

# Could a reinterpreted Marxism have solutions to our unprecedented environmental crisis?

March 31 2023, by Jeff Sparrow



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In 2021, Kohei Saito's "Capital in the Anthropocene" became a publishing sensation in Japan, eventually selling more than half a million copies.

That astonishing achievement becomes even more extraordinary when one considers that Saito, an academic at the University of Tokyo, has for



some years been rearticulating materialist philosophy based on a close reading of Karl Marx's unpublished manuscripts—not exactly the kind of enterprise that traditionally results in bestsellers.

Though "Capital in the Anthropocene" remains (somewhat oddly) untranslated, English-speaking readers can now access Saito's subsequent work, "Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism."

In his new book, Saito notes the awful ironies of the current period, in which, instead of the promised "end of history," we face the (rather different) end of human history, as the conquest of nature transforms dialectically into nature's apocalyptic return in the form of fires, floods and other disasters.

The social crises associated with the environmental emergency have not, as yet, spurred the Marxist revival one might expect from an era of political and economic tumult. Saito blames this on the longstanding association between socialism and the Promethean notion that nature can and should serve as raw materials for human ends.

Think of the Communist Manifesto and its giddy zeal for the transformative program of the bourgeoisie: "constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation ...".

The young Marx's enthusiasm for solids melting into air sounds rather different with the environment collapsing all around us.

### **MEGA**

In "Marx and the Anthropocene," Saito continues the project developed in his earlier book, "Karl Marx's Ecosocialism," in which he delved



deeply into Marx and Engels' vast corpus of unpublished work to explain their engagement with environmental issues.

At first glance, a painstaking analysis of Marx's private notes on, say, soil chemistry might seem arcane or even cultish: a doomed attempt at quote-mining to refashion a 19th century thinker according to contemporary tastes.

Yet Marx never completed the broader project of which Capital was merely one facet. The systemized "Marxism" we take for granted was a later reconstruction based on uncompleted manuscripts. The ongoing efforts of the <a href="Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe">Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe</a> (or MEGA) to compile every available text thus provides Saito with a new basis on which to analyze fundamental concepts of the late Marx.

Saito focuses, in particular, on an argument presented in Capital but, until recently, ignored by most readers. That is, Marx treats labor as a metabolic relationship between people and nature. Human beings, in any society, must reshape—through labor—the natural world if they are to survive. Yet the way they do that varies tremendously from society to society.

Prior to capitalism, labor was (as you would expect) overwhelmingly directed to the immediate satisfaction of specific needs. Even in the most oppressive ancient societies, slaves created use values. They toiled to make goods and provide services their rulers actually wanted.

Capitalism mandates something very different. In a society governed by the commodity, production takes place primarily for exchange. Today, we sell our labor power to others, who then direct us. Unlike the pharaohs of old, our bosses don't themselves want what we make or do. The capitalists who employ us seek, first and foremost, value, which can expand without any definite limit because it is quantitative rather than



qualitative.

Saito argues that commodification—of labor and everything else—fundamentally changes the human relationship with nature. When value becomes "the organizing principle of metabolism between humans and nature, it cannot fully reflect the complexity of the biophysical metabolic processes between them."

Our direct and immediate interaction with the natural world, in other words, becomes a process driven by an external, expansionary dynamic.

#### Metabolic rift

Marx describes the disruption of nature by the circuit of capital as a "metabolic rift."

For Saito, this concept entails "spatial rifts" between the cities and the country, and between developed and developing nations. It also entails "temporal rifts" between the deep time of geological processes and the ever-increasing tempo of capitalist production.

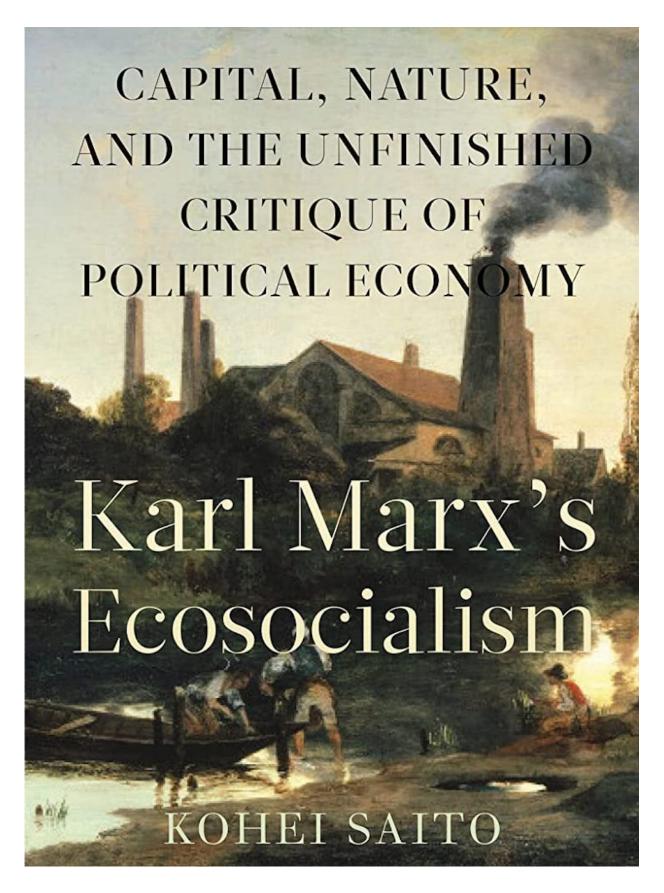
The notion of a "metabolic rift" thus makes manifest an environmental theory that is latent in Capital. Saito's extraordinary erudition teases out the implication of concepts sometimes present in Marx's work only in embryonic form.

Of course, everyone knows that corporations ravage the environment. The theory of metabolic rift explains that despoliation not as a result of the greed or ineptitude of individual entrepreneurs, but as a consequence of the commodity itself. It suggests that the fundamental interdependence between humans and nature is disturbed at the most granular level of capitalism.



The consequences cannot be overstated. Mainstream responses to climate change—the strategies advocated by most governments and by international gatherings (the Conference of the Parties, for example)—center on market mechanisms such as emissions trading schemes. Many progressives criticize such interventions as too little, too late. On Saito's reading, their critique misses the point. Carbon trading and similar schemes, such as Australia's new biodiversity market, seek the further commodification of nature. They are not merely insufficient; they are actively worsening the problem they claim to remedy.







#### **Ecosocialism**

Even more importantly, rift theory provides the basis for what Saito calls "ecosocialism."

Historically, attempts to unite proletarians with the planet have tended to rely on moral appeals to workers on behalf of the natural world. This non-materialist strategy has invariably failed.

Saito suggests a very different approach. He emphasizes that Marx sees the alienation of land and labor as different facets of the same phenomenon. The systematic ruination of nature arises from an equally thoroughgoing degradation of basic human activity. The fight to save the environment thus becomes, not an optional extra, but a cause fundamentally entwined with class struggle.

In his new book, Saito buttresses his argument by identifying various thinkers within the broader Marxist tradition who, more or less independently, grasped a similar notion of metabolism. These include Rosa Luxemburg (in her book The Accumulation of Capital), Georg Lukacs (particularly in his rediscovered 1925 manuscript A Defense of History and Class Consciousness: Tailism and the Dialectic), the Hungarian philosopher István Mészáros, and contemporary writers like John Bellamy Foster and Paul Burkett.

Saito also defends the nature-society dualism on which rift theory rests against rival Marxist approaches. He polemicizes, in particular, against Neil Smith and Jason Moore.



But by far the most important—and challenging—sections of Marx in the Anthropocene involve textual exegesis. Biographers sometimes describe Marx's final years as unproductive, marred by illness and lack of focus. Saito argues that, from the late 1860s, Marx threw himself into a renewed study of the natural sciences in order to work through the implications of labor as metabolism and, in the process, revised several key concepts.

# Forces and relations of production

Saito revisits, in particular, the traditional opposition between the forces of production—a term that includes the means of production, labor power, machinery, and much else—and the relations of production—that is, the economic ownership of those forces.

This antagonism is conventionally understood as the motor of social history. 20th century Marxists, in particular, presented the productive forces as the basis of a new society, often focusing on the technological advances facilitated by capitalism as central to the transition to socialism.

Saito claims that the later Marx saw the real (rather than formal) subsumption of labor under capital as dependent on a reorganization of workers' activities. Capital, writes Saito, "creates qualitatively new productive forces and a uniquely capitalist way of production sui generis."

According to Saito, Marx rejected the idea—associated with official Soviet "Marxism"—that socialists could simply take over the forces of production. Rather, Marx concluded that the relations of production shaped productive forces in ways that could not and should not be considered progressive.



For example, the factory system generates tremendous productivity by bringing workers together. But the "co-operation" of the assembly line relies on individual workers performing repetitive actions, with management solely responsible for decisions about what they do and how.

This kind of tailored productivity does not provide the basis for collective self-management. On the contrary, democratic and collective control of the means of production—the basis of Marxian socialism—necessitates a proletarian autonomy that is incompatible with the management techniques enforced in, say, an Amazon factory.

That means progressives should not enthuse about productivity in the manner of some so-called "ecomodernists." We can't create a "fully-automated luxury communism" simply by freeing advanced technology from the tech-bros who currently control it.

The non-alienated labor required for environmental sustainability and workers' self-management requires a qualitative break with capitalist forces of production.

#### **Degrowth communism**

On that basis, Saito challenges the linear narrative associated with mechanical Marxism, which proposes that societies must transition from feudalism to capitalism, and then from capitalism to socialism.

He focuses on Marx's famous correspondence with the Russian populist Vera Zasulich, who asked whether communes in which which peasants traditionally managed their affairs must inexorably give way to Westernstyle capitalism. In his (very brief) published response, Marx denied any inevitability about developments in Russia. In an unsent draft, however, he argued explicitly that capitalism "will end through its own



elimination, through the return of modern societies to a higher form of an "archaic" type of collective ownership and production."

Saito chases down an array of notes, jottings and other writings in which Marx muses on precisely how pre- and post-capitalist relations might intersect. He shows that Marx, by the end of his life, had broken from any notion of a new society based on the expansion of productive forces. Marx had instead come to advocate what Saito calls "degrowth communism."

It's a remarkable conclusion. Saito writes: "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. Marx's rejection of productivism is not identical with the romantic advocation of a 'return to the countryside.' In fact, he repeatedly added that the Russian communes would have to assimilate the positive fruits of capitalist development and the principle of steady-state economy in non-Western societies that would allow Western societies to leap to communism as a higher stage of the archaic communes."

Saito acknowledges that this vision is "utterly different from the productivist approach of traditional Marxism in the 20th century." And the passages he relies on are fragmentary, even cryptic—much more so than the texts from which metabolic rift theory arises.

In some ways, though, that's not really the point. The debate among Marxist scholars about the extent to which the MEGA provides textual support for such a conclusion matters much less than whether Saito's thesis holds conceptually. We might even say that Saito's insistence on grounding his book in Marx's writing obscures his own considerable status as a theoretician who is creatively extending Marxism for a new period.



## I have seen the past—and it works!

Today, a thoroughgoing pessimism pervades both mainstream and radical politics. Few people believe in their own power to shape events. Many accept misanthropic or Malthusian environmental currents that regard humanity as an innately destructive force.

Saito provides a much needed alternative—a demonstration of alternative possibilities. His project might be understood as an inversion of Lincoln Steffen's famous slogan, along the lines of "I have seen the past—and it works!"

Australians, in particular, should be aware of how pre-class societies developed ways to live more or less sustainably in their environment. As I have argued in <u>Overland</u> and <u>elsewhere</u>, the living culture of Indigenous Australia proves that human beings are not hardwired (as we are often told) to destroy the natural world.

For tens of thousands of years, Aboriginal people labored on the continent in ways that fostered, rather than diminished, the country that they tended. The introduction of capitalism to the country thus provides a remarkable illustration of the metabolic rift. In the space of a few years, agricultural capitalism wiped out landscapes created by untold generations of Indigenous people. Many settlers recorded their astonishment and dismay as the country, deprived of its traditional custodians, changed under their feet.

Saito's argument is not, of course, that the society that existed prior to 1788 should or could be revived. "The critique of productive forces of capital," he says, "is not equivalent to a rejection of all technologies." The scientific achievements of the capitalist allow, in Marx's terms, "the associated producers [to] govern the human metabolism with nature in a rational way."



Saito describes the resulting society in terms of "degrowth." In some ways, it is an infelicitous term. As a political slogan, "degrowth" invokes the much-hated austerity associated with neoliberal economics. It also sounds too much like the bourgeois environmentalism that is expressed through calls for individual sacrifice.

Even more importantly, it obscures Saito's theoretical distinction between capitalism, on one hand, and ancient societies and communism on the other. "Growth" does not provide a meaningful measure for a use-value society. Communism would, for instance, prioritize healthcare, but the success or failure of its efforts would be assessed according to patient welfare, rather than the expansion or contraction of GDP.

Elsewhere, Saito borrows from Kirstin Ross the phrase "communal luxury," a term that better captures the meaning of unalienated labor. In the early years of white conquest, Indigenous people flatly refused to work for Europeans. They considered wage labor—an activity that stripped all meaning, control and spirituality from daily life—the most profound impoverishment imaginable.

A society based on use values might harbor the resources that capitalism squanders, but that would not amount to austerity. "Abundance," says Saito, "is not a technological threshold but a social relationship."

# A radical theory for the 21st century

Saito's deep knowledge of Marx's published and unpublished writing makes for a rigorous argument, but it also presents socialism almost exclusively in terms of the development of ideas. That is misleading.

The crude productivism of so much 20th century <u>socialist</u> writing stemmed less from Engels' misreading of Marx's notes on science (a topic Saito addresses in detail) than from the Soviet Union's repurposing



of Marxism as a justification for state-directed capitalist development.

The Marx-Zasulich letters prefigured the much more concrete debate about feudalism, capitalism and socialism that ensued after 1917. In some respects, Saito's argument resonates with Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution, which provided an account of how undeveloped countries might build a workers' state by spreading the revolutionary process to the imperialist heartland.

Trotsky's argument centers on the role of the proletariat, but Saito does not really address how "degrowth communism" might come about. In that respect, the intellectual rigor of "Marx in the Anthropocene" fosters a certain weakness. Saito sounds occasionally as if he thinks a correct restatement of fundamentals will, in and of itself, repopularise Marxism. Obviously, that is not the case. We cannot rely on MEGA to make socialism great again.

"Marx in the Anthropocene" is nevertheless a tremendously important achievement: an imaginative re-purposing of radical theory for the 21st century. Too often environmental debates center only on the most immediate proposals for curtailing emissions, without addressing how we got into this mess and how we might get out. By contrast, Saito provides both a convincing account of the social forces driving climate change and a description of what an alternative might entail. His book deserves the widest possible readership. Here's hoping it sells as much as the last one.

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