



Kohei Saito says his aim in Marx in the Anthropocene is to ‘overcome the divide between Marxism and degrowth’. Photograph: Kazuhiro Igarashi

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A greener Marx? Kohei Saito on connecting communism with the climate crisis

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Author of surprise hit *Capital in the Anthropocene* has developed his arguments in a new study of Karl Marx’s ecological thinking

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A Greener Marx?

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hen academic Kohei Saito submitted his manuscript on [Karl Marx](#), the

ecological crisis and arguments for degrowth economics, he hoped it might introduce at least some people in Japan to a new perspective on the climate crisis.



The cover of Marx in the Anthropocene Photograph: Courtesy of Kohei Saito

Fast forward three years and the subsequent book, [Capital in the Anthropocene](#), has sold more than half a million copies and Saito, a thoughtful 36-year-old, is now something of a Marxist celebrity.

“It was a big surprise,” admits Saito on Zoom from his study in Tokyo, “because who cares about Marx and communism?”

Now Saito, who says he has not always been a “degrowth communist”, has written a more academic text, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, which builds on those arguments to propose degrowth communism as a “new way of living”.

At a time when degrowth economics is being hotly debated within and outside the environmental movement, Saito’s aim, he explains, is to “overcome the divide between Marxism and degrowth”, bringing together the red and the green. Many in the environmental movement argue that capitalism and its “infinite accumulation on a finite planet ... is the root cause of climate breakdown”, writes Saito. But because Marx’s writings on ecology have often been marginalised, there’s a view that his socialism is pro-technological and anti-ecological – supporting the development of technologies to lay the foundation for a post-capitalist society and ignoring nature’s limits, believing it can be dominated by humans. According to Saito, it is possible and necessary to reconstruct Marx so we can see how he analysed economic *and* ecological crisis.

A Greener Marx?

Saito first studied Marx when he was an undergrad at the University of Tokyo, trying to understand degrading working conditions among temporary workers in Japan. After the earthquake and the Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011, he realised “how capitalism is not just simply exploiting workers but also seriously degrading the environment”. Influenced by scholars who made the case for Marx as an ecological thinker – including Paul Burkett and John Bellamy Foster – Saito sharpened his analysis studying in the US and began to learn German before his next move.

It was in Berlin, where he researched his PhD-cum-[award-winning book](#), that he became involved in editing the new complete works of Marx and Friedrich Engels, [Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe](#), including some of Marx’s long-neglected notebooks. “If you look at his notebooks, one realises he studies two weird fields: one is natural science and the other one is capitalist societies.” While Marx was supposed to be finishing Volume II and III of Capital, he was “actually studying natural science, chemistry, geology”. This shift points to a vital change in Marx’s thinking, argues Saito. “With his growing interest in ecology,” Saito writes, “Marx came to see the plunder of the natural environment as a manifestation of the central contradiction of capitalism.”



Discarded secondhand clothes cover the beach in Jamestown in Accra, Ghana. Photograph: Muntaka Chasant/REX/Shutterstock

By synthesising these different approaches, Saito developed a “unique way of reading Marx”, he says, as a “degrowth ecological communist”.

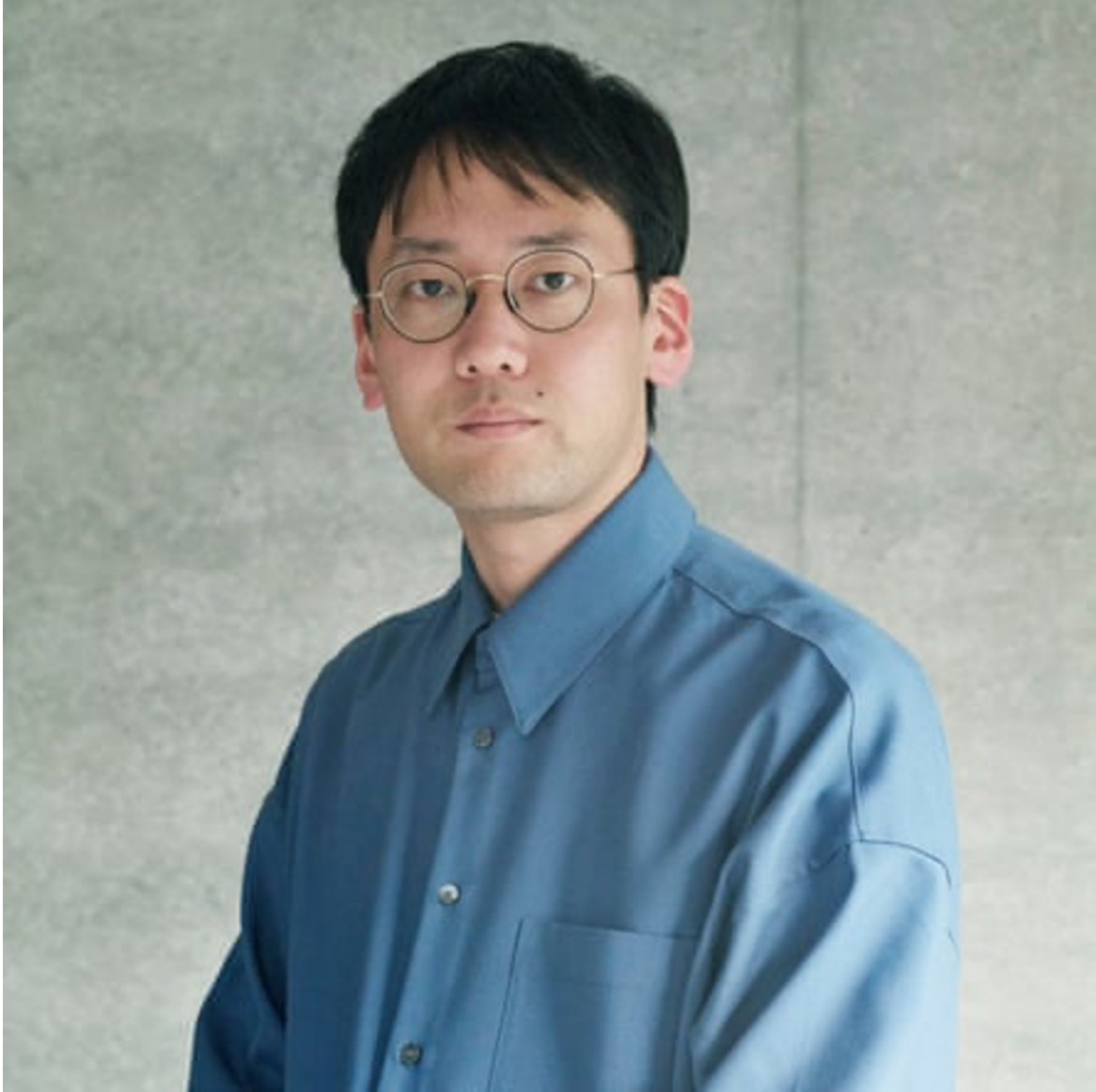
Degrowth argues that economic growth – the holy grail for governments in most countries – is simply not sustainable and that to stop climate breakdown, we need to reduce consumption.

A Greener Marx?

Saito cites [Jason Hicke's work](#) as one example. He is conscious of the critique that denying many countries in the global south the chance to "develop" in the way the north has could be destructive to people who are already very poor. Woven throughout Marx in the Anthropocene is a mindfulness of this global imbalance. "Like many degrowth people I limit the scope of the argument to the global north, developed countries like the UK, Japan and the US. I am obviously pro-growth for those poor countries in the global south." What is needed to achieve that is a new idea of "abundance" and "progress", Saito says. Everyone on the planet should have access to the basic things we need to live – electricity, water, education – but "we need to come up with a vision where mass production, mass consumption and mass waste can be avoided."

Crucial to imagining this alternative world is another strand of thinking in Marx's notebooks: his interest in pre-capitalist, non-western societies. Contra to the ethnocentrism in some of his earlier work, in the end, Marx emphasised "the importance of learning" from these parts of the world "for the western societies". Informed by this and his ecological studies, Marx's idea of communism changed significantly, and was no longer growth-driven. "The pre-capitalist society had a unique way of communal regulations of land," Saito says, "and they also imposed various rules on their production and consumption which realised a more steady-state of sustainable production."

A Greener Marx?



Kohei Saito Photograph: Courtesy of Kohei Saito

Still, you may wonder why such a deep engagement with a 19th-century thinker matters today. Saito argues that Marx's way of understanding the relationship between humans and nature – encapsulated in the theory of “metabolic rift”, a vigorously debated subject in Marxist circles – can determine how we respond to the climate and ecological crisis we now face. The basic premise of this thesis is that human/nature interaction is the “basis of living”, but capitalism organises “human interactions with their ecosystems” in such a way that it creates “a great chasm in these processes and threatens both human and nonhuman beings”, Saito says. Some criticise this concept, arguing that it divides nature and society so as to ignore how the former is completely transformed by capitalism. But Saito doesn't agree.

His use of the term [Anthropocene](#) is meant to recognise that the “entire planet is now fully transformed by our economic activities”, but he rejects that this means we do not have to distinguish between nature and society. If we understand the two as the same, Saito argues, we

A Greener Marx?

risk believing environmental problems can be overcome through more human intervention. We must be attuned to the differences to grasp what “we cannot change” – such as temperature increases due to CO₂ and the natural chain reactions that flow from that – and what we can: most urgently “the fossil fuel industry”, Saito says.

This makes him sceptical of technological utopianism. Though he had once been optimistic about the possibility of technological progress, he now sees the limitations. “By hoping there will be new technologies, we simply wait until they will be invented but the result will be they will never be and we will be all dead,” Saito says. This is not just a criticism of much-lauded technological fixes within capitalism, such as carbon capture and storage, but of the idea that we can transfer capitalist technologies to an automated communist utopia – where collectively owned robots do the vast majority of the work and there is no more resource scarcity thanks to green energy and things like [asteroid mining](#).

Saito welcomes these attempts for imagining a post-capitalist world but sees them as ultimately misguided. “This kind of abundant future appeals to the satisfaction of people’s immediate desires without challenging the current imperial mode of living in the global north,” he observes. “Such a vision accepts too uncritically existing value-standards and consumerist ideals.”



A man fishes near a steel plant in IJmuiden, in the Netherlands. Photograph: Pierre Crom/Getty Images

Capitalism doesn’t just flout natural scarcity, caring little for the planet’s limits, Saito argues – it artificially creates a social scarcity, where we are always compelled to want more: the latest phone, car or jacket. But we can reorganise our relationship with nature, Saito insists, to imagine a new kind of abundance: regulating advertising, SUV usage and constant mobile phone

A Greener Marx?

model changes while “distributing both wealth and burdens more equally and justly among members of the society”. Some sectors – those that don’t make a profit and so are underdeveloped in capitalism – would be improved, which would mean more money and resources for “education, care work, art, sports and public transportation”.

Saito maintains this is not a miserabilist alternative future. Pointing to [Kate Soper’s thinking](#), he says that the constant need to engage in competitive work and consumption is not a mark of the good life and in fact limits opportunities for fulfilling experiences outside the market. Without the need to produce for excessive, unnecessary consumption (that which is “necessary” for economic growth, not the development of the individual), jobs could be fundamentally changed. We could spend far fewer hours working, using our abilities and talents to do what we can and sharing the unpleasant and boring tasks more fairly.

Saito, though, does not see this as a romanticised “return-to the countryside”, abandoning all technologies in the process; nor is he a Soviet Marxist. Using André Gorz’s distinction between “open” and “locking technology”, he advocates for the former. While the latter is “about domination over people and nature”, where “technology is for discipline and monopoly” – he gives nuclear power plants as an example – open technologies can be run at a local level by cooperatives. Solar panels, for instance, are a more democratic way of “controlling energy and electricity”, he says. This doesn’t amount to doing away with the state entirely, but he stresses: “My vision is not Soviet-style – I am not arguing for the state ownership of everything or state-planned economy.” That would simply change too little.



An activist with a banner that says “Overconsumption = Extinction” gatecrashes a show at Paris fashion week in 2021. Photograph: Gonzalo Fuentes/Reuters

A Greener Marx?

One question, though, is how possible any of this actually is. Saito is aware of the challenges, but he points to Gen Z, Just Stop Oil, climate protests around the world, and Alberto Garzón, the Spanish minister for consumer affairs, [who recently wrote about the limits of growth](#). This is a big change compared with the past 30 years, when such movements have been marginalised. “I am hoping the 2020s and 2030s will become much more turbulent as the crisis deepens,” he says, and hopes that the amount of radical protest will grow and changes in our values will continue to accelerate.

“What I am trying to do,” Saito says at the end of our conversation, “is, inspired by these movements, offer something for them ... I tried to show why it is necessary to criticise capitalism and why socialism or communism can be a more solid foundation for their movements too.”

- [Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism](#) is published by Cambridge University Press on 28 February