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In Defense of the Planet

Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism, by Kohei Saito, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2023, 276 pp., £85.00 (cloth), £29.99 (paper), £23.99 (Kindle)

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Kohei Saito, a Japanese Marx researcher and editor of the historical-critical edition of Marx and Engels's complete works (*Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe* or *MEGA*), is known to Anglophone readers for his 2017 book *Karl Marx's Ecosocialism*. The present volume reads like a sequel to that work, taking the Marx-ecology connection as a point of departure and developing it further in the direction of what the author calls "degrowth communism." The book consists of three parts the last of which constitutes arguably the most innovative and ambitious section: Part I – Marx's Ecological Critique of Capitalism and Its Oblivion; Part II – A Critique of Productive Forces in the Age of Global Ecological Crisis; and Part III – Towards Degrowth Communism.

For a long time, ecological matters have been considered trivial in the Marxist theoretical tradition. Hans Magnus Enzensberger once spoke of "bad blood" between ecologists and Marxists, referring to the latter as those who resisted the temptation to trouble themselves with natural instead of social crises. Ecologists, in turn, have charged Marxists with being ideologically blind and politically insensible to alarmingly serious issues of the environment. Some ecologists have gone so far as to claim that Marx himself failed to sufficiently consider the limits that nature imposes on the development of societies. There have been various Marxist responses to this ecological charge in the earlier scholarly literature. Ellen Meiksins Wood, for instance, complained that ecological questions do not prompt class-specific revolts. Michael Löwy, by contrast, admitted that while ecology constitutes somewhat of a blind spot in the Marxist theoretical corpus, this is no excuse to remain deaf to environmental destruction, global warming and pandemics. Assuming a position close to, if not identical with, Löwy, Saito proposes that there is much to learn from Marx on ecology and that the Marxists' negligence of ecology largely stems from their ignorance of Marx's ecological scope.

Pursuing a renewed return to Marx, Saito intends to reveal the unacknowledged extent to which Marx's thinking was informed by ecological issues both before and after the publication of the first edition of *Capital*, vol. 1 (1867). Saito takes on the traditional imagery of Marx according to which he is assumed to be a "Promethean productivist," that is, a passionate proponent of the technological mastery of nature by society. This technological determinism is either celebrated for its historically progressive role (i.e.,

by G. A. Cohen and Fredric Jameson), or condemned as ignorant of environmental problems (i.e., by Axel Honneth and Nancy Fraser).

Saito acknowledges Marx's suggested productivism but relativizes it as an early intellectual stage that he left behind in his later work. What occasioned this shift was Marx's growing ecological awareness that is clearly documented in his scientific vocabulary that concerned metabolic interaction, metabolic rift and metabolic shift. The first term simply refers to human intervention in and transformation of the natural environment. In overtly exploitative dimensions, metabolic interaction takes on destructive forms, causing disruptions and rifts in the social usage of natural resources. Metabolic shift is expressive of a specifically capitalist phenomenon, namely the capacity of capital to prolong its own reproduction. Capital is capable of avoiding the consequences of its ecological destruction either by technological innovations (i.e., the solution of the problem of soil exhaustion by industrial production of ammonia) or by geographically relocating its operations in naturally more fertile territories (i.e., rising investments in natural agricultural fertilizers such as guano [seabird excrement] and their export from South America to Northern Europe in the nineteenth century). Capital displays flexibility also in temporal terms in that it exploits natural resources tendentially to the extent of their exhaustion, though the repercussions of ecological destruction are felt only in the long run. Up to the point of an absolute ecological breakdown, capital is still provided with a "time gap," a temporal and temporary opportunity to exploit nature until the very last drop (i.e., the time period between global warming as a result of carbon emissions, on the one hand, and life-threatening heat waves, floods and other natural disasters connected to global warming, on the other).

As Saito points out, the more recent metabolic accounts of capitalist accumulation in the Marxist theorizing go back to Rosa Luxemburg's theory of the reproduction of capital. Luxemburg charged Marx with giving insufficient attention to the destructive impacts of the capitalist mode of production upon non-capitalist societies in non-European peripheries. However, Saito asserts that Luxemburg occasionally neglects some passages in *Capital* on the history of slavery and ecological miseries in the Americas. In addition, she was not aware of Marx's focus in the 1870s on primal and feudal societies in non-European geographies. The textual basis for Saito's claims is Marx's recently published excerpt notebooks in MEGA on ecology, natural sciences (i.e., geology, chemistry, agricultural chemistry and scientific forestry), ethnology and history of the commons. By making massive use of these notebooks, Saito intends to cover the neglected bits of Marx's theory of capitalism and ecosocialism and to draw on the very late development in his intellectual trajectory, the stage Saito calls degrowth communism. This return to Marx's excerpts also serves the purpose of clarifying an older controversy, namely the so-called "Marx-Engels problem" as understood in the quarrel between "Western" and "Soviet" Marxisms.

The by-now classical charge, most prominently voiced by Georg Lukàcs in his 1923 book *History and Class Consciousness*, and later taken up and turned into one of the pillars of Western Marxism, suggested a philosophical divergence between Marx's and Engels's understanding of dialectics. Despite their decades-long friendship and collaboration, so the argument went, Engels, contrary to Marx, aimed to establish a rigid, dogmatic metaphysics in the name of dialectics. This attempt directly violated Marx's historically and socially specific dialectics that did not allow for transhistorical schematizations. Though

obviously no great admirer of Engels, Saito approaches the suggested divergence between Marx and Engels from an ecological rather than a philosophical perspective, and sheds light on their respective understanding of nature. Remarkably, he does so via a recourse to Lukàcs's interpretation of the metabolic exchange between nature and society. What is most noteworthy is his positive use of metabolic interaction, which according to Saito gave rise to his ontological dualism which, on the surface, contradicts Marx's monist worldview. Lukàcs famously identified natural sciences with formalism and positivism, which he strictly separated from social-scientific and philosophical thinking. Yet scientific approaches to natural phenomena are socially, politically and ideologically informed, which is why nature is categorized as a social phenomenon. Against some of Lukacs's critics, Saito argues that instead of forcibly reducing nature to society or society to nature, one needs to admit a difference in unity without collapsing their obvious disparity. The metabolic exchange between nature and society most vividly testifies to, and is ontologically established on, a dynamic symbiosis between the two. It is this methodological and ontological distinction that also constitutes the very basis of a metabolic rift. Thus a scientifically sound ecocritique cannot afford to ignore this dualism, for to deny it and argue for monism is, in Saito's view, to fall prey to the fallacies of social constructivism and subjective idealism. Saito's plea for dualism is binding for his further pursuit, as he targets monist accounts of nature and society in recent debates on the Anthropocene.

In Saito's understanding, the greatest monist shortcoming lies in its dubious technological optimism, a naïve view, one version of which could be found in early Marx's Promethean productivism. There are indeed proponents of this account in the Anthropocene debates, though Marx's *Grundrisse* rather than the *1844 Manuscripts* or *The German Ideology* figures as their source of inspiration. For instance, Aaron Bastani, in his 2019 book *Fully Automated Luxury Communism*, builds his technomorphic socialist utopia on the infamous "Fragment on Machines" in the *Grundrisse*. In that fragment Marx spoke of the ways in which technological development of productive forces signals reductions of necessary labor time which the so-called "left accelerationists" extrapolate to argue that full automation promises to emancipate humans from work and enable the rise of a post-work society. Saito's conviction is that since capital cannot survive without exploiting labor, the sole source of value, emancipation from work does not appear possible. Saito also relativizes the importance attached to the "Fragment on Machines" by asserting that Marx's growing awareness of the ecologically harmful impacts of technological mastery over nature brought him closer to a rather pessimistic viewpoint. What underlies this shift in Marx's conception was his changing view as to whether social domination of nature is a viable and realistic option at all.

Saito believes that Marx sought the way out elsewhere and came very close to embracing what Saito calls a "new Front Populaire in defense of the planet in the Anthropocene" (172). This suggestion is informed by Marx's turn to studies on ecology, the natural sciences and history of the commons after the 1867 publication of *Capital*. This was the period when one witnesses Marx abandoning his previous Promethean productivism. In 1868, for instance, he was taken by the botanist Carl Fraas's 1847 book *Climate and the World of Plants* where Fraas drew attention to the emerging dangers of excessive deforestation and its potentially long-lasting impacts on local climate by means of rising temperatures and decreasing moisture. Marx was also following the British parliamentary debates, including those on the coal question. Having read William Stanley Jevons's *The*

Coal Question in 1869, Marx was alerted by Jevons's warning that the coal reserves were expected to be exhausted in about a century. This would eventually have an impact on the search for other sources of heat and energy but also cause fluctuations in the international coal markets. An avid reader of the *Economist*, Marx also closely attended to pandemics and farm plagues in the first half of the 1860s. Animal grazing was another matter he was interested in, as he took note of soil exhaustion as a result of grazing in Ireland. These phenomena received the epithet of the metabolic rift in Marx's conception of the term. Given his ever-widening scope of interests, Marx came to the point, Saito argues, where he broke away from his historical materialism and embraced a new world-view: degrowth communism.

This switch from Marx's earlier to his new understanding of communism could be located in the ecology-commons connection, occasioned by Marx's readings of Fraas and one of Fraas's sources, Georg Ludwig von Maurer's works on the history of the Teutonic commons. Marx was drawn to their observations about the egalitarian structures underlying the communal cooperation and ecologically sustainable mode of production of the Teutonic commons and detected a latent socialist tendency in both authors. What came to be embodied in these older societies was a radical egalitarianism, somewhat a surprising finding from the dustbin of history. Saito suspects an anachronistic reconfiguration of Marx's communism, most vividly traceable to Marx's readings of Henry Morgan's *Ancient Society*. Under the influence of Morgan, he claims, Marx came to believe that a revival of such superior elements of archaic communes as social equality and ecological sustainability was viable and desirable. When reading on native American tribes, Marx himself spoke of "Communism in living" (206), drawing parallels between this form and the Russian communes. The invariable principle behind the communal mode of production or "commonism," as it were, was a repeated cycle of production, "a stationary and circular economy without economic growth" (207). This was the idea that inspired Saito's claim that the very late Marx became a "degrowth communist."

Overall, the book is useful both for beginners and advanced readers of Marx and Marxism and for anyone interested in the contemporary debates on ecology, dispossession and the future of the commons. That said, it would be an exaggeration to say that Saito's project is complete. That the notion of class struggle is entirely missing in Saito's work is more than obvious. It is also unclear if he proposes the future degrowth communism as a policy to be forcibly imposed from above by a paternalistic state or to be achieved as a result of class-based contentions from below. Similarly, Saito fails to contextualize the full history of the Teutonic commons and depicts them as micro-societies isolated from the social property relations predominantly shaped by court chambers, forest administrations, electors, local governments and feudal lords. Hopefully, further focus on the ecology-commons connection will prompt the author to turn his attention to these open questions.