital* that “the country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future,” and his comment in the main text regarding “the riddle of the unchangeability of Asiatic societies.”³²

²⁶ ↩ Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, 150, 155–58.

²⁷ ↩ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 90.

²⁸ ↩ Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, 153, 156; Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 90.

²⁹ ↩ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 175.

³⁰ ↩ Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, 156–57.

³¹ ↩ Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, 184.

³² ↩ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 91, 479.

Yet, as Foster has pointed out, and a simple reading of these statements in their actual contexts confirms, neither of these passages substantiates Saito's allegations. In the preface, Marx addressed his comments directly to readers in Germany who might be tempted to dismiss his critique on the grounds that the conditions in Germany, owing to a lack of industrial development, had not yet reached the level of class polarisation then present in England. Later in his life, in correspondence with Russian Marxists, Marx explicitly affirmed this point, indicating that his statement was directed at Western Europe, and that his account of the developments there should not be read as a suprahistorical principle. Saito, however, dismisses this as dissembling on Marx's part. He additionally contends that Marx's aforementioned concern with explaining the historically indisputable divergence between Asia's economic stagnation and Western Europe's rapid economic growth at the time of the Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries renders him guilty of Orientalism, and, therefore, Eurocentrism. Yet, Marx does not attribute either industrial capital's consolidation in Western Europe or its failure to do so in Asia in his time to inherent cultural features, but to historical factors.³³ Indeed, the actual context of Marx's statement is the stagnation of the village communities in Java, many of which, as Marx points out elsewhere in *Capital*, were subjected to the brutalities of the Dutch colonial slave trade.³⁴

Based on this erroneous interpretation, Saito claims that Marx's ecosocialism leading to the theory of metabolic rift in the first volume of *Capital* still "uncritically projects the trajectory of European history onto the rest of the world."³⁵ This was only rectified when the "last Marx" of 1868 to 1883 experienced a "coupure épistémologique [epistemological break] in an Althusserian sense" and "went beyond ecosocialism" to embrace "degrowth communism."³⁶ The epistemological break leading to degrowth communism, Saito asserts, is reflected in "Marx's call for a 'return' to non-capitalist society," which indicates his "abandonment of his earlier historical materialism" and recognition 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."³⁷

In *Slow Down*, Saito organises these three stages of Marx's thought into a table, which is reproduced here in Chart 1. The case that Saito offers for Marx's epistemological break in the 1870s depends heavily on rather circuitous readings of a letter that Marx wrote to Engels on March 25, 1868, and the drafts of Marx's March 8, 1881, letter to Vera Zasulich regarding the fate of the Russian communes.³⁸ In Marx's letter to Engels, Saito contends that Marx identified in Georg Ludwig von Maurer and Karl Nikolaus Fraas "the same 'socialist tendency,'" by which Marx meant an objective tendency toward socialism evident in historical developments. On this tenuous ground, Saito concludes that in 1868, Marx had reversed his earlier Prometheanism and recognised that "pre-capitalist communes" manifested the "interconnectedness of sustainability and social equality" (as if such a connection was not evident throughout Marx's thought) which is why, we are told: "Marx started to simultaneously study pre-capitalist societies and natural sciences after 1868."³⁹ According to Saito, Marx tied the two principles of sustainability and social equality to a steady-state economy after he read Henry Lewis Morgan's *Ancient Society*, in which he encountered Caesar's description of Teutonic communes as lacking zeal for agriculture while opposed to private property, such that this sort of agrarian commune "basically repeated the same

³³ ↪ John Bellamy Foster, "Marxian Ecology, East and West," — Jus Semper, March, 2024.

³⁴ ↪ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 916.

³⁵ ↪ Saito, Marx in the Anthropocene, 184–85.

³⁶ ↪ Saito, Marx in the Anthropocene, 6.

³⁷ ↪ Saito, Marx in the Anthropocene, 208.

³⁸ ↪ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 24 (Chadwell Heath: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 346–70; Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 42, 557–59.

³⁹ ↪ Saito, Marx in the Anthropocene, 203. Saito seems to adopt an extreme stagist approach that conflates pre-capitalist European societies with all non-capitalist societies around the world.

Chart 1: From Saito's *Slow Down* Depicting the Evolution of Marx's Political Goals

Years	Marx's Political Goals	Growth	Sustainability
1840s-1850s	Productivism <i>Communist Manifesto</i> ; "British Rule in India"	Yes	No
1860s	Ecosocialism <i>Capital</i> , Volume One	Yes	Yes
1870s-1880s	Degrowth Communism <i>Critique of the Gotha Programme</i> ; "Letter to Vera Zasulich"	No	Yes

Source: Figure 8 in Kohei Saito, *Slow Down* (London: Astra Publishing House, 2024), 121.

cycle of production every year. That is, the Mark's long-lasting traditional mode of production realised a stationary and circular economy without economic growth, which Marx once dismissed as the regressive steadiness of primitive societies without history."⁴⁰ Morgan, however, was not, as Saito contends here, Marx's first exposure to Caesar's description of the German Mark association for the administration of lands held collectively, as Marx had already translated the source, Tacitus's *Germania*, into German by 1837, when he was nineteen years old.⁴¹ Moreover, in Marx's time references to societies "without history" were literal references to societies without written history, a point often emphasised at the time.

In his thorough account of Marx's analysis of communal reproduction in the *Grundrisse*, Mészáros confirms the fundamental link drawn there between substantive equality and sustainability, negating Saito's contention that Marx only made this connection after 1868.⁴² On top of this, Saito's claim that Marx linked these two principles together and to the steady-state economy in his reference to "the same socialist tendency" with respect to Maurer and Fraas is not substantiated by the actual text of Marx's letter to Engels. Rather, in this letter Marx noted that Maurer's findings on ancient egalitarianism corresponded to an objective "socialist tendency" that scholars like Maurer were unaware of affirming. With respect to Fraas, who came up separately in the same letter, Marx noted that "once again an unconscious socialist tendency"—one that Fraas himself did not even conceive of—becomes evident in observing the consequences of agriculture proceeding without conscious and rational control.⁴³ The only sense in which Marx posits a common connection between these two scholars is in that they were both unaware of the underlying objective socialist tendency. Nothing in this letter or elsewhere suggests that the slow development of productive forces in ancient societies recommended itself to Marx as a guiding principle.

⁴⁰ ↪ Saito, Marx in the Anthropocene, 207.

⁴¹ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 1, 17.

⁴² ↪ István Mészáros, *Beyond Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000); Mészáros, *The Challenge and Burden of Historical Time*.

⁴³ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 42, 557, 559.

One of the points that Saito claims as evidence of Marx's Eurocentrism is his antagonism toward Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, together with the "mocking" tone he adopted in *Capital* toward revolutionary populist-socialist Alexander Herzen, along with German reactionary August Franz Ludwig Maria, Baron von Haxthausen-Abbenburg. Haxthausen was a member of the Prussian Privy Council, who in 1847–52 wrote a study of Russian agrarian relations with the financial support of the tsar. Marx's criticisms of Bakunin, which are well-known, were far removed from the question of the Russian commune and can hardly be described as Eurocentric. Likewise, Marx's charges directed at Herzen and Haxthausen in the first edition of *Capital* (removed in the second edition), quoted by Saito, had nothing to do with the Russian agrarian commune. Instead, they were directed at issues of racism and repression. Herzen had pan-Slavic sympathies and Baron Haxthausen was pro-serfdom.⁴⁴ Saito claims that the mere fact Marx criticised Herzen and Haxthausen at all, since both had written on the Russian *mir*, demonstrates his dismissiveness toward the Russian commune. Thus Marx, he writes, "did not recognise the revolutionary potentiality of Russian communes at all," with the proof of this being that at the very time he was criticising Herzen and Haxthausen (on entirely different issues) "agrarian communes called 'mir' or obshchina still existed in Russia." The implication here is that if Marx had taken the Russian agrarian commune seriously at this point, he would not have voiced objections to Herzen's pan-Slavism, as well as the far more reactionary views of Haxthausen—an aristocrat who donned armour to have his portrait painted.⁴⁵

A similar manoeuvre can be seen on Saito's part in his endorsement of Anderson's work demonstrating the development of Marx's thought away from its early ethnocentrism. Here he characterises Anderson's analysis as inadequate because it only deals with "one aspect of Marx's historical materialism, that is 'Eurocentrism,' neglecting the other, that is 'productivism.'" ⁴⁶ The drafts of Marx's letter to Zasulich in 1881, Saito contends, indicate a radical reversal on both points. As evidence of the reversal of Marx's Eurocentrism, Saito contends that these drafts indicate that Marx only now "explicitly acknowledged the power of Russian rural communes to make their own history by leaping to socialism based on existing communal property without going through the destructive process of capitalist modernisation."

Saito claims that there is evidence of Marx's reversal on his alleged Prometheanism in his repeated references to replacing "capitalist property with a higher form of the archaic type of property, i.e. communist property," which is based on a quotation that Marx draws from Morgan's comments regarding the movement of society towards "a revival, in a higher form, of the liberty, equality and fraternity of the ancient gentes."⁴⁷ However, such references to socialism as realising higher forms of precapitalist or noncapitalist communal forms of property permeate Marx's writings throughout his life. Although the draft letters to Zasulich refer to the replacement of capitalist property with communist property as a higher form of the archaic type of property, Saito contends that "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."⁴⁸ To bolster this claim, Saito points to well-known excerpts in Marx's *Ethnological Notebooks* of Morgan's discussion of "communism in living"—which Saito characterises as having "repeated the same cycle of production every year"—that include comments by Marx noting the similarities to

⁴⁴ ↩ Hal Draper, *The Marx-Engels Glossary* (New York: Schocken Books,

⁴⁵ ↩ Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, 186.

⁴⁶ ↩ Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, 199.

⁴⁷ ↩ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 24, 362; Lewis Henry Morgan, *Ancient Society or Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery through Barbarism to Civilization* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985), 562.

⁴⁸ ↩ Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, 208.

the Russian communes.⁴⁹ Marx's comments, however, suggest nothing more than a recognition of common aspects in the structures of traditional, non-commodity, communal production that recurs throughout his work.⁵⁰

Saito nuances his argument on the Russian mir as a model of degrowth communism by suggesting that “Marx did not demand the preservation of the rural commune as it was but rather advocated for the development of the communes ‘on their present foundations’ by actively absorbing the positive outcomes of Western capitalism.”⁵¹ However, what Marx actually said in his third draft of the letter to Zasulich was quite different from what Saito conveys. In Marx's own words:

*Communal landownership offers it [the Russian commune] the natural basis for collective appropriation, and its historical context—the contemporaneity of capitalist production—provides it with the ready-made material conditions for large-scale co-operative labor organised on a large scale. It may therefore incorporate the positive achievements of the capitalist system without having to pass under its harsh tribute. It may gradually replace small-plot agriculture with a combined, machine-assisted agriculture.*⁵²

Marx's statement here hardly indicated that he saw in the Russian communes “the new principle of a steady-state economy.”⁵³ Rather, he suggested that communal control over advances to the productive forces achieved in Western Europe under capital could more effectively facilitate the development of Russian agriculture without capital extracting its “harsh tribute.” The claim that this in any way reflects a profound epistemological break leading to degrowth communism relies solely on fantastical extrapolations from Marx's extracts from other thinkers, where his own ideas were not developed.

Believing he has nonetheless conclusively established Marx's epistemological break—though his evidence of a fundamental discontinuity is so slim, tendentious, and in many cases inconsistent with what Marx wrote as to be virtually nonexistent—Saito finally parts company with Cohen to offer a very different interpretation of the “last Marx.” An important passage in this respect is the famous excerpt from the Critique of the Gotha Programme, in which Marx contended that:

In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour, and thereby also the antithesis between mental and physical labour, has vanished; after labour has become not only a means of life but life's prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of common wealth flow more abundantly—only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!

Saito contends that the apparent continuity between this statement, written in Marx's supposed degrowth communist phase, is actually marked by a “clean break” from what he derides as “Marx's naïve endorsement of infinite wealth thanks to the development of productive forces and the continuation of the absolute domination over nature in the

⁴⁹ ↪ Saito, Marx in the Anthropocene, 207.

⁵⁰ ↪ See, for example, Marx, Capital, vol. 1, 98.

⁵¹ ↪ Saito, Marx in the Anthropocene, 195.

⁵² ↪ Marx, “Third Draft of the Letter to Vera Zasulich” in Teodor Shanin, *Late Marx and the Russian Road* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 121.

⁵³ ↪ Saito, Marx in the Anthropocene, 208.

Grundrisse”—which, as Foster has repeatedly demonstrated, is a gross misinterpretation.⁵⁴ In contrast to the Prometheanism that Saito claims to have demonstrated in the Grundrisse (by severing one or two phrases from their critical-dialectical context), Marx’s concrete reference to the development of the productive forces in the Critique of the Gotha Programme, Saito avers, is no longer “equivalent to the ‘mere’ increase of productivity because productive forces are both quantitative and qualitative” (as, of course, is productivity).⁵⁵ Claiming that Marx has stood himself on his head, Saito maintains that increases of the productive forces in Marx’s analysis now referred to “development” of these forces in the sense of ensuring “the free and autonomous activity of individual workers,” which could actually contribute to sustainability and the steady-state economy to the degree that “this reorganisation of the labour process may decrease productivity,” as though reducing labor productivity—rather than promoting human needs over capital accumulation, was the object of communism.⁵⁶

The reference to the springs of common wealth flowing more abundantly also takes on new meaning for Saito here. On this point, Saito elaborates on Marx’s reference in the last edition of volume one of Capital to the establishment of “individual property on the basis of the achievements of the capitalist era: namely co-operation and the possession in common of the land and the means of production produced by labour itself,” through the development of capitalist monopolies. This, for Marx, then set the stage for the “negation of the negation,” the expropriation of the expropriators.⁵⁷ Contending that “the richness of social and natural wealth was originally abundant in the sense that they did not possess value and were accessible to members of the community,” Saito charges capital with producing an artificial scarcity that is “created by thoroughly destroying the commons.”⁵⁸ Rather than technological advances, Saito suggests that Marx at that point viewed restoration, or what Saito also calls “private citizen-isation—that is, the citizen management or municipalisation” of the commons as the primary source of abundant wealth.⁵⁹ (Citizenship has always been a slogan of the right, since, by definition, it excludes those who are non-citizens.)

Nevertheless, however much the idea of a restored commons providing abundant social wealth is consistent with the thrust of Marx’s argument, it should be pointed out that this has little to do with the context of Marx’s actual comment on the negation of the negation in the passage cited. Saito nonetheless applies a similar interpretation to Marx’s statement in the third volume of Capital regarding the expansion of the realm of freedom, contending that “the expansion of the ‘realm of freedom’ need not solely depend on ever-increasing productive forces. Rather, once the artificial scarcity of capitalism is overcome, people, now free from the constant pressure to earn money thanks to the expanding common wealth, would have an attractive choice to work less without worrying about the degradation of their quality of life.”⁶⁰ In this case, Marx did indeed maintain that “shortening of the working-day” is the basic prerequisite to expanding the realm of freedom, but in the context of insisting that the productivity of labor is a more important determinant than the length of the working day in “the actual wealth of society”—that is, increased productivity, when turned to the satisfaction of social needs rather than to capital accumulation, could allow social needs to be satisfied with less labor for all, rather than fed back into expanding production. Just as Marx did not suggest that mere increases in productivity would bring

⁵⁴ ↪ Saito, Marx in the Anthropocene, 231; John Bellamy Foster, “Marx’s Grundrisse and the Ecological Contradictions of Capitalism” in Karl Marx’s Grundrisse, ed. Marcello Musto (London: Routledge, 2008), 100–2.

⁵⁵ ↪ Saito, Marx in the Anthropocene, 233.

⁵⁶ ↪ Saito, Marx in the Anthropocene, 233.

⁵⁷ ↪ Marx, Capital, vol. 1, 929.

⁵⁸ ↪ Saito, Marx in the Anthropocene, 226.

⁵⁹ ↪ Saito, Slow Down, 162.

⁶⁰ ↪ Saito, Marx in the Anthropocene, 234.

about the end of capital prior to 1868, he likewise did not reject the importance of productivity in reducing the burden of necessary labor after 1868.⁶¹

Methodological Dualism against the Dialectics of Nature

Setting aside the absence of evidence for it, this notion of a radical break and wholesale reversal in Marx's thought so profound that it led him to reject his own historical materialism and advocate a steady-state economy one hundred years before Herman Daly does not so much answer the question of "Why have Marxists prior to Saito overlooked degrowth communism?" as it transmutes it into "Why have Marxists prior to Saito failed to detect the incredible epistemological break leading to degrowth communism in Marx's thought?" Saito seeks to answer this question by placing the blame on the shoulders of Marx's longtime friend and intellectual and political partner, Engels. Although somewhat critical of Western Marxism's handling of Marx and Engels, Saito does not object to Western Marxists expelling "Engels and his mechanistic dialectic of nature from their analysis." Instead, he views this as "inevitable for Western Marxists in order to prevent Marx's social theory from descending into the crude materialism of Soviet Marxism." Saito's own emphasis, however, is elsewhere, in rejecting the idea of a division of labor in which Marx focused primarily on society while Engels focused primarily on nature/natural science. This is because, Saito claims, it denies Marx's interest in the natural sciences.⁶²

Despite stating that his intention is not to "scapegoat" Engels, Saito asserts that Engels misdirected the Marxist project in two respects. First, Saito alleges that Engels "hid" Marx's own interest in the natural sciences in his preface to the second edition of *Anti-Dühring*, while substituting his dialectics of nature for Marx's more nuanced combination of ontological monism and "methodological dualism."⁶³ The upshot of this, in Saito's view, is that Engels was unable to transcend a mechanistic notion of the "revenge of nature" that could only be prevented by asserting increasing human control over nature. As a result, Engels allegedly restricted the "realm of freedom" to labor's increased mastery of nature through science and technology, and simultaneously encouraged a mechanistic understanding of society. Marx, in contrast, is described as more modestly eschewing "the project of materialist dialectics that Engels was pursuing." Instead, Marx chose to confine himself to the dual relationship between the social and the natural metabolism in conformity with his alleged methodological dualism.

Saito describes what he calls Marx's "dualistic method" as one of "separating and unifying the purely social [or formal, Form] and the material [or Stoff] in order to analyse how metabolism between humans and nature is transformed and reorganised under capitalistically constituted social relations." This supposedly allowed Marx ultimately to posit a larger realm of freedom that included aesthetic and ludic aspects as well as science and technology, and, by extension, shorter working hours, whereas Engels in his dialectics of nature (and society) is strangely said to lack such insight.⁶⁴ In the face of Engels's statement that he had read drafts of *Anti-Dühring* to Marx, suggesting that Marx was in accord with his dialectical-naturalist project and its presentation, Saito adamantly rejects this as "not necessarily credible because this 'proof' was provided only after Marx's death"—which is to say, Engels lied.⁶⁵

⁶¹ ↪ Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, trans. David Fernbach (New York: Penguin, 1981), 571.

⁶² ↪ Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, 48.

⁶³ ↪ Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, 49, 124, 192.

⁶⁴ ↪ Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, 55–67, 150, 156.

⁶⁵ ↪ Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, 51.

For Saito, Engels not only failed to comprehend the full dimensions of Marx's theory of metabolism, but deliberately downplayed it, feeding into what Saito portrays as Engels's second distortion, associated with his editing and publication of the unfinished second two volumes of *Capital*. Saito contends that Engels himself was unable to grasp "the concept of metabolic rift in *Capital* but rather maintained the earlier scheme of the 'antagonism of town and country' already put forward in *The German Ideology*."⁶⁶ This, coupled with the supposed distortions incurred by Engels's dialectics of nature, caused him allegedly to modify Marx's manuscripts in ways that obscured the theories of metabolism and metabolic rift, contributing to their neglect prior to the twenty-first century. Saito also laments that Engels's cleaning up of Marx's manuscripts created the illusion that "the three volumes of *Capital* are more or less complete in their current form."⁶⁷ This, he contends, helped discourage Marxists from taking greater interest in Marx's investigations after 1868, which he views as an ongoing problem, with scholars outside Germany and Japan supposedly remaining largely ignorant of the importance of the Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe (MEGA) and the evidence of the epistemological break with historical materialism that Saito claims lies therein. Certainly, Saito has not done much to substantiate the existence of such evidence, as his argument on Marx's supposed degrowth communism relies scarcely at all on Marx's extract notebooks, apart from *The Ethnological Notebooks* that have long been available.

Foster has already thoroughly rebutted Saito's allegations against Engels, and the recapitulation here is intended to elaborate a few related points rather than cover the whole of Foster's critique.⁶⁸ Here, Foster does not bother responding to Saito's claim that Engels's editing of *Capital* made it appear too finished, as this is readily falsified by simply reading volumes two and three. Rather, the three substantive charges that Saito levels are (1) that Engels lied regarding Marx's agreement with Anti-Dühring; (2) that Engels suppressed Marx's theory of metabolism and metabolic rift in his editing of volume three of *Capital*; and (3) that Engels criticised Liebig's notion of metabolism. These are undergirded by an attempt to reinforce Western Marxism's rejection of Engels's dialectics of nature.

The first charge is, quite simply, unfounded, based on nothing more than the unsubstantiated claim that Engels most likely lied about his relationship with his lifelong friend, and is entirely inconsistent with what we know of Engels's character. It says more about the lengths to which Saito is willing to go to fit the evidence to his interpretation than it does about Engels himself.

Indeed, Engels is not the only one whom Saito accuses of deception when his interpretation runs contrary to an explicit statement by the figure in question. In an attempt to rescue Georg Lukács's criticism of Engels's dialectics of nature and its implications from Lukács's own self-critical reflections in the 1967 preface to *History and Class Consciousness*, Saito asserts that Lukács "distorted the history of his personal intellectual development." Thus, in going so far as to chastise himself for his failure to address the concept of metabolism in his classic 1923 work, Lukács, Saito contends, neglected to point out in his 1967 preface that he had "already" demonstrated his awareness of the metabolism concept in an unpublished work (the now famous *Tailism* manuscript) written in 1925–26. This is then taken as annulling Lukács's self-criticism for failing to incorporate the metabolism concept in *History and Class Consciousness* two years prior to this in 1923. But, since the *Tailism* manuscript was written years after *History and Class Consciousness*, the inclusion of the metabolism concept there neither invalidates Lukács's criticism of his classic work, nor justifies Saito's charge that he somehow distorted his own "personal intellectual development."⁶⁹

⁶⁶ ↪ Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, 57.

⁶⁷ ↪ Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, 176.

⁶⁸ ↪ John Bellamy Foster, "[Engels and the Second Foundation of Marxism](#)," — *Jus Semper*, October 2023.

⁶⁹ ↪ Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, 82; Georg Lukács, *A Defense of History and Class Consciousness: Tailism and the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2000).

In defending his charge of Eurocentrism in *Capital*, Saito—as mentioned—accuses Marx of being less than honest in his strong objection to Nikolay Mikhailovsky’s attempt to turn the brief statement on the evolution of capital in Western Europe in the preface to the first volume of *Capital* into a “supra-historical” theory applying to every nation around the globe.⁷⁰ According to Saito, it was Marx, not Mikhailovsky, who was wrong here: “Mikhailovsky did not misunderstand *Capital*. On the contrary, it was Marx who changed his view after 1868,” providing in his reply to Mikhailovsky a deliberately distorted view of his own work.⁷¹ The fact that Saito finds it necessary to accuse three different writers as significant to the history of Marxism as Marx, Engels, and Lukács of misrepresenting themselves regarding the manner in which they intended their texts to be interpreted, since their statements contradict Saito’s own interpretation, strongly suggests that it is his own interpretation that requires critical re-evaluation.

Saito’s second charge directed at Engels, as Foster has pointed out, is more indicative of the philosophical assumptions with which Saito operates than of an actual misrepresentation of Marx’s thought by Engels. A key issue here is the manner in which Saito attempts to fit the categories of natural metabolism and social metabolism into his methodological dualism, with natural metabolism representing the first-order mediation, or material side of the binary, and social metabolism representing the second-order mediation, or formal side. This is a mistaken understanding of Mészáros’s explanation of first- and second-order mediations. In Mészáros’s account, first-order mediation refers to the necessary aspects of the mediation of the social metabolism with the universal metabolism of nature common to all societies. In contrast, the category of second-order mediation refers to the specific alienated form this takes in different modes of social-metabolic reproduction. Under capital, alienated second-order mediations are portrayed by the apologists of the system as though they were first-order mediations themselves.⁷² Moreover, to characterise dialectics, and materialist dialectics in particular, as dualistic at the methodological level suggests a problematic dualism of ontology and epistemology, and is inaccurate inasmuch as the point of the dialectical process is to overcome dualism without lapsing into crude monism, or “the night in which, as the saying goes, all cows are black.”⁷³

Saito nonetheless insists that, as opposed to Engels, “Marx clearly distinguished and contrasted two kinds of metabolisms—one social and the other natural—warning against the formation of rupture in their perpetual interaction under capitalism.” Yet, in making this distinction, Saito fails to follow Marx’s own lead in treating the social metabolism as an emergent process within the universal metabolism of nature (thereby providing the basis for the social metabolism to trigger rifts within the universal metabolism of nature).⁷⁴ Marx’s alleged methodological dualism between the separate entities of the natural and social metabolisms, in Saito’s account, then resulted in the “later Marx”—in contradistinction both to the earlier Marx and to Engels—becoming increasingly “aware of the likelihood that the annihilation of the productive forces of capital will result in the decrease of social productivity for the sake of more autonomous and sustainable production in democratic socialism.”⁷⁵

The third charge is a red herring. Contrary to Saito’s contention that Engels “did not cherish Liebig’s theory of metabolism,” there is not a single sentence in which Engels criticised Liebig on this issue. What Engels did criticise is Liebig’s vitalism, and his “hypothesis of ‘eternal life,’” in the sense that life had no origin but has always existed together

⁷⁰ ↪ Karl Marx, “A Letter to the Editorial Board of *Otechestvennye Zapiski*” in Shanin, *Late Marx and the Russian Road*, 136.

⁷¹ ↪ Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, 189.

⁷² ↪ Mészáros, *Beyond Capital*; István Mészáros, *Marx’s Theory of Alienation* (London: Merlin Press, 2005); Mészáros, *The Challenge and Burden of Historical Time*; István Mészáros, *The Necessity of Social Control* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2014).

⁷³ ↪ W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 9.

⁷⁴ ↪ Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, 119.

⁷⁵ ↪ Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, 249.

with its chemical constituents. The fact that Engels mentioned the “metabolic interchange with the natural environment” in a discussion of proteins and the basis of life shortly after criticising Liebig’s vitalistic views on the eternal character of life, has nothing whatsoever to do with whether Engels was capable of grasping the significance of the concept of metabolism (which was not Liebig’s own, but was part of the scientific discussion generally), which Engels in fact explored in great depth.⁷⁶

Whither—or Wither—the Productive Forces?

The idea of the annihilation of the productive forces of capital raises the issue of Saito’s understanding of the metabolic rift and its relation to the fate of humanity’s productive forces in his vision of degrowth communism. His appeal to such annihilation and his contention that this would reduce social productivity seems to envision degrowth communism as a wholesale rejection of all development of humanity’s productive forces under capital, with restoration of the commons the only guarantee against this degenerating into a situation in which “privation, want is merely made general, and with want the struggle for necessities would begin again, and all the old filthy business would necessarily be restored.”⁷⁷

Saito, moreover, seeks to expand Harry Braverman’s critique of the split between conception and execution (a characteristic of scientific management under monopoly capital) into a condemnation of the technical division of labor in industry more generally, prompting him to complain, contrary to Braverman himself, that “modern workers are unable to create a complete product alone in the manner of the artisans who came before them.”⁷⁸ Contending that the resultant impotence has infiltrated all aspects of everyday life, Saito further extends this condemnation to industry and urban life more broadly:

*Most of us lack the ability to raise animals or catch fish for ourselves and prepare them properly for consumption. In the past, not only could people do these things, they could even make the tools necessary to do it themselves. Compared to them, we have been swallowed up by capitalism completely, lacking the power to support ourselves as living beings. We cannot survive without commodities; we have lost the know-how necessary to live in concert with nature. All we know how to do anymore is live our urban lifestyles supported by the exploitation of the periphery.*⁷⁹

What precisely Saito intends to express by this is, however, extremely opaque, as he also includes a number of qualifiers that render the prospects for further development of the productive forces under socialism unclear. He explicitly repudiates any idea that, in the criticism quoted immediately above, he is “denying the productive force and technological advancements fostered by capitalism and expecting everyone to go back to nature to live primitive, rustic lives,” and his advocacy of municipalism would certainly be inconsistent with a wholesale condemnation of the urban.⁸⁰ Regarding science, Saito concedes that labor under any mode of production requires “the rational regulation of natural law.”⁸¹ Regarding technology, he similarly concedes that particularly harmful or onerous types of labor “need to be reduced with the aid of new technologies,” in addition to being distributed equitably.⁸² More generally, Saito posits a

⁷⁶ ↪ Marx and Engels, Collected Works, vol. 25, 576–78.

⁷⁷ ↪ Marx and Engels, Collected Works, vol. 5, 49. As this comment in The German Ideology was written by Engels and the “productivist” Marx, Saito presumably would simply reject the entire argument regarding the development of the productive forces as a material precondition to communism as Promethean and Eurocentric.

⁷⁸ ↪ Saito, Slow Down, 138.

⁷⁹ ↪ Saito, Slow Down, 137.

⁸⁰ ↪ Saito, Slow Down, 140.

⁸¹ ↪ Saito, Marx in the Anthropocene, 236.

⁸² ↪ Saito, Marx in the Anthropocene, 240.

rule based on a distinction he credits to one of André Gorz's last works between "open" and "locking" technologies. Finally, Saito also qualifies his argument by acknowledging that "it is true that in some sectors production must improve (not grow) because some essential sectors are currently underdeveloped in capitalism." However, he restricts these sectors to education, care work, art, sports, and public transportation, all of which he contends are immune to "unlimited growth, and in this sense they are already realising a stationary economy today."⁸³

As the English title of his bestseller *Slow Down* implies, the idea that a transition to socialism entails a significant slowing down of production seems to be the central, if ambiguous, feature of Saito's degrowth communism. Importantly, this insistence on slowing down serves two functions for Saito. In addition to justifying the "degrowth" aspect of his vision of communism, slowing down production also serves to dissociate his Marxism from that of the Soviet Union. Saito expresses this intent in the preface to the English edition of *Slow Down*, contending that, "instead of the undemocratic state socialism controlled by the state bureaucrats, a more democratic, egalitarian, and sustainable vision of a new steady-state economy proves compatible with Marx's vision of the future society." Saito claims that his age is an advantage in this undertaking, arguing that, having been born in 1987, he "never got to experience so-called actually existing socialism" (by which he apparently means the Soviet Union, rather than China, North Korea, Cuba, or Venezuela) and therefore did not try to "reflexively impose Soviet history onto Marx's thought."⁸⁴

Ironically, many of the positions that Saito attributes to the first Marx, as distinct from the last Marx, such as a dogmatic, linear stagism in which each country must proceed through capitalism to reach socialism, and an obsession "with the wish to control (physical) nature and the external world, completely oblivious to the authentic Marxist vision of appropriation"—as Lefebvre expressed it—appear more in line with Joseph Stalin's and Western Cold War versions of Marxism than with Marx's thought itself.⁸⁵ As already mentioned, Saito's claim that Marx initially disregarded "biophysical limits" and suggested that production could be infinitely expanded to satisfy unlimited "social demands" is not only unsubstantiated, but controverted by a more careful reading of the texts on which Saito bases his claims (the very part of the *Grundrisse* that Saito focuses on is also where Marx developed his dialectic of barriers and boundaries).⁸⁶ In an assessment of the conceptions of wealth in both G. W. F. Hegel and Marx, Peter G. Stillman maintains that Hegel's emphasis on spiritual needs and Marx's emphasis on human development indicate that neither of them were advocating unbridled consumption, and that they both believed that "the single-minded pursuit of abundance is also misguided because of its likely effect on nature." Both, therefore, would have regarded as "ludicrous the common proclamations that economic productivity, consumption, or GNP [Gross National Product] properly measures the quality of a country's way of life."⁸⁷

Saito's claims that the first Promethean Marx was an advocate of unlimited growth, and that the second transitional Marx was an ecosocialist, are as anachronistic as his claim that the third and last degrowth Marx ultimately "came to admit that the principles of a steady-state economy need to be rehabilitated in Western society"—at a time when high-speed transport meant either a buggy driven by a particularly fast team of horses or (over long distances) a steam-powered

⁸³ ↪ Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, 237–38. Saito's suggestion that universities belong to a sector immune to efforts to increase productivity is somewhat difficult to reconcile with the way in which academic performance in many universities is increasingly evaluated on the basis of the numbers of indexed articles, courses, and students produced.

⁸⁴ ↪ Saito, *Slow Down*, e11.9.

⁸⁵ ↪ Henri Lefebvre, *Introduction to Modernity* (London: Verso, 1995), 192.

⁸⁶ ↪ Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, 237; Foster, "Marx's *Grundrisse* and the Ecological Contradictions of Capitalism," 100–2.

⁸⁷ ↪ Peter G. Stillman, "Scarcity, Sufficiency, and Abundance: Hegel and Marx on Material Needs and Satisfactions," *International Political Science Review/Revue Internationale de Science Politique* 4, no. 3 (1983): 307.

locomotive.⁸⁸ In all three cases, Saito is characterising Marx's thought in terms of historical categories and concepts that did not exist in his time, when industrial capital was still confined to a small corner of the globe. Rather than simply relating to Marx himself, the sequence of the productivist Marx followed by the ecosocialist Marx and then the degrowth-communist Marx appears to reflect more accurately the general stages through which Saito envisions the development of Marxist thought altogether.

As Kent Klitgaard has pointed out, the ideology of growth did not emerge until the mid-twentieth century, when "concern with economic growth became a theoretical focus," leading to the still-predominant yet never realised belief that "economic growth and technological change will save us from misery and provide an improved quality of life."⁸⁹ Writing shortly after the first scientific challenge to growth, in the form of the Club of Rome's Limits to Growth report, Lefebvre related the issue of growth to a key historical shift in the productive forces between Marx's time and the late twentieth century. Advocacy of either infinite or zero growth, Lefebvre maintained, together formed obverse ideologies of growth, reflecting the manner in which growth and development split apart and became contradictory with the advance of monopoly capital, with growth now threatening further development. To escape this ideological impasse, he suggested that growth needed to be anchored back to development in order to interrupt the former's "exponential curve" and restore growth as "a strategy rather than an economic necessity."⁹⁰

Degrowth Communism versus Ecosocialist Degrowth

Saito, however, bypasses these historical changes to trace the necessity of slowing down or degrowth to Marx himself a hundred years before the publication of *The Limits to Growth*, divorcing him from all historical context. Here Saito's account of Marx's degrowth communism is fundamental to what he calls the "bold renewal of Marx's post-capitalism after the collapse of the USSR [that] is indispensable in order to enrich dialogues with non-Marxian environmentalism and to envision the possibility of human survival in the Anthropocene."⁹¹ Saito summarises his positive vision of a bold renewal of Marx's postcapitalism in five fundamental principles, each of which he argues will slow down production:

- (1) Transition to an economy based on use-value;
- (2) Shortening of work hours;
- (3) Abolition of the uniform division of labor;
- (4) Democratisation of the production process;
- (5) Prioritization of essential work.

By his own admission, "these demands might at first blush resemble those of traditional Marxists," but Saito maintains that the "ultimate goal," that is, "deceleration," is very different.⁹² Inasmuch as Saito seems to view degrowth as a principle rather than a strategy, he is likely correct on this difference in goals.

In a more systematic account that draws on the open totality of Marx's corpus, Burkett previously identified the very same principles Saito expounds as important tenets of what Burkett more accurately characterised as Marx's vision of sustainable human development, which creates the necessary conditions for degrowth where needed without dictating it

⁸⁸ ↪ Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, 237.

⁸⁹ ↪ Kent A. Klitgaard, "[Planning Degrowth: The Necessity, History, and Challenges](#)," *Monthly Review* 75, no. 3 (2023): 86.

⁹⁰ ↪ Lefebvre, *Toward an Architecture of Enjoyment*, 133.

⁹¹ ↪ Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, 250.

⁹² ↪ Saito, *Slow Down*, e331.1.

everywhere.⁹³ Burkett, together with Foster, offered a far more careful account of Marx's assessment of the development of the productive forces under capital that more closely follows Marx's dialectical approach to the issue, tracing both the progressive and the destructive sides as interdependent moments.⁹⁴ As Burkett maintained, Marx critically acknowledged that capitalism's development of the productive forces contributes to humanity's "historical potential" by negating "the scarcity rationale for class inequalities" and creating new openings in the realm of human possibility. The result is a conception of "production [as] an increasingly broad social process" and "the possibility of less restricted relations between humanity and nature." In short, capital has created the basis for conditions in which, Lefebvre suggests, humanity's "relationship with nature would turn out to be not instrumental but one of co-substantiality and co-belonging." In this respect, Marx was consistently concerned with sustainable human development, even prior to the 1870s.⁹⁵

The technical or horizontal division of labor that, to Saito, renders humans weak and impotent, to Burkett (and Marx) is another way in which "capitalism is historically progressive insofar as it develops and socialises production to the point at which further advances in production as a system of human-need satisfaction depend primarily on the universal development of people as natural and social beings. But it is precisely the latter task for which capitalist relations are singularly ill-fitted."⁹⁶ The historical legitimacy of the wage-labor relation rests on the direct correlation between individual labor and social wealth, which capital undermines by rendering labor increasingly social, thereby placing itself in the position of immanent contradiction as it creates the conditions in which "the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all." Meanwhile, capital's perpetuation of class domination and the individual appropriation of social wealth systematically prevents such "free development of each."⁹⁷ Saito, in contrast, appears to be advocating the restoration of individual autonomy and self-sufficiency against social labor. This raises important questions regarding the feasibility of the necessary global planning in Saito's vision.

As Saito himself concedes, "social planning is indispensable to banning excessive and dirty production and to staying within planetary boundaries while satisfying basic social needs."⁹⁸ Whereas the recent convergence between ecosocialism and degrowth has largely been on the issue of planning and its global implementation, Saito never explains how he proposes to reconcile the need for planning at every level from the communal to the global with his municipalist vision.⁹⁹ Given the way in which production is currently distributed across world-spanning commodity chains, attempting to scale down and localise production without attempts at comprehensive global planning informed by directly democratic decision-making at every level would not merely slow down production; it would bring it to a screeching, catastrophic halt. Indeed, Martin Hart-Landsberg has pointed out that amid the numerous lacunae and uncertainties surrounding the issue of planning, "one certain insight is that, because of the complex nature of economic processes, a transformative change in one area cannot be achieved in isolation."¹⁰⁰ This implies that collective autonomy and self-determination in the production process need to be complemented by global cooperation and coordination. Ecosocialist degrowth has begun to draw important lessons and tools from the Soviet experience and China, but it is

⁹³ ↪ Paul Burkett, "[Marx's Vision of Sustainable Human Development](#)," *Monthly Review* 57, no. 5 (2005): 34–62.

⁹⁴ ↪ Burkett, *Marx and Nature*; Foster, *Marx's Ecology*.

⁹⁵ ↪ Burkett, "Marx's Vision of Sustainable Human Development," 56; Henri Lefebvre, *Metaphilosophy* (London: Verso, 2016), e568.4.

⁹⁶ ↪ Burkett, *Marx and Nature*, 189.

⁹⁷ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 6, 506.

⁹⁸ ↪ Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, 242.

⁹⁹ ↪ Foster, "Planned Degrowth."

¹⁰⁰ ↪ Martin Hart-Landsberg, "[Planning an Ecologically Sustainable and Democratic Economy](#)," *Monthly Review* 75, no. 3 (2023): 114.

uncertain whether Saito would be willing to incorporate them into his degrowth-communist vision in light of his complete antipathy to the Soviet Union and what he refers to negatively as “climate Maoism.”¹⁰¹

Although subtle, the differences between Burkett and Foster’s interpretations and Saito’s are important, as the former carefully avoid the anachronism of trying to fit Marx’s thought into historical categories that do not apply to it. As Foster makes clear in discussing Marx’s ecology, he is not maintaining that Marx was an ecologist in the narrow technical sense in which that word is currently employed, while nonetheless emphasising his “conclusion that Marx’s world-view was deeply, and indeed systematically, ecological (in all positive senses in which that term is used today), and that this ecological perspective derived from his materialism.”¹⁰² In more recent work, Foster has demonstrated that this materialism, rooted in Epicurus and evident even in the young Marx’s doctoral dissertation, not only prefigured ecology, but actively contributed to its development through its influence on the natural sciences.¹⁰³

Saito, in contrast, maintains that Marx himself was first a Eurocentric Promethean, then an ecosocialist (in which his Eurocentrism cum Prometheanism had not been fully transcended), and, finally, a degrowth communist. More subtly, but also more importantly, this points to an important methodological difference between the approach to Marx’s thought and its contemporary meaning adopted by ecological Marxists such as Burkett and Foster as distinguished from that of Saito. The former proceed very much along the lines of the two conditions that Lefebvre maintained define the defensibility of restoring Marx’s thought, “taking the totality of his work in its movement, instead of excluding this or that a priori,” and “reconnecting this thought to the ‘vécu’, the lived experience of our own age, with its multiple problems that remain in shadow.”¹⁰⁴ On this basis, Foster and Burkett have inspired countless other scholars and activists to take up Marx’s theory of metabolic rift and go beyond it, using the concept to pursue new insights and ideas so as to go beyond “finding fault,” instead striving for humanity’s “opening, the way of escape” from the capitalist system.¹⁰⁵

Saito, in contrast, bypasses the mediations of historical time and attempts to extract from “the last Marx” a timeless principle of degrowth equally applicable to his own time and to the present. Despite Saito’s contention that “degrowth is incompatible with capitalism, and it is essentially an anti-capitalist project,” the prospects of his static rendition of Marx’s vision of degrowth communism inspiring the sort of mass movement needed to bring about the urgent transformation demanded by the Anthropocene crisis seems doubtful—notwithstanding his attempt to claim Fearless Cities, Buen Vivir, La Vía Campesina, and other movements as degrowth mobilisations *avant la lettre*.¹⁰⁶ The problem here is not that degrowth is “politically unattractive and ineffective”; it is that degrowth, like growth, cannot legitimately be elevated from the level of a strategic objective to that of an operational principle.

In the attempt to repudiate his first, productivist Marx, Saito moreover resurrects several arguments that have been used to discredit Marxism in toto. It is by way of contrast with this resurrected Promethean Marx, which in his earlier work he had ironically sought to bury, that he now attempts to redeem an ideologically purified final degrowth-communist Marx. In this rendition, the transitional, ecosocialist Marx almost seems to be advocating ecological modernisation, and has become an enemy of sorts. Not only is Marx torn from his own historical context here, but the evidence advanced in

¹⁰¹ ↪ Saito, *Slow Down*, e133.8; Foster, “Planned Degrowth.”

¹⁰² ↪ Foster, *Marx’s Ecology*, viii.

¹⁰³ ↪ John Bellamy Foster, *The Return of Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020).

¹⁰⁴ ↪ Henri Lefebvre, *Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche* (London: Verso, 2020), e265.9.

¹⁰⁵ ↪ Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, 150.

¹⁰⁶ ↪ Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, 245.

favor of his redemption is so scanty that skepticism regarding this conversion would be partially justified—save that the evidence sustaining the accusations of Prometheanism and Eurocentrism from which Marx allegedly converted is even less valid, if more politically useful to Marxism’s opponents.

His attempts to split Marx in this way create important problems regarding the totality of his critique of capital and capitalist society, overshadowing Saito’s contention that “Marx is clearly one of the few theorists to have developed a systematic critique of the capitalist system.” Therefore, allegations of Prometheanism and Eurocentrism in Marx eclipse Saito’s contention that “by negating [Marx’s] intellectual legacy too hastily, it becomes increasingly hard to criticise capitalism.” Building a mass socialist movement to overturn capital and imperialism already faces the difficult challenge of countering prevalent anticommunist rhetoric and propaganda. Legitimizing discredited accusations against Marx’s thought, and of Marxist traditions that have built on it, threatens to undermine the dialectic of materialist theory and praxis altogether. To counter growth-oriented capitalism with degrowth-oriented communism falls into the trap of crude, undialectical inversions in which history is characterised by “clean breaks.” A more complex dialectical ecology is offered by the notion of sustainable human development, which does not rely dualistically and at the level of principle on growth versus degrowth but is directed at human-historical development, rooted in the struggle for substantive equality and ecological sustainability.

It is not clear that Saito views a mass movement for socialism as really necessary, in light of his explanation in a recent interview that “What I’m calling for is not a revolution like the Russian Revolution. I don’t think we can break this system by taking power.... But changing our consciousness and behaviour in daily life creates more room for demanding more radical changes. That way, I think we will make a gradual transition to a degrowth society.”¹⁰⁷ Under this lens, the inverted order of terms between Saito’s “degrowth communism” and the recent convergence around “ecosocialist degrowth” may be indicative of more fundamental inversions alluded to between means and ends. In the context of socialist degrowth, Jason Hickel declares that “degrowth—the framework that has cracked open the imagination of scientists and activists over the past decade—is best understood as an element within a broader struggle for ecosocialism and anti-imperialism.”¹⁰⁸ Saito’s degrowth communism, in contrast, at best views ecosocialism as a stepping stone on the path to degrowth. Thus, the ecological revolution that ecosocialism entails—a social rift in response to the metabolic rift—is apparently a misguided deviation, with degrowth as the true stake of struggle. While the experiences of socialist experiments to date aptly demonstrate that the difficult task of building socialism certainly does not stop with a political revolution, the ongoing experience of an increasingly brutal and potentially fatal capitalist system strongly suggests that building socialism, communism, or any degrowth variant thereof still requires a social revolution, and that these experiments should not be quickly discarded as mere historical errors. Indeed, given the lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic and the rapidly escalating severity of the social-ecological crises of the Anthropocene, any human future at this point would seem to pivot on a radical and revolutionary transformation as part of a longer process of transition towards a society organised around fundamentally reconstituted principles of sustainable human development.

¹⁰⁷ ↪ Kohei Saito, “[Kohei Saito: ‘Degrowth Needs to Learn from Communism,’](#)” Green European Journal (blog), October 5, 2023.

¹⁰⁸ ↪ Jason Hickel, “[The Double Objective of Democratic Ecosocialism,](#)” — Jus Semper, February 2024.

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❖ **About this paper:** This paper was originally published in English by Monthly Review in June 2024.

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