

**ARETE**



Politik Felsefe Dergisi  
Journal of Political Philosophy

Arete Politik Felsefe Dergisi | Cilt: 4, Sayı: 2, 2024  
Arete Journal of Political Philosophy | Vol: 4, Issue: 2, 2024

Başvuru Tarihi | Received: 06.05.2024  
Kabul Tarihi | Accepted: 25.11.2024  
Yayın Tarihi | Published: 30.11.2024  
Kitap İncelemesi | Book Review

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## *Marx in the Anthropocene*

**Kohei Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2022. ISBN 978-1-108-84415-4. 276 pages.**

**Kutlu TUNCEL\***

### **Abstract**

Saito's *Marx in the Anthropocene* presents interesting arguments and views that propose to unite Marxism and degrowth. The importance of the book comes from the fact that it intends to respond to the ecological crisis and the Anthropocene. To this end, Saito utilizes Meszaros's interpretation of Marx according to which Marx bases his critique of political economy on the theory of metabolism. What follows from this is nature has absolute limits and capitalism produces the ecological crisis in which the metabolism between humans and nature degrades. Saito scrutinizes this crisis through three rifts: the material disruption of cyclical processes in natural metabolism, the spatial rift, and the temporal rift. Moreover, Saito maintains that the theory of metabolism is compatible with Marx's materialism, in that Marx is neither a flat ontological monist nor a Cartesian dualist but a methodological dualist. I find this line of thinking, however, as doubtful.

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Atf | Citation: Tuncel, R. (2024). Kitap İncelemesi. *Marx in the anthropocene. Arete Politik Felsefe Dergisi*, 4(2). 100-108. Doi: 10.29228/aretjournal.77456

Lastly, Saito claims that although Marx was before the 1870s Promethean, Europocentric, and productionist he underwent a radical breakthrough and became a degrowth communist. However, Saito's claims are hardly convincing.

**Keywords:** Anthropocene, Degrowth, Marx, Metabolism, Saito.

## Özet

Saito'nun *Antroposen'de Marx*'ı, Marksizm ile küçülmeyi birleştirmeyi öneren ilginç argümanlar ve görüşler sunuyor. Kitabın önemi, ekolojik krize ve Antroposen'e yanıt vermeyi amaçlamasından kaynaklanıyor. Bu amaçla Saito, Meszaros'un Marx yorumunu kullanıyor; buna göre Marx ekonomi politik eleştirisini metabolizma teorisine dayandırıyor. Buradan çıkan sonuç, doğanın mutlak sınırlara sahip olduğu ve kapitalizmin, insanlarla doğa arasındaki metabolizmanın bozulduğu bir ekolojik krize yol açtığıdır. Saito bu krizi üç yarıkla inceliyor: doğal metabolizmadaki döngüsel süreçlerin maddi olarak bozulması, uzaysal yarık ve zamansal yarık. Üstelik Saito, metabolizma teorisinin Marx'ın materyalizmiyle uyumlu olduğunu, zira Marx'ın düz bir ontolojik monist ya da Kartezyen bir düalist değil, metodolojik bir düalist olduğunu ileri sürer. Ancak bu düşünce tarzını şüpheli buluyorum. Son olarak Saito, Marx'ın 1870'lerden önce Promethean, Avrupa merkezci ve üretimi olmasına rağmen, daha sonra radikal bir dönüşüm gerçekleştirdiğini ve küçülme komünistine dönüştüğünü iddia ediyor. Ancak Saito'nun iddiaları pek ikna edici değil.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Antroposen, Küçülme, Marx, Metabolizma, Saito.

Kohei Saito's book, *Marx in the Anthropocene* presents an exciting and highly debatable picture of Marxism as well as a case for a fraction of eco-socialism. The book's merit must be evaluated in two terms: political and scholarly. This review intends to scrutinize the work in both aspects.

To begin with, Saito says that the Anthropocene is mostly characterized by the 'end of nature' in that the human element 'prevails' on the entire planet and the so-called pristine nature is gone. However, the current situation is dialectical: after the intervention and degradation of nature on an unprecedented scale, the consequence is not that nature is gone but rather the opposite, that is, nature is overwhelmingly there as if it reminds itself. In other words, instead of the domination and overcome of nature by humanity through modern technology and the accumulation of capital, nature again comes in the moment of 'return of the surpassed': the climate dramatically changes, the sea-level rises, the wildfires uncontrollably increase, so and so forth. (Saito, 2022, p. 3) Most of the degradation of nature is to be explained by the accumulation and irrational growth of capital. Hence our theoretical instruments by no means exclude Marxism. So, Saito's project promises to bridge two theoretical and political agendas: environmentalism and

Marxism, or to put it otherwise, the Green and the Red. In the end, Saito defends that Marx after the 1870s underwent a theoretical breakthrough and became a ‘degrowth communist.’ (Saito, 2022, p. 6)

In Chapter 1, Saito provides a background understanding the ways in which Marx comes to understand the ecologically destructive aspects of capitalism. This contradicts, according to Saito, our currently mainstream and historically dominating understanding of Marxism in which Marx characterized as a ‘Promethean,’ i.e., pro-technological, anti-ecological. (Saito, 2022, p. 13) It is said that Marx has eco-socialism that is implicit or rather surpassed by their predecessors. In order to understand Marx’s genuine insights that are in favour of eco-socialism and against the Promethean view, one needs to go to Meszaros.

The vital value of Meszaros’s theoretical contribution is to allow us to recognize and rightly emphasize Marx’s concept of metabolism which, as Saito puts it, is “the foundation of his political economy.” (Saito, 2022, p. 17) The idea of metabolism comes from that nature as substratum has certain absolute limits and not always transcendable. Since nature is *the* ineliminable element, human society in *all* historical modes of production develops a metabolic relationship with nature. It is said that humans are dependent upon nature and therefore the two factors, i.e., humans and nature, unceasingly interact with each other which constitutes the ‘primary level’ of the universal (that is, trans-historical) metabolic process. In the ‘secondary level’ humans reproduce nature designing tools and creating products that satisfy and sometimes generate their needs. In this level, nature possesses plasticity, which is to say, is reconstructed in some sense: however, that does not negate its un-transcendentable characteristic as a natural substratum in the first level. (Saito, 2022, p. 20) The idea of metabolism is in some sense certainly undeniable, in that since we must be ‘realists’ or ‘materialists’, nature is not simply an idea or product of humanity but implies certain givenness.

Meszaros’s theoretical intervention underscores that the primary contradiction of the capitalist system is in the locus of the degraded metabolism between humans and nature. Capitalism overwhelmingly demands production for the sake of profit and overproduction in some cases. Crucially, although nature has absolute limits, capital cannot recognize them and proceeds at the price of the destruction of nature. (Saito, 2022,

p. 17-18) Therefore, under capitalism, the metabolism deteriorates and some metabolic ‘rifts’ take place. The first is “the material disruption of cyclical processes in natural metabolism.” (Saito, 2022, p. 24) In this context, Marx investigates and eventually criticizes the ‘robbery’ system of agriculture, that is, the soil being irreversibly rubbed from some vital inorganic substance that requires a long time in order to replenish in the capitalistic agricultural process with the aim of short-term profit (Saito, 2022, p. 24) The second is the “spatial rift” which amounts to antagonism between town and country. (Saito, 2022, p. 26) The third is the “temporal shift” which stems from the incongruence between the temporality of capital and that of nature, in that nature obviously is slow in the formation of soil nutrients and fossil fuels, whereas capital endeavours to fasten the turnover time. (Saito, 2022, p. 27) In the end, capital responds to all the rifts but the responses are not conclusive. Rather they simply aim to postpone the occurrence of the crisis while in effect increasing the severity of the rifts.

Saito’s analysis appears to be a materialist one. However, one might want to be cautious for the desired stance is not materialism alone—in the end, one might be a mechanic materialist or brute realist, however, we do not want to be that. It seems to be that Saito’s stance is in constant danger of falling this undesired kind of materialism on the basis that he seems no intention to distance himself from Malthusianism.

To say nature is finite and of absolute limit is totally understandable from a materialist perspective. However, if one overemphasizes the finitude of nature, it is easy to fall into Malthusianism. And Saito sometimes appears to commit that mistake. At this point, I think it is necessary to disentangle the ecological critique from Malthusianism. Saito, unfortunately, avoids that duty.

In Chapter 2, Saito criticizes Engels’s ecological view in particular and philosophical stance in general, in that Engels seems to be responsible for forgetting the genuine insights of eco-socialism in Marx. However, it seems to me Saito’s treatment of Engels is a rather harsh and sometimes dull repetition of Western Marxism’s portrait of Engels. Especially, it is hard to accept Saito’s characterization of Engels who accordingly is a proto-positivist and ‘scientist.’ (Saito, 2022, p. 54) As a result, Engels on that reading appears to be a mechanical, reductionist materialist, which contradicts the contemporary findings of the Engels scholarship. (Kangal 2020) Furthermore, it seems

hardly convincing Marx does or would not agree with Engels's eco-socialism in his *Anti-Dühring*, considering that Engels in the preface says that Marx read the entire text and endorsed it. (Engels, 1987, p. XIII) There is no reason to disbelieve Engels.

In Chapter 3, Saito does some philosophical work by interpreting Lukacs's *Tailism and the Dialectic*. The overall argument of this chapter is the following. Lukacs provides a holistic understanding of capitalism; although Lukacs's position concerning nature seems like a constructivist one, in the end, it is not. The unattractiveness of constructivism comes from its connotation of idealism, in that it seems to abolish realism at once. However, although Lukacs is and cannot be a constructivist, the famous line (he writes "nature is a social category") is there and presents an interpretive problem. How should we understand the claim that nature is a social category?

The famous "social category" line is interpreted by Saito as not ontological but epistemological argument. Saito's reconstruction is the following. Not nature as in itself in the ontological sense but our "knowledge" of nature is socially constructed. By contrast, nature in the object sense is non-identical to humans. "The fact that nature is affected by the social does not mean that nature is socially constructed." (Saito, 2022, 90) However, in my opinion, the problem is that the distinction between the nature-in-the-object-sense and the nature-in-the-epistemic-sense is harsh. If all knowledge about nature is socially constructed, this means that we have no access to so-called nature-in-itself which is supposedly be non-identical and persistent substance. It is problematic to speak of something that we have no access to in principle. The issue eventually dates back to Kant's thing in itself and cannot be pursued here. Nevertheless, one thing is to be mentioned: the distinction between knowledge and the object in Saito's understanding seems to be dichotomic and resembles the dichotomy of sex-gender. In the traditional understanding, sex is understood as the so-called 'real', the ultimately mind-independent entity, uninterpreted givenness, and gender is something like a social phenomenon that occurs in our practice and is dependent on it. In short, the former seems to be in the universe of 'physics' and the latter is in the universe of 'discourse.' However, such a dichotomous understanding is dubious. After all, what is sex is always gendered, that is, always interpreted, practiced, and 'performed'. There is no two but one universe. As a result, Saito's unknowable, "thing-in-itselfish" nature that is supposed to be *not* constructed seems to be a suspicious philosophical fiction.

After discovering or rediscovering Lukacs's theory of metabolism, which is compatible with Meszaros, Saito in Chapter 3 arrives at the following conclusion. Marx is neither a flat ontological monist nor a Cartesian dualist: he is a "methodological dualist" in that he comes to acknowledge the dialectical identity and non-identity between humans and nature. The last phrase is supposed to mean that humans are nothing over and above nature and therefore are identical to nature, but nature is not human construction or fiction but something persistent, thus its persistence dates back and presumably continues after humans. (Saito, 2022, 91) Consequently, Saito's stance appears to be a relatively 'easy' one. However, it is highly tensioned, and Saito in some respects falls into a Cartesian dualism. In discussing Moore's overtly holistic and ontologically monist ecologist project, Saito writes: "If *the reality is dualist*, re-describing it in a monist manner may end up mystifying the particular arrangements and functioning of existing social forces characteristic of capitalism." (Saito, 2022, p. 123, emphasis added) Does Saito believe the reality is dualist? If so, does not he contradict his main methodological position? If not, what is the meaning of his critique of Moore?

Overall, one might say that constructivism presents a menace to a materialist project, and I think Saito in general in the debate of monism and dualism is on the right track. However, in my opinion, his argument in Chapter 3 and the elucidation of it in Chapter 4 does not work —although his basic intuition is understandable.

Chapter 5 appears to have some problems. First, the famous section known as the 'Fragment on Machines' in the *Grundrisse* appears to be unjustly interpreted. Saito equates Marx's position here with some non-Marxian and reformist theoreticians such as Jeremy Rifkin. Rifkin predicts information technology "breaks down [...] the labour theory of value." (Saito, 2022, p. 141) They bring about the "collaborative economy [and] the 'demise' of capitalism." (Saito, 2022, p. 141) This understanding is certainly naïve in the sense that it excludes power relations and idealizes the application of technological improvement. However, in the current capitalist societies, there are well-known fetters to such advancements —like copyrights and patent laws, monopolization and rentierization in information technologies. Is Marx in the *Grundrisse* to that extent naïve? I do not think so. It seems that some overtly optimistic lines in 'Fragment on Machines' should be interpreted in the following way. Marx does not believe that mechanization immediately or automatically brings a revolutionary change *in actuality*. It seems utterly implausible

that Marx overlooks social and political aspects of the phenomena of technological improvements and the problem of agency in revolutionary change. However, what Marx has in mind is presumably the *potentiality* of automation —the emancipation of burdened and boring labour.

Second, Saito in Chapter 5 attempts to reject the mechanism of productive forces-production relations. In that mechanism, Saito indicates, the productive forces are counted as independent variables and as the ‘driving force of historical progress.’ Although the mechanism and relatedly base-superstructure theory (metaphor?) possess certain problems that cannot be discussed here, I find Saito’s approach is too dismissive. To begin with, if the productive forces are understood as technology, Marx in some places endorses that technology is a socially-variable phenomenon and cannot be used to explain political economic relationships. (Marx, 1993, p. 36; pp. 409-410) Furthermore, Saito characterizes the relationship between productive forces-production relations in Marx or traditional Marxist accounts in the following way. “[T]he increase of productive forces is a necessary and *sufficient* conditions for a post-capitalist society.” (Saito, 2022, p. 154, emphasis added) Accordingly, this view very easily leads to productivism. However, I suspect that no one, if being Marxist, has ever conceived of this increase as a sufficient condition. Otherwise, Marxism becomes a fatalistic worldview and political struggle becomes meaningless: this is the very reason or the aim to be a Marxist. Therefore, Saito appears to fall into the strawman fallacy in attempting to debunk traditional Marxism. Lastly, in very easily rejecting the traditional account, Saito does not consider some attempts to bring Gramscian or neo-Gramscian elasticity or contingency instead of the brute determination model in the mechanism of productive forces-production relations and the base-superstructure theory. Rather than revising the determination model in question, Saito very decidedly throws away the determination model at all.

Finally, Saito in Chapter 6 aims to demonstrate Marx underwent a serious breakthrough in his views after 1868: before he was a Promethean and after he was a degrowth communist. This is the heart and unfortunately the least well-founded part of the book. There are some fatal problems in it. First, Saito summarizes the “stereotypical account of Marx’s theory of revolution” with a reference to “market competition” as the “overproduction crisis.” (Saito, 2022, p. 174) I suspect that no serious Marxist attempts to explain the structural crisis of capitalism by means of competition because it is obvious

that as capitalism progresses to more advanced stages competition will decrease and there will be monopolization. Furthermore, the overproduction crisis is not in terms of Marx's own perspective the most serious threat to capitalism. Rather the threat comes from the famous tendency of the rate of profit to fall which Saito never mentions. Second, Saito presents the traditional account such that it is said that accordingly the bourgeoisie domination is "illegitimate" and the proletarian revolution is "legitimate." (Saito, 2022, p. 175) Here again, I have doubts about whether the issue in terms of classical Marxism is that of moral or worse juridical legitimacy, and it is not intelligible why Saito presents as if this were so. Third, Saito approvingly refers to Popper on the historical materialism is allegedly "economic determinist." (Saito 2022, p. 177) Popper is far from being a trustworthy commentator of Marx's work. Moreover, Saito claims that this "economic determinism" contains two elements: productivism and Eurocentrism. We are expected to be convinced that Marx after 1868 disembarked two currents. However, in this context, Saito's scholarship is questionable. Some scholarly works argue that Marx since the 1840s has been eco-socialist and not productivist (Foster 2008) and the 1850s anti-colonialist (Drapeau 2017). Unfortunately, Saito does not discuss them in detail.

In conclusion, it should be said that Saito's project, albeit promises certainly interesting claims and includes partial clues to validate them, in my opinion, does not go beyond lining up controversial assertions alongside without much discussion. Nevertheless, it is beyond doubt that Saito's basic insight is correct: the planet is alarming and much of the responsibility falls on the shoulders of the capitalist modernity. Thus, I think the core lesson of the book is of decisive importance and truth. That is, if we do not develop and live in a non-capitalist modernity, it seems highly likely that we will not live much further on that planet.

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