

Marx and Prometheanism

The Editors of Monthly Review

The term Promethean, referring in this context to extreme productivism, first entered into the ecological debate as a censure aimed almost entirely at Karl Marx. It was adopted as a form of condemnation by first-stage ecosocialists in the 1980s and '90s, who sought to graft standard liberal Green theory onto Marxism, while jettisoning what were then widely presumed to be Marx's anti-ecological views. However, the Promethean myth with respect to Marx was to be subjected to a sustained attack, commencing twenty-five years ago, in the work of second-stage ecosocialists, represented by Paul Burkett's *Marx and Nature* (Haymarket, 1999) and John Bellamy Foster's "Marx's Theory of Metabolic Rift" (*American Journal of Sociology* 105, no. 2 [September 1999])—followed soon after by Foster's [Marx's Ecology](#) (Monthly Review Press, 2000). Here it was understood that the outlook of classical historical materialism was not that of the promotion of production for its own sake—much less accumulation for its own sake—but rather the creation of a society of sustainable human development controlled by the associated producers. The key analytical basis of this recovery of the classical historical-materialist ecological critique was Marx's theory of metabolic rift.

On the basis of the recovery of Marx's deep-seated ecological critique, ecosocialism has made major advances over the last quarter-century. One notable work, in this respect, was Kohei Saito's [Karl Marx's Ecosocialism](#) (Monthly Review Press, 2017), which brought additional evidence to bear on the critique of the Promethean myth and on the development of Marx's theory of metabolic rift. The result was the emergence of powerful ecological Marxist assessments of the contemporary planetary crisis provided by a host of thinkers, including such notable figures as Ian Angus, Jacopo Nicola Bergamo, Mauricio Betancourt, Brett Clark, Rebecca Clausen, Sean Creaven, Peter Dickens, Martin Empson, Michael Friedman, Nicolas Graham, Hannah Holleman, Michael A. Lebowitz, Stefano Longo, Fred Magdoff, Andreas Malm, Brian M. Napoletano, Ariel Salleh, Eamonn Slater, Carles Soriano, Pedro Urquijo, Rob Wallace, Del Weston, Victor Wallis, Richard York, and many others too numerous to name.

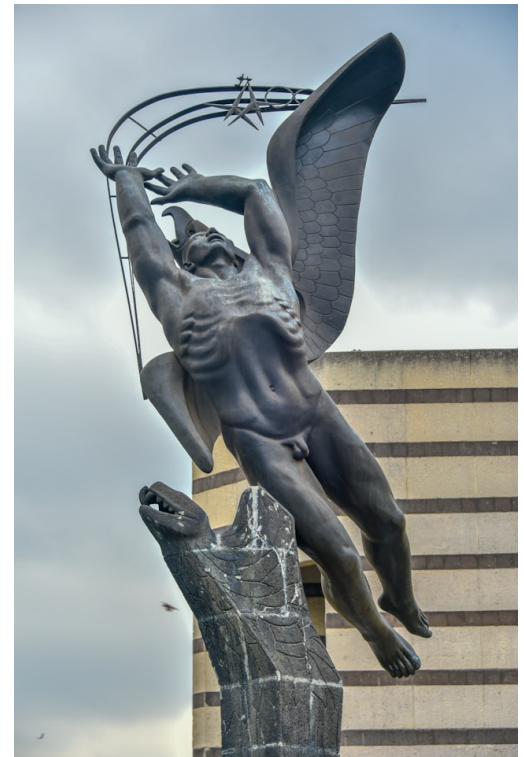


Photo by [David Nieto](#) on [Unsplash](#). *Prometheus, Prometheus and Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico*

However, in the last couple of years, the myth of Prometheanism in Marx's thought has been reintroduced in ghostly fashion by thinkers such as Saito, in his latest works, and by Jacobin authors Matt Huber and Leigh Phillips, representing two opposite extremes on the issue of the role of productive forces/technology. The result has been to erect a "Tower of Babel" that threatens to extinguish much that has been achieved by Marxian ecology.

In his two most recent studies, *Marx in the Anthropocene* (Cambridge University Press, 2023) and *Slow Down* (Astra Publishing House, 2024, originally titled *Capital in the Anthropocene*), Saito has gone back on his earlier contention in Karl Marx's *Ecosocialism* that Marx was not a Promethean thinker, and now insists, drawing on the largely discredited work of the "analytical Marxist" G. A. Cohen, that Marx was a technological determinist for most of his life. The about-face by Saito on Marx and Prometheanism is clearly designed to accentuate what Saito now calls Marx's "epistemological break," beginning in 1868. From that point on, Marx is supposed to have entirely abandoned his previous historical materialism, rejecting all notions of the expansion of productive forces in favor of a steady-state economy, or degrowth. However, since there is not even the slightest textual evidence anywhere to be found in support of Saito's claim on Marx and degrowth (beyond what has long been argued, that Marx was a theorist of sustainable human development), Saito is forced to read between the lines, imagining as he goes along. The thrust of his new thesis is that the "last Marx" concluded that the productive forces inherited from capitalism formed a trap, causing him to reject growth of productive forces altogether in favor of a no-growth path to communism. Such a view, however, is clearly anachronistic. Naturally, the fact that [planned degrowth](#) is a real issue today does not mean that the problem would have presented itself in that way to Marx in 1868, in horse and buggy days, when industrial production was still confined to only a small corner of the world. (On Saito's analysis, see Brian Napoletano, "Was Marx a Degrowth Communist?" [in this issue](#).)

Ironically, Saito's thesis that Marx was a Promethean up to and including the publication of *Capital* (viewed by Saito as a transitional work in this respect) receives strong backing from Huber and Phillips in their article "Kohei Saito's 'Start from Scratch' Degrowth Communism" (Jacobin, March 9, 2024). Proudly holding up a "Promethean Marxism" banner, Huber and Phillips present themselves as belonging to a long tradition of well-known Prometheans, including not only Marx and Frederick Engels, but also V. I. Lenin, Leon Trotsky, and Joseph Stalin. For the Jacobin authors, for whom Marxism = Prometheanism, Saito is thus to be faulted not for suggesting that Marx was Promethean up until the writing of *Capital*, but rather for his claim that Marx jettisoned his Prometheanism in his white-beard years, failing to carry it all the way to his grave.

Although they adopt a Marxist cover, the views of Huber and Phillips on technology and the environment are virtually identical to those of Julian Simon, author of *The Ultimate Resource* (Princeton University Press, 1981) and the leading anti-environmentalist critic of the ecological limits to growth within the neoclassical-economic orthodoxy in the 1970s and '80s (see Foster's "[Ecosocialism and Degrowth](#)" in this issue). The Jacobin authors thus adopt a view that is not so much ecomodernist in orientation as a form of total human exemptionalism from ecological determinants, in which humanity is presumed to be able to transcend by technological means all Earth System limits—including those of life itself.

The Jacobin authors thus adopt a view that is not so much ecomodernist in orientation as a form of total human exemptionalism from ecological determinants, in which humanity is presumed to be able to transcend by technological means all Earth System limits—including those of life itself.

The metabolic rift, we are told, does not exist since it is dependent on a rift in a nonexistent "balance of nature." Here they ignore the fact that the notion of anthropogenic rifts in the biogeophysical cycles of life on the planet, raising the issue of mass extinction,

extending even to human life itself, is central to modern Earth System science. It is not a question of a “balance of nature” as such, but rather one of preserving the earth as a safe home for humanity and innumerable other species.

Going against the current world scientific consensus, Huber and Phillips explicitly deny the reality of the nine planetary boundaries (climate change, biological integrity, biogeochemical cycles, ocean acidification, land system change, freshwater use, stratospheric ozone depletion, atmospheric aerosol loading, and novel entities). Rather, they insist in their total exemptionalism that there are no biospheric limits to economic growth. Hence, “there is no need,” they tell us, “to move to a steady-state economy...to return to more ‘appropriate’ technologies, to abandon ‘megaprojects,’ or to critique...a ‘metabolic rift’ with the rest of nature which,” they say, “[does] not exist.” Words like “commons” and “mutual aid” are classified as mere “buzzwords.” All arguments for “limits to growth” are by definition forms of “Malthusianism.” Nuclear power is to be promoted as a key solution to climate change and pollution generally. To cap it off, they contend, in social Darwinist terms, that capitalism itself is somehow integral to natural selection: “So as far as the rest of nature is concerned, whatever we humans do, via the capitalist mode of production or otherwise, from combustion of fossil fuels to the invention of plastics, is just the latest set of novel evolutionary selection pressures.”

Phillips has gone even further elsewhere: “The Socialist,” he declares, “must defend economic growth, productivism, Prometheanism.... Energy is freedom. Growth is freedom.” The ultimate goal is “more stuff.” What is required is “a high energy planet, not modesty, humility, and simple living.” With a brazen display of irrationalism, Phillips bluntly asserts: “you can have infinite growth on a finite planet.” The earth, we are duly informed, can support “282 billion people”—or even more. Marxists who have questioned the nature of contemporary technology, such as Herbert Marcuse, are summarily dismissed as proponents of “neo-luddite positions.” Phillips openly celebrates Simon’s reactionary work, *The Ultimate Resource*, the bible of anti-ecological total exemptionalism (Leigh Phillips, *Austerity Ecology and the Collapse-Porn Addicts: A Defence of Growth, Progress, Industry and Stuff* [Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2015], 59, 63, 89, 250, 259).

Huber and Phillips’s bold advocacy of a “Promethean Marxism” in their Jacobin article was delivered with a panache that must have left the capitalist Breakthrough Institute green with envy. It has already led to a strong backlash in left-liberal environmental circles against the inanities of so-called “orthodox Marxism.” This can be seen in an article by Thomas Smith titled [“Technology, Ecology and the Commons—Huber and Phillips’ Barren Marxism”](#) (Resilience, March 21, 2024, resilience.org). Here we are told, in a further retreat from reason, that Huber and Phillips, in their total contempt for ecology, are simply “toeing the Marxist line,” promoting the “promethean Marxist dogma”—as if their views could be seen as representative of “orthodox Marxism” (which, as Georg Lukács famously said, is related entirely to method), or as if their outlook were one with that of Marxism in the world today. Neither is the case. In twenty-first-century conditions, socialism is ecology and ecology is socialism. Perhaps the most important aspect of Saito’s own analysis, despite all of the contradictions in his most recent work, is that it recognises that a deep ecological view was present classically within the work of Marx (and, we would add, Engels), and that this constitutes a theoretical foundation on which all those committed to the philosophy of praxis today can draw in their struggles to create an economically egalitarian and ecologically sustainable world.

Related links:

- The Jus Semper Global Alliance
- Monthly Review
- John Bellamy Foster: [The Long Ecological Revolution](#)
- John Bellamy Foster and Roberto Andrés: [Ten Questions About Marx—More Than Twenty Years After Marx’s Ecology](#)
- John Bellamy Foster and Alejandro Pedregal: [The Return of Nature and Marx’s Ecology](#)
- John Bellamy Foster and Haris Golemis: [The Planetary Rift](#)
- John Bellamy Foster and Mahesh Maskey: [Marxian Ecology and Sustainable Human Development](#)
- Álvaro J. de Regil: [The Unbearable Unawareness of our Ecological Existential Crisis](#)
- Sam Popowich: [The Spectre of ‘Knowledge as Commons’](#)
- William Sacher: [The "Metabolic Rift" of John Bellamy Foster: What contributions for an ecomarxist theory?](#)



- ❖ **About Jus Semper:** The Jus Semper Global Alliance aims to contribute to achieving a sustainable ethos of social justice in the world, where all communities live in truly democratic environments that provide full enjoyment of human rights and sustainable living standards in accordance with human dignity. To accomplish this, it contributes to the liberalisation of the democratic institutions of society that have been captured by the owners of the market. With that purpose, it is devoted to research and analysis to provoke the awareness and critical thinking to generate ideas for a transformative vision to materialise the truly democratic and sustainable paradigm of People and Planet and NOT of the market.
- ❖ **About the authors: Editors of Monthly Review Magazine:** John Bellamy Foster is the editor of MR and a professor of sociology at the University of Oregon. He has written extensively on political economy, ecology, and Marxism. Brett Clark is the associate editor of MR and a professor of sociology at the University of Utah.
- ❖ **About this paper:** This paper was originally published in English by Monthly Review in June 2024. This paper has been published under Creative Commons, CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0. You are welcome to reproduce the material for non-commercial use, crediting the author and providing a link to the original publisher.
- ❖ **Quote this paper as:** The Editors of Monthly Review: Marx and Prometheanism – The Jus Semper Global Alliance, November 2024.
- ❖ **Tags:** Capitalism, Democracy, Ecology, Economic Theory, Marxist Ecology, Political Economy, Places: Global
- ❖ The responsibility for opinions expressed in this work rests only with the author(s), and its publication does not necessarily constitute an endorsement by The Jus Semper Global Alliance.



Under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

© 2024. The Jus Semper Global Alliance
Portal on the net: <https://www.jussemper.org/>
e-mail: informa@jussemper.org