



## BOOK REVIEW

### From Western Marxism to degrowth communism A review of *Slow down: The degrowth manifesto*

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#### Abstract

Drawing on Marx's previously unpublished research, Saitō argues for a radical rethinking of Marxist theory. The book critiques both green capitalism and state-led climate solutions, revealing how market mechanisms merely displace the contradictions of capital. Instead, Saitō advocates for degrowth communism through commons-based production, shortened work weeks, and worker cooperatives. These findings suggest that a revolutionary strategy of class war is more suitable to achieving social-ecological transformation rather than a reformist approach to markets and states.

**Saitō, K. (2024). *Slow down: The degrowth manifesto* (B. Bergstrom, Trans.). Astra House: New York. ISBN: 9781662602368. (Originally published in Japanese in 2020).**

Claiming that Marx was a degrowth communist is huge. It suggests he had an epistemological break late in life after researching natural sciences and communal organisations for 16 years after publishing *Capital Volume I*. How could such a significant development have been overlooked by Marxists? Moreover, what does this mean for the future of Marxism and the degrowth movement? These are the herculean questions that Kōhei attempts to answer throughout *Slow Down: The Degrowth Manifesto*.

Kōhei Saitō is an associate professor and philosopher at the University of Tokyo, Japan. His research systematically reconstructs Marx's unfinished ecological critique of capitalism as part of a new publication project, MEGA: The Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe [The Complete Works of Marx and Engels]. His previous publications include *Karl Marx's Ecosocialism* (2017),

人新世の「資本論」 [Capital in the Anthropocene] (2020), and *Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism* (2022). This book is the English translation of the Japanese bestseller that sold over 500,000 copies during Covid-19.

The book opens by dissecting the primacy of economic thought and its obsession with economism. The razor-sharp analysis reveals how climate change is a symptom of the “imperial mode of living” where affluence, especially in the Global North, depends on extractivism, especially in the Global South (Brand & Wissen, 2021). This is because “capitalism displaces its contradictions elsewhere and thus renders them invisible” (p.33). By tracing three forms of displacement — technological, spatial, and temporal — Saitō demonstrates how treating nature like a machine ultimately sustains the foundations of capital. For example, the technological promise to overcome biophysical limits via negative emission technologies, the spatial promise of shifting ecological distribution conflicts onto the periphery, and the temporal promise of shifting the impacts of global warming onto the next generation. The exit strategy? A radical rethinking of cultural and political values grounded in workers developing ecological class consciousness as opposed to seeking for social change through purely economic demands like higher wages or shorter working hours.

Chapter 2 explains why this radical rethink will not come from Green Keynesianism. While Green Keynesianism initially appears transformative, Saitō reveals that its underlying logic mirrors that of capitalism: fiscal expansion to accelerate investment in ‘green’ infrastructure. This is why “the elites who populate international organizations see climate change solutions as golden opportunities for renewed economic growth” (p.46). For example, Saitō explains how the logic of the Green New Deal in the European Union and United States is predicated on price making markets to stop climate change. Meanwhile in reality, markets do nothing more than shift ecological and social distribution conflicts onto the periphery whilst converting efficiency gains into economic expansion that rely on increased resource consumption (Vogel & Hickel, 2023). Such trends are made evident in the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) scenarios that overestimate levels of economic growth, energy efficiency gains, and decoupling, as well as ignore rebound effects and speculate heavily on negative emission technologies (Slameršak et al., 2024). So as scientists continue to expose the limitations of capitalism, it is crucial for people within the degrowth movement to do their

due diligence so that they can distinguish if mechanisms like markets or money should be reformed or abolished (see further, Nelson, 2024).

Chapter 3 shoots down ‘degrowth capitalism’ and its aim of sustainable northern European-style welfare states. This is because European affluence is already destroying the planet without being universalised. Instead, Saitō offers four future scenarios: Climate Fascism (inequality, strong state), Barbarism (inequality, weak state), Climate Maoism (equality, strong state), and the X Factor (equality, weak state). The first scenario (Climate Fascism) is where “we choose to do nothing and keep pursuing economic growth through capitalism in order to support the status quo” (p.80). So instead of cracking down on the elite who are benefiting from capitalist growth, society with state support will crack down on climate refugees and vulnerable populations. The second scenario (Barbarism) outlines a world characterised by a “Hobbesian state of nature” where everyone protects their individual interests in a “war of all against all” (p.81). The third scenario (Climate Maoism) describes a situation where a ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ would command top-down state policies to bring about a “more efficient and equal society” (p.81). The final scenario (X Factor) explains that we could resist the temptation of monetary markets and nation states by choosing mutual aid and cooperation. Indeed, given that capitalism is a competitive system based on private property, capital accumulation and scarcity, reform packages within its structures will naturally bend toward supporting growth and inequality via a strong state. Whereas the X Factor — degrowth communism — necessitates the exact opposite: a weak state and equality because capital and the state are inseparable (Fitzpatrick, 2024). This may come as a surprise to some degrowthers who believe that everything would be fixed if we just replace state power with the ‘right’ representatives. Instead, it would be more beneficial to realise that transitioning to degrowth “cannot be brought about by laws and policies meant to prioritize sustainability and the redistribution of resources as long as the fundamental essence of capitalism is left intact” (p.95). But as Saitō alludes, the trouble is not with ‘impure’ politics but politics itself because the state and its legal systems are merely mechanisms used to oppress the people when they concentrate power in the hands of a few.

The crux of Chapter 4 lies in realising that labour mediates the relationship between humans and nature. Here Saitō teases out the differences between productivism, ecosocialism, and

degrowth communism. Having learnt German to read Marx and being one of the only people who has read his personal research notes, this is where Saitō shines. The MEGA project reveals a pivotal finding: Marx's vision of communism transitioned from productivism outlined in the *Communist Manifesto*, through ecosocialism in *Capital Volume I*, to degrowth communism as articulated in the *Critique of the Gotha Program* and *Letters to Vera Zasulich*, reflecting an evolved understanding of the interconnectedness between ecological sustainability and social equity. This evolution was based on the findings of his "research into ecology and the communal societies of the non-Western and precapitalist world" (p.122) in the 16 years after publishing *Capital Volume I*. In other words, Marx revised his vision of revolution by discarding the Western view of 'history as progress' that is linked to eurocentrism and productivism. For the degrowth movement, this evolution in Marx's revolutionary thought challenges theories of change based on electoralism that rely on the benevolence of political and economic elites through capitalist institutions like the state and monetary markets.

Degrowth will be achieved through class war. When theorising capital for the Anthropocene in Chapter 5, Saitō says it loud and clear, "It's imperative that we install a social system other than capitalism in this era of climate crisis. Communism is the only viable choice left for the future in the Anthropocene" (p.139). To illustrate his point, he critiques visions of accelerationism that call for 'sustainable growth' such as fully automated luxury communism and green growth. While they sometimes recognise ecological limits, these visions are guided by the myth that human superiority can overcome them. Through examining the core tenants of ecomodernism, readers begin to see that sustainability cannot be achieved through mechanisms that protect capital like voting in representative democracies or price making markets. So instead of being distracted by economism and divided by nationalism, the degrowth movement should promote unified action against capitalist structures, economic elites, and their technologies (see Gorz, 2018; Baker, 2023a). In this instance, the fundamental struggle becomes overthrowing capital and the state because they are two sides of the same coin.

Saitō contrasts capitalism and communism, illustrating how capitalism perpetuates scarcity while communism fosters abundance. The historical expansion of capitalism is one of

enclosure because primitive accumulation, a concept describing the initial processes of capital formation creates artificial scarcity. It is exactly this process that divides and conquers the abundance of the commons to create more and more artificial scarcity. As Saitō outlines in Chapter 6, this leads to a “tragedy of the commodity” because scarcity is socially constructed for the purpose of privatising profits and socialising costs. But luckily scarcity is not socially determined, so how can we change? Just like Peter Kropotkin before him, Saitō advocates to return the means of production to the commons via workers cooperatives and private citizenization (i.e., the citizen management or municipalisation of energy production). Such a move not only democratises the material base of the economy, but it simultaneously democratises the social relations of society, unlike laws, so the 99% go from being competitive wage slaves for profits sake to cooperative co-owners satisfying the needs of all. And although the commons need to be reclaimed and defended in more ways than one, collective self-limitation starts with production. Only then can a plentiful economy of degrowth communism begin to emerge.

The X Factor is degrowth communism. Fresh out of a global pandemic caused by the commodification of the planet, most populations called upon the state for saviour. In response, the capitalist state did what it does best: acts as a tool of class oppression by sacrificing democracy to guarantee profits in the name of freedom. The nation doesn’t matter because they all follow the same logic. Whilst some see this as positive evidence of state intervention, the state is no friend of degrowth if it sacrifices the planet or people (Engel-Di Mauro, 2021). Indeed, it is in Chapter 7 that Saitō outlines the five pillars of degrowth communism: (1) transitioning to a use-value based economy; (2) shortening the working week; (3) abolishing the uniform division of labour; (4) democratising the production process; and (5) prioritising essential work. This is a task only achievable by leveraging climate justice in workers’ cooperatives, social movements, and fearless cities that unite in the direct struggle against capital that transcends social constructs like borders, genders, races, and religions (see Kropotkin, 2014).

Overall, *Slow Down* is a fascinating read that I would recommend to people in the degrowth movement, especially newcomers. But the book has several shortcomings. The first is the writing style, which at the paragraph level is difficult to follow throughout the book. Perhaps

due to translating a Japanese writing style into English? Second and more importantly, the book overlooks most degrowth literature, especially anarchist scholars. Whilst one cannot engage with everyone, a more holistic engagement with the degrowth literature would increase the potential for dialogue on degrowth strategy. Third, the author dismisses anarchism without dialogue. Perhaps this is due to his obsession with the Barcelona school of degrowth (see Villamayor-Tomas & Muradian, 2023). This is odd given the desired goal is 'degrowth communism' (Saitō, 2022), which is almost identical to anarchist communism in analysis and actualisation. Indeed, we must pick the appropriate means otherwise we will not end up at our desired destination of degrowth (see Baker, 2023b). Finally, I am sceptical of the concluding claim that if 3.5% of the population support degrowth it will happen (see Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011). If we want degrowth to be the outcome of a socially consented process rather than an ecologically imposed imperative, we need mass movements and not revolutionary vanguards to overthrow capital and the state. Nonetheless, *Slow Down* represents the closest the degrowth movement has come to stating that its goal is in fact anarchist communism.

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