

Kohei Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism* (Cambridge University Press, 2023, 276 pp.)

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Book Review

Received: 20.03.2024; Revised: 02.04.2024; Accepted: 11.04.2024

The anthropogenic destruction of nature is causing irreversible consequences worldwide. The current dominant mode of production contributes significantly to this destruction, more than ever in history. If it continues in this form, it is estimated that the catastrophic disasters the world will face are not far away. Various theoretical approaches and social movements are emerging to stop this process and repair the destruction. One of the most discussed and popular approaches today is *degrowth*. Interestingly, within degrowth approaches, relatively few perspectives align with Marxian ideology.

Marxist theory is fundamentally rooted in the concept of exploitation. However, despite the extensive exploitation of nature, the absence of a strong Marxist presence within the environmental movement demands an explanation. We can turn this question upside down and ask why environmentalist movements are not sufficiently nourished by Marxist theory. Foremost among them is the understanding of history attributed to Marx and the belief in the possibilities created by the level of development of the productive forces.

The documents uncovered or highlighted in the *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe (MEGA)* have led to significant results and discussions. Thanks to the studies within the MEGA project, various fundamental aspects of Marx's theory and previously overlooked concepts are being re-discussed. Kohei Saito fills an essential gap by rigorously reviewing Marx's views on ecology and the human-nature relationship. The study of Marx's late ethnological and ecological manuscripts has led to the ideas presented here. Some of the original ideas in "Marx in the Anthropocene" are an expanded version of the author's book, *Hithosinsei no Shihonron (Capital in the Anthropocene)*, which received extraordinary attention in Japan. The book consists of three parts and seven chapters. The first part discusses the causes and consequences of the oblivion of Marx's emphasis on ecology based on recent studies. The second part presents

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the current critique of the productive forces, and the last part presents the theory of *degrowth communism* based on the ideas of the late Marx.

According to Saito's research, Marx's ecological ideas are grounded in the concepts of metabolism and metabolic rift. The concepts of metabolism and metabolic rift are used largely in the sense used by John Bellamy Foster. Labor, the most fundamental category of Marxism, is defined in relation to the metabolism between humans and nature. Metabolic rift refers to the physical disruption of the cyclical functioning of natural metabolism under capitalist relations of production. The limitless exploitation of nature causes irreversible destruction. At the same time, the rift in question also grows spatially. Agricultural products sold and consumed in today's modern big cities do not return to their original soil. The cycle of nature is interrupted in this respect as well. The cycle of nature that reproduces and sustains itself needs a certain amount of time. Capital, on the other hand, is impatient and hasty. The rift between the time of nature and the time of capital is growing day by day. This rift itself is nothing but new opportunities for profit and accumulation of capital, even though it carries terrible disasters for the peoples of the world.

The book emphasizes the shortcomings and errors of the progressivist understanding of history attributed to Marx and the change in Marx's ideas on the progressive role of the productive forces. According to Marx's views, which he later revised, the capitalist mode of production enables the productive forces to develop to a certain extent, thanks to its dynamic structure. Thanks to the new techniques introduced, the required labor time is shortened, and the productivity of labor increases rapidly. As labor productivity increases, as a necessary consequence, the time that societies need to allocate for production is shortened, and the material basis for human freedom is provided. In other words, the level of development of the productive forces necessary for the transition to socialism develops within capitalist relations of production. Capitalist relations of production and distribution are not flexible and responsive enough to sustain the productive forces' development level. Therefore, the material basis for human freedom can only be achieved through the transition to socialism.

When considering Marx's perspective on history and the development of productive forces, it leads to the perception that the concepts of degrowth and Marxism are incompatible. This perception stems from the foundational premise of growth inherent in Marx's understanding. According to this viewpoint, the establishment of a socialist society becomes feasible only when the productive forces attain a certain level of advancement, necessitating high economic growth. This is evidenced by the belief that the socialist revolution will initially occur in the most

developed capitalist country. Therefore, for the sake of economic growth, the destruction and exploitation of nature are often ignored. Throughout his book, Saito proves that these ideas attributed to Marx do not reflect reality.

According to Saito, Marx revised his views and gave more consideration to the environmental destruction caused by capital dominance and the level of development of productive forces. From this perspective, Marx's stance does not celebrate endless production. Instead, Marx advocates for a return to the original harmony with nature, transcending the alienation from nature brought about by capitalist production relations. Marx's concept of metabolism aligns with this perspective. Moreover, Marx argues that the wealth of societies (*reichtum*) is only manifested as commodities within specific social relations. In other words, under the capitalist mode of production, producing more commodities becomes the primary measure of wealth. However, if these capitalist constraints are eliminated, a broader understanding of wealth can emerge that is not solely tied to commodity production.

The concept of *degrowth communism* emerges from the critique of capitalism, where wealth is solely measured by commodity production and human potential is limited to its profitability. However, by redefining wealth, new possibilities arise. Degrowth communism advocates for reducing production not just to create more free time but also to address environmental destruction. It challenges the notion that increasing productive forces is the only way to shorten the working day as a precondition for expanding freedom. Instead, a more egalitarian distribution of resources would also shorten the working day and increase free time.

With the concept of degrowth communism, Saito invites the reader to rethink the concepts of free time and wealth. Wealth can mean much more than the quantities calculated in gross domestic product. The idea of degrowth challenges the very essence of capitalism, as the capitalist mode of production relies on growth propaganda for legitimacy. Moreover, a significant proportion of resources today are allocated to non-productive sectors such as finance, marketing, and advertising. Restricting or eliminating activities in such non-productive areas could be an important starting point for degrowth. Under contemporary capitalism, such activities that appear to be essential for social life are in fact only essential for capital accumulation and economic growth.

Degrowth communism places an understanding of autonomous and self-limited production and consumption, contrasting sharply with the current capitalist paradigm. Capitalism is built on maximising consumption and production, which inherently requires continuous growth.

Therefore, the concept of degrowth is fundamentally incompatible with capitalism. Degrowth policies can only be implemented in a system that is not dependent on growth and can establish a human-nature relationship that minimizes the exploitation of nature. In Marx's terms, people's conscious organization of their relations with the environment makes it essential to limit their needs when necessary. Because degrowth communism considers human freedom not in maximizing consumption but in creating free time. From this point of view, degrowth communism makes it possible to increase the space for human freedom without depending on increased production. As a result, the degrowth communism approach seems to be an essential tool for developing political strategy for environmental movements.