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Reviews

Saito: the metabolic rift and de-growth communism

- Reviews section -

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Kohei Saito is an associate professor at Tokyo University and an erudite Marxist scholar. Not a candidate for a best-seller in the non-fiction book world, you might think. But you would be wrong in this case.

Saito's new book (currently in Japanese), which analyses the relationship between capitalism and the planet, has been a smash hit in Japan, with over half a million sales already. In the English version out shortly, the book is entitled, *Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism*.

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The book's message is stark and clear. Capitalism's rapacious drive for profit is destroying the planet and only "degrowth" can repair the damage by slowing down social production and sharing wealth. Humans need to find a "new way of living", and that means replacing capitalism.

Saito is deeply sceptical of some widely accepted strategies for tackling the climate emergency. "In my book, I start a sentence by describing sustainable development goals [SDGs] as the new opium of the masses," he said in reference to Marx's view of religion. "Buying eco bags and bottles without changing anything about the economic system ... SDGs mask the systemic problem and reduce everything to the responsibility of the individual, while obscuring the responsibility of corporations and politicians."

He continues: "We face a very difficult situation: the pandemic, poverty, climate change, the war in Ukraine, inflation ... it is impossible to imagine a future in which we can grow the economy and at the same time live in a sustainable manner without fundamentally changing anything about our way of life. "If economic policies have been failing for 30 years, then why don't we invent a new way of life? The desire for that is suddenly there."

Saito reckons it is necessary to end mass production and the mass consumption of wasteful goods such as fast fashion. In his earlier more academic text in English, called *Capital in the Anthropocene*, Saito also advocates decarbonisation through shorter working hours and prioritising essential "labour-intensive" work such as caregiving. In effect, Saito promotes what could be called 'de-growth Communism'.

Saito's uncompromising message has seemingly captured the imagination of Japan's youth. "Saito is telling a story that is easy to understand," says Jun Shiota, a 31-year-old researcher who bought *Capital in the Anthropocene* soon after it was published. "He doesn't say there are good and bad things about capitalism, or that it is possible to reform it ... he just says we have to get rid of the entire system."

In his academic work, Saito has followed John Bellamy Foster and Paul Burkett, in showing that it is wrong to claim, as some Greens do, that Marx and Engels ignored the impact of capitalism on the planet and the environment. In particular, Saito won the Isaac Deutscher prize in 2018 for his learned analysis of Marx's notebooks on agriculture and the exhaustion of the soil revealing Marx's deep interest in ecology.

Metabolic Rift

In this earlier work, Saito points out that his approach “is a clear continuation of the “metabolic rift” theory advocated by Foster and Burkett.” Saito argues that it is quite apparent today that mass production and consumption under capitalism has tremendous influence upon global landscape and causes ecological crises. So Marxist theory needs to respond to the situation with a clear practical demand that envisages a sustainable society beyond capitalism. Capitalism and material conditions for sustainable production are incompatible. This is the basic insight of ‘eco-socialism’. The antagonism between red and green needs to be dissolved.

In his earlier book on Marx’s notes on agriculture under capitalism, Saito reckons that Marx attempted to analyze how the logic of capital diverges from the eternal natural cycle and ultimately causes various disharmonies in the metabolic interaction between humans and nature. Marx analysed this point with reference to Justus von Liebig’s critique of modern ‘robbery’ agriculture — Raubbau — which takes as much nutrition as possible from the soil without returning any. This ‘robbery agriculture’ is driven by profit maximisation, which is simply incompatible with the material conditions of the soil for sustainable production. Thus, there emerges a grave gap between the logic of capital’s valorisation and that of nature’s metabolism, ie ‘metabolic rifts’ in human interaction with the environment.

In the key passage on the concept of the metabolic rift, Marx wrote that the capitalist mode of production “produces conditions that provoke an irreparable rift in the interdependent process between social metabolism and natural metabolism prescribed by the natural laws of the soil. The result of this is a squandering of the vitality of the soil, and trade carries this devastation far beyond the bounds of a single country (Liebig).” With an expansion of capitalist accumulation, the metabolic rift becomes a global issue. So for Saito eco-socialism argues that the ecological crisis and metabolic rift is the central contradiction of capitalism.

According to Saito, in *The German Ideology*, written in 1845, there was a turning point in Marx’s travel towards an ‘ecological dimension’ in his critique of capitalism. Saito reckons this is when he begins to use the term ‘metabolism’ and refines his understanding of the concept as the general metabolic tendency of capital. Saito argues that Marx progressively realises that capital’s continuous expansion exploits not just labour, but also nature in the search for profit, leading to the destruction of the soil, deforestation and other such forms of the degradation of natural resources. Capital wants more and more value and, in particular, surplus value. That becomes the purpose of production and the metabolic harmony that existed between humans and nature before capitalism is broken. There is now a metabolic rift caused by capitalism.

Now there is a debate about whether using the term ‘metabolic rift’ is useful because it suggests, at least to me, that at some time in the past before capitalism there was some metabolic balance or harmony between humans, on the one hand, and ‘nature’, on the other. Any emphasis on rifts or ruptures has the risk of assuming that nature is in harmony or in balance until capitalism disturbs it. But nature is never in balance, even without humans. It is always changing, evolving, with ‘punctuated equilibriums’ to use the term of Marxist paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould – such as the Cambrian explosion, with many species evolving as others go extinct. The rule of the dinosaurs and their eventual extinction had nothing to do with humans (despite what the movies may depict). And humans have never been in a position to dictate conditions on the planet or with other species without repercussions. ‘Nature’ lays down the environment for humans and humans act on nature. To quote Marx: ‘Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered and inherited from the past.’

It’s true that Marx refers to the robbing of the soil by capitalist production. In *Capital*, Volume I, Chapter 15 on machinery Marx says: “Moreover, all progress in capitalist agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the worker, but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasingly the fertility of the soil for a given time is a progress towards ruining the more long-lasting sources of that fertility. The more a country proceeds from large-scale industry as the

background of its development ... the more rapid is this process of destruction. Capitalist production, therefore, only develops the techniques and the degree of combination of the social process of production by simultaneously undermining the original sources of all wealth – the soil and the worker. "(Marx, 1995 [1887])

Saito argues that "Marx's critique of political economy, if completed, would have put a much stronger emphasis on the disturbance of the "metabolic interaction" between humanity and nature as the fundamental contradiction of capitalism." That may be Saito's view, but was it Marx's? Is the 'metabolic rift' the "fundamental contradiction of capitalism"? In my view, Saito does not offer a justification for this claim.

For Marx, capitalism was a system of "brutal exploitation" of labour power in production for profit, not one of robbery or dispossession. For Marx, agriculture under capitalism is a sector that exploits labour in the same way as industry. Marx rejected the Ricardian theory that the profitability of capital tended to fall because of diminishing returns in agriculture. Marx's law of tendency of the rate of profit to fall depended on a rising "organic" composition of capital (the word "organic" perhaps taken from Liebig, as Saito suggests), where the material value of machinery and natural materials rises in cost relative to the exploitation of labour power. But contrary to Saito's conclusion, Marx rejected Liebig's soil exhaustion theory of the limits of capitalism and rejected the implied Malthusianism that population would outrun the availability of food and the necessities for human life.

Saito's book is subtitled: 'Towards the idea of de-growth communism'. De-growth has become increasingly popular among many environmentalists and leftists. Jason Hickel, a prominent proponent of de-growth, defines it like this: 'The objective of degrowth is to scale down the material and energy throughput of the global economy, focusing on high-income nations with high levels of per-capita consumption.'

There is a big debate here – as expressed in the critique by ex-World Bank chief economist and expert on global inequality, Branco Milanovic. Milanovic argues that any proposal to redistribute income and wealth to the global South by stopping or even reducing accumulation and GDP growth in the rich countries is economically irrational and politically infeasible. De-growth proponents like Hickel says Milanovic is misrepresenting the de-growth argument because he has a 'blind faith' in economic growth. I leave the readers here to consider the arguments.

Suffice it to say now that, under capitalism, accumulation happens for accumulation's sake, to invest more and thus to make more profits without a plan and purely in the interests of private profit. When workers are in control of the surplus, will we not develop and grow the productive forces to make life better and easier for ourselves and more sustainable for the earth and its inhabitants? Wouldn't we especially expand 'green' productive forces to build say, more (and better) schools, public transportation etc.? Shouldn't socialists strive to repair the underdevelopment created by imperialism by assisting in the development of productive forces in the formerly colonised world?

"Yet for all its stinginess, capitalist production is thoroughly wasteful with human material, just as its way of distributing its products through trade, and its manner of competition, make it very wasteful of material resources, so that it loses for society what it gains for the individual capitalist." (Marx). The wasteful and environmentally unsustainable consumption patterns of the working class are not produced by 'personal' choice but are system-induced.

But the proponents of de-growth seem to argue that there are absolute 'planetary limits' and a fixed 'carrying capacity' that cannot be surpassed by humans if we want to avoid ecological collapse. Here there's no distinction between socially produced limits and natural limits. But degrading nature, exterminating species and threatening to destroy the atmosphere of the planet are the result of the contradictions to be found in the capitalist mode of production itself, not in some existential threat from outside the system. Increased rates of pollution and environmental degradation occur because capitalists pursue profits at the expense of the environment, not because of the technologies themselves. Socialists should distinguish between the instruments of production and their use

under capitalism.

In a socialist de-growth scenario, the goal would be to scale down ecologically destructive and socially less necessary production (what some might call the exchange value part of the economy), while protecting and indeed even enhancing parts of the economy that are organised around human well-being and ecological regeneration (the use value part of the economy).

Saito is right that ending the dialectical contradiction between humans and nature and bringing about some level of harmony and ecological balance would only be possible with the abolition of the capitalist mode of production. As Engels (1896) said, "To carry out this control requires something more than mere knowledge." Science is not enough. "It requires a complete revolution in our hitherto existing mode of production, and with it of our whole contemporary social order" (ibid.)

Source: [Michael Roberts blog](#)

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