

## **Kohei Saito: “Degrowth needs to learn from communism”**

**Article by Kohei Saito**

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A Marxist who turned to ecology in the wake of the Fukushima nuclear disaster, Japanese philosopher Kohei Saito has gained international attention with his work on degrowth communism. In an interview with the *Green European Journal*, Saito explains what socialism and environmentalism can learn from each other – and why economically stagnant, pandemic-stricken Japan was fertile ground for degrowth ideas.

Published in Japan in 2020, Kohei Saito’s book “Capital in the Anthropocene” has enjoyed unexpected success, selling around five hundred thousand copies. The English translation *Slow Down: The Degrowth Manifesto*, is expected in early 2024.

### **Jamie Kendrick: How did you come to work on Marx and then degrowth communism?**

**Kohei Saito:** I encountered the works of Marx and Engels at 18, when I started at Tokyo University, through student groups active in protecting young workers. At the beginning, I was more interested in the exploitation of workers and then increasingly in wider inequality, as these became more acute in Japan in the 2008 economic crisis. These were precisely the problems that Marx had warned about and would only become more important in the future. I decided to go to Germany to further study Marx.

In 2011, after the earthquake in Japan and the Fukushima nuclear disaster, I came to realise that capitalism is not simply about exploitation of human beings but also about these gigantic technologies created for the sake of profit – that ultimately brought catastrophe to the lives of many people in Japan. From about 2013, I started to pay more attention to general issues of sustainability and ecology, and started reading Marx’s notebooks on natural sciences, and it happens that Marx was studying these sustainability issues – agriculture, forestry, and so on.

### **So you came to ecology via the nuclear issue rather than climate issues?**

I was initially more optimistic about the development of technology but after the Fukushima disaster, I came to reflect on technology and capitalism, and couldn’t be as optimistic. I also started to pay more attention to the issue of climate change in 2014 and after reading Naomi Klein’s book *This Changes Everything*. Still, I remained optimistic about the possibility of electric vehicles, renewable energy, and the Green New Deal. I thought that some socialist politics, with more planning and a job guarantee, could bring about equality as well as more sustainability. But then I started reading more and encountered the works of Jason Hickel, Giorgos Kallis, and degrowth thinking more generally.

By 2018, Greta Thunberg had begun to raise the voice of the movement against the myth of green capitalism and green growth. I was compelled to reflect on my optimism and abandoned the possibility of green growth. There was a tension of course between Marx and degrowth, a tension around Marx and the climate crisis, so I began to read his later works. I came to reinterpret his ideas, especially his studies of pre-capitalist societies. I realised that Marx was interested in those pre-capitalist societies because they are these basically steady states and not oriented towards growth. Yet they managed to

guarantee sustainability as well as quality of life for everyone. That's how I came to the thesis of degrowth communism.

**How do you reconcile degrowth and communism? To be crude, don't communists want more and degrowthers want less?**

That's the tension in the tradition of Marxism and environmentalism. Socialist politics are about technological development to bring more for everyone: we need more development, more progress, more efficiency. Environmentalism highlights that there is about too much consumption and overproduction, so it is about slowing down to protect nature.

However, I came to realise that Marx was interested in both issues: protecting everyone's lives and protecting nature. It's not necessary to have more in a very capitalistic sense. When Marx talks about abundance, he doesn't mean that we have private jets or mansions. He means that we could live in an abundant way, live the good life, if we have medical care for everyone, transportation for everyone, and housing, water, electricity, and guaranteed basic provision without the mediation of money.

That kind of abundance can be the new foundation for socialism or communism, because it is about equality. But if we want to have more, in today's sense, it will simply bring about ecological catastrophe. The middle way is to redefine abundance; following Jason Hickel, I call it radical abundance. It's a very different kind of abundance where we share things, help each other, and we have that feeling of security.

**What about socialists? Is productivist eco-socialism credible looking at the state of the planet? Do they need to realise that the old Marxist dream is over?**

Without environmentalism, socialist politics will be about creating more equality by producing more and consuming more. But the whole world cannot live like Bill Gates. Nor can the whole world live like the upper middle class in Germany. It is not sustainable. Socialists criticise capitalism, but at the same time they are still trapped in capitalist values.

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We also need to bear in mind that if we consume more energy and resources, we will exploit more resources and energies and labour power in the Global South. So if we really want to think about equality and sustainability on a planetary scale, we simply cannot count on technology alone, we also have to think about the way we live, how we produce things. Here socialist politics is again very important, because it is rich people who are responsible for this excessive production and consumption. So we need to tax the rich and ban goods like private jets, cruise ships, and gigantic houses.

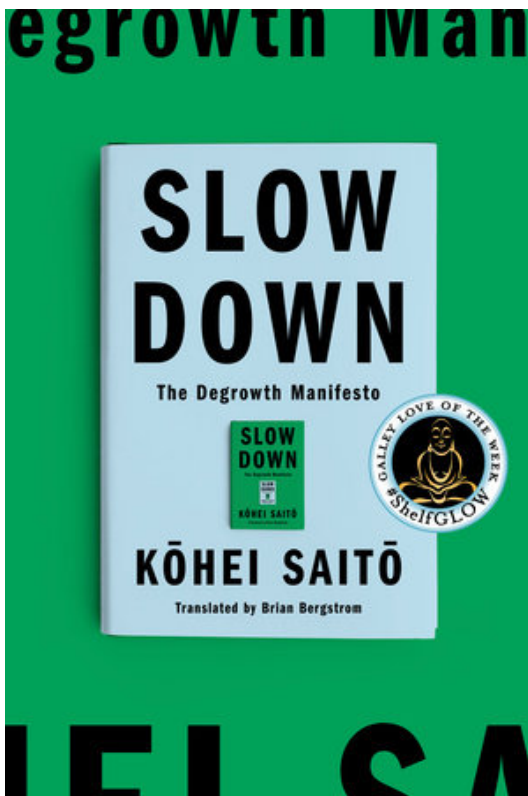
If we do that, we will have much less production and consumption, but we will have more free time, increase wellbeing, and secure some space for development in the Global South. Then, we have to think about reducing our material consumption, especially in the Global North. Too much confidence in technology obscures the fact that our way of living is not sustainable.

**Some might say, "I want a healthy environment and a stable climate, but I do not want this ideological agenda". Does environmentalism really need to be anti-capitalist?**

Yes, environmentalists should be aware that capitalism must be challenged. It's too optimistic today to believe that a carbon tax can solve the problem. We need to have more aggressive measures, like banning dirty industries and reducing advertising. These measures are in contradiction with the logic of capitalism.

In the face of this global ecological crisis, of course we need massive investment in new technologies, like renewable energies. But even if we invest in those technologies and we develop new ones, we will keep working very hard, very long hours, and also consume more and more. In the last 100 years, we have developed so many technologies, but we are still working long hours.

In capitalism, even if we increase efficiency, technology is simply used for the sake of producing more. For that sake, we also have to work more in order to gain money and so on. The greater the efficiency, the more we produce and therefore the more resources and energy we consume. This will not help us solve the climate crisis. Only by bringing these together – environmentalism or degrowth alongside socialism or communism – can we bring about a new vision of society.



*Slow Down: The Degrowth Manifesto by Kohei Saito, expected in early 2024*

### **Why was your book *Capital in the Anthropocene* so popular in Japan?**

It was very surprising. Marx and degrowth are not usually very popular topics in Japan, but it sold about half a million copies. The German translation has already been among the top 10 bestsellers in *Der Spiegel*. So something is going on. In Japan, the book came out in the middle of the pandemic. That was a time when we had to slow down our lifestyle. Restaurants closed, people worked from home, and didn't go outside. Instead, they spent more time with their families and cooked at home. As we slowed down, we had some room to reflect on our previous lifestyle. Why did we commute more than one hour every day? Why did we like to drink beer every night with people we don't really like? Why do we buy so many clothes? We realised that that lifestyle is not bringing any kind of happiness; we just did it because

we were used to it. But we could change it.

At the same time, during the pandemic, there were people called “essential workers” who were exposed to the risk of COVID-19 but were very low paid and had to work long hours. Meanwhile people who are earning good money were working at home being much safer. They were making even more money during the pandemic. That economic inequality was a social scandal and a very big concern in Japan. I criticised that issue from a left-wing perspective and people accepted that capitalism is a problem.

**The Japanese economy seems to be bouncing back to pre-pandemic levels. But it has been known for decades for low growth and a stagnating population. Was that also part of the appeal?**

There were people in Japan talking about postgrowth before my book. They were saying, “The economy is not growing anyway, why don’t we actually make a transition to a post-growth society?” But many of those people tended to be older and what happened was that younger people disagreed. Younger generations were not happy that those who enjoyed the good old days in the 1980s when Japan was the world’s leading economy were telling them not to care about growth. Many young people who are suffering from poverty and have poor working conditions felt that these people were essentially hypocrites. My case is different – even though I belong to these younger generations, I argued that we have to make the transition to a postgrowth society first because of climate change, but also to make life more secure and equal.

Recession and degrowth are two different things. What Japan had over the last decades is not degrowth, and the lack of sustained growth in a capitalist society creates huge problems. Instead, we need a conscious transition to a postgrowth society. The Millennials and Gen Z do not remember the glory days in the 1980s and are not so optimistic about Japanese future progress. So we are demanding a new society that doesn’t presuppose growth. This is what I’m suggesting with degrowth communism.

**How do we get there? Do you need a revolution to get to degrowth communism like with classic communism?**

What I’m calling for is not a revolution like the Russian Revolution. I don’t think we can break this system by taking power. Even if we seize power in the national parliament, it just doesn’t change the economic system. What’s more realistic is Rosa Luxemburg’s idea of revolutionary realpolitik through reform; taxing the rich to introduce a maximum income, for example. Reforms and policies can bring a lot of changes in our daily perception and daily behaviour, even though it doesn’t overcome capitalism immediately. But changing our consciousness and behaviour in daily life creates more room for demanding more radical changes. That way, I think we will make a gradual transition to a degrowth society. In Germany, in France, and even in the United States, people and especially young people are demanding that kind of transformation. It is gradual but I think that the 2030s will see that kind of transformative change that will bring about systemic change on the global level.

**Are advanced capitalist countries like Japan and Germany the ripest for degrowth communism?**

Cities like Amsterdam, Barcelona, Paris, and New York have huge potential. New ideas such as doughnut economics are being introduced at the local level. What I’m hoping for is not top-down change like in the Russian Revolution but bottom up – and the city level provides more opportunities to intervene in politics and create transformation. Cities are some of the places where we should fight more, and that will hopefully ripple to the national level.

**Isn’t degrowth communism an unnecessarily scary name? Degrowth is already alarming for**

**some, and you are adding communism and all the baggage of the 20th-century on top of that.**

That is why I was not expecting *Capital in the Anthropocene* to be such a best seller in Japan. The country does have a strong tradition of Marxism, especially in academia. But outside universities, it's not really a positive term. Japan is quite capitalist, and it is not like people believe in Marxism or socialism. However, people are tired of capitalism, and the Japanese economy has been failing for many years. Many are looking for more radical ideas. But many did criticise the book and I accept that the idea of degrowth communism is too strong. But I use these terms as a kind of provocation. What I want to do is say that capitalism is not working and that fixing it is not enough. We need ideas like degrowth and communism to at least explore new possibilities. If people start talking about new ideas outside of capitalism, I think my book is already successful.

**Communist states were known for their central planning. Do we need to recover the idea of economic planning – i.e. the state having more of a say in economic decisions such as how many goods are produced and so on?**

Yes, that's why degrowth needs to learn from communism or at least socialism. Socialism has a long tradition of economic planning. There are very bad kinds of planning, like the extremely centralised bureaucratic planning of the Soviet Union, but that is not the only kind. We could explore different and more democratic ways of planning. This is too often something that degrowthers don't want to talk about because they associate all kinds of planning with Stalinism and call for small changes and reforms here and there. I don't think that's enough – we also have to talk about planning what kind of industries we need more of and what we do not need at all.

*Capitalism will not invest in protecting nature or building large infrastructure projects; it is simply not profitable.*

Capitalism will not invest in protecting nature or building large infrastructure projects; it is simply not profitable. To protect the planet, we need conscious planning and state intervention. It might use artificial intelligence, it might use local democracy, we don't have the answer yet, but we need to immediately figure out how to plan the transition to the society we want.

**Describe a normal day for a normal citizen in degrowth communism.**

Right now, we work five days a week and often more than 40 hours. We could immediately reduce that to four days, and with technologies I think that we could go down to three in the future. So that's a 25-hour week. What will we do with all this new time? We will spend more time with family. We will garden, we might do sports. We will do some volunteering and have some political engagement in the planning of what we produce and what our local government will do. We will commute not by car but by bus and tram, and our workplace will be more horizontal. We should have more job rotation. It should not always be the same person doing the best part of the job and then some people cleaning their clothes. With new technologies, we can share more and rotate jobs. For me, as a university teacher, I can also teach in local communities or I can teach in prison, for example. We can also use our skills and abilities and time not simply for making money but also to build communities and bring up new generations.

Apart from that, the basic things are pretty much the same. When you get home you might have a beer,

maybe go to the sauna. We won't spend much time in shopping malls, and we won't be visiting Korea or Taiwan for the weekend. We will be spending more time in nature and in places where we can just slow down. But we won't go back to the lifestyle of 120 years ago, we will still use technology and we will still eat good meals with friends and family.

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Kohei Saito is a Japanese philosopher. He is an associate professor at the University of Tokyo. Saito works on ecology and political economy from a Marxist perspective. His book, *Capital in the Anthropocene*, has been credited for inspiring a resurgence of interest in Marxist thought in Japan.

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