



ESSAY

Is degrowth incompatible with historical materialism?¹

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Abstract

The contemporary eco-Marxist discourse is sharply divided between a degrowth position and an eco-modernist position. While degrowth views capitalism's limitless growth as fundamentally unsustainable, eco-modernism regards growth as the only viable path to socialism. The eco-modernist criticism of degrowth has its roots in Marx's theory of history. According to this theory, known as historical materialism, the continuous expansion of the productive forces is the driving force of history and carries the promise of a socialism of abundance. In the eyes of eco-modernists, degrowth represents a brake on the productive forces and is therefore incompatible with traditional Marxism. This essay refutes this claimed incompatibility. Drawing on G. A. Cohen's analysis of Marx's theory of history, it demonstrates that a degrowth society is not only compatible with historical materialism, but may in fact be its logical outcome. By demonstrating this compatibility, I hope to make eco-modernists more open to degrowth arguments.

How should we respond to the ecological crisis? This has been one of the most polarizing questions among Marxists in the 2020s. Eco-Marxist discourse is currently divided between a degrowth position, most notably represented by Kohei Saito, and an eco-modernist position, most notably represented by Matthew Huber (Holgersen, 2023). These two Marxists have developed their arguments in many texts, but most comprehensively in Saito's *Hitoshinsei no Shihonron [Capital in the Anthropocene]*² and Huber's *Climate Change as Class War* (Saito, 2025; Huber, 2022). I have reviewed both works elsewhere (see Hanssen 2022a; 2022b), but

¹ This article is a substantially rewritten version of a text that was originally published in 2025 in the Norwegian journal *Sosialistisk framtid*, 22(1), 43-48.

² The book was translated to English in 2024 under the title *Slow Down: How Degrowth Communism Can Save the Earth*. This article uses the English version of Saito's book.

here I will briefly summarize their arguments as representative of the two conflicting positions on the eco-Marxist left.

The degrowth position spans a broad spectrum, ranging from the non-Marxist (Kallis et al., 2020) to the Marx-inspired (Hickel, 2021) to the explicitly Marxist (Klitgaard, 2023). Saito (2025) belongs to the explicitly Marxist camp. He argues that capitalism's inescapable pursuit of profit will inevitably lead to ecological catastrophe. A capitalist economy must always grow, and it is impossible to decouple economic growth from resource use and greenhouse gas emissions. In other words, the more we grow our economy, the more we deplete our finite resources and heat up our climate. Since this is unsustainable, we must strive to abandon our obsession with economic growth.

The only way to do so, however, is to overthrow capitalism, which Saito (2025) identifies as the core problem. "It's capitalism – nothing more, nothing less – that lies at the root of climate change and the other global environmental crises that come with it," Saito writes in his argument for what he calls "degrowth communism": a post-capitalist society organized around use-values (production for needs) instead of exchange-values (production for sale) (Saito, 2025, pp. 71-72). Saito challenges the traditional Marxist view that a constant strengthening of the productive forces is a condition for the transition to socialism. This kind of Marxist productivism, he argues, would only lead a future socialism into the same ecological problems as today's growth capitalism.

Although Saito does not explicitly define degrowth communism, he describes it in general terms as "a free, equal, just and sustainable society that overcomes class divides of exploitation and domination and that radically revolutionizes labour" (Saito, 2025, pp. 85-86). Such a society would scale down or abolish socially unnecessary production and turn "self-limitation" into a value (Saito, 2025, p. 177). Saito's most controversial claim is that Marx in his later years made a "clean break" with his earlier conviction about the need for ever-expanding productive forces and instead began to embrace something akin to a degrowth perspective that more fully respected nature's limits (Saito, 2025, p. 102). Personally, I do not think Saito provides sufficient evidence for such a radical reinterpretation of Marx, but that is of lesser importance in this text.

The eco-modernist position, which Huber (2022) represents, also ranges from the non/anti-Marxist (Breakthrough Institute, 2015) to the explicitly Marxist (Bastani, 2020). What all eco-modernist perspectives have in common is a strong belief in technology's liberating power and in the folly of degrowth. Huber, who falls into the Marxist camp, accuses degrowthers of being an elitist bunch of academic snobs who support a "politics of less" (Huber, 2022, pp. 162-175). This, he writes, is both bad political strategy (who wants less?) and a break with the traditional Marxian promise of a socialism built on prosperity and abundance (Huber, 2022, pp. 173, 250). He further argues that degrowth advocates are naïve to believe that simply informing people about the seriousness of the climate problem will be enough to spark political mobilization. In reality, he asserts, people must be persuaded by material incentives and serious promises of a better life.

The strength of Huber's book lies in its class perspective, which even degrowthers will admit is often absent in the degrowth literature (Kallis & D'Alisa, 2025). Huber believes that only the working class can save us from the climate crisis. This is because: 1) the working class constitutes the majority of the population and thus has a democratic mandate; 2) it stands closest to the means of production and can therefore use strikes to force capital to stop environmentally destructive production; and 3) it has a material interest in changes to the relations of production. The material focus is a red thread throughout Huber's book:

[A] politics of 'less' and 'limits' has no resonance for the vast majority of people already living precarious and insecure working-class lives. For the working class, steeped as it is in basic material deprivation, we need to assert a politics of more that explains how much we have to gain from a climate program. (Huber, 2022, p. 38)

He dismisses any anti-capitalist framework that does not promise material abundance as "utopian politics" (Huber, 2022, p. 33). The ideal climate politics for Huber is one that means "improvements in one's material life" (Huber, 2022, p. 40). Huber thus echoes a common critique of degrowth; namely that "it is against modernity and against progress" (Schmelzer et al., 2022, p. 21).

Both Huber and Saito draw on Marx to support their views, but their visions for the future appear to be incompatible. Huber builds on Marx's productivism, while Saito builds on an alleged post-productivist phase in Marx's later years. This means their visions of post-capitalist society are quite different. While Saito imagines a society with localized economies, a weak state, and a small material footprint, Huber seems to advocate for a society with integrated economies, a powerful state, and material abundance. Huber's productivist viewpoint holds that, despite its exploitation and inequality, capitalism plays a historically progressive role (Huber, 2022, p. 283). It strengthens the productive forces and lays the groundwork for a socialist society. Such a society must function without exploitation and therefore depends on well-developed productive forces to generate material abundance for everyone while simultaneously easing the labor burden. This vision of socialist/communist society is rooted in Marx's theory of history, known as historical materialism. Although not all Marxist eco-modernists explicitly refer to historical materialism (Huber does), there is no doubt that it often underpins their aversion to degrowth. To them, degrowth appears to be the antithesis of historical materialism.

1. Is degrowth the antithesis of historical materialism?

In the remainder of this text, I will challenge the eco-modernist view that degrowth is incompatible with historical materialism. Historical materialism not only allows for the possibility of a future degrowth society but may also imply that such a society is a necessary phase in history. My argument will mainly be based on G. A. Cohen's analysis of historical materialism as presented in his classic 1978 book *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*. Cohen's (1978) account of historical materialism is arguably the most authoritative and has been lauded as "the strongest defense [historical materialism] has received to date" (Dietsch, 2016), and a work "whose intellectual force supersedes virtually all previous discussion" (Anderson, 1980, p. 82).

Before I begin this argument, it may be appropriate to briefly clarify my own views. I support the degrowth position, even though I do not always agree with the arguments, framing, or rhetoric of degrowth advocates. Ultimately, I cannot help but agree with the basic degrowth principle that infinite growth on a finite planet is impossible. This principle has become

something of a cliché, yet it has never been disproved. Thus, Huber's failure to seriously engage with this simple but powerful degrowth principle is the greatest weakness of his critique of degrowth. Indeed, at times he seems to dismiss the idea of planetary boundaries entirely (Huber, 2023; Huber & Phillips, 2024). This is far too cavalier an attitude toward a potentially existential matter.

When it comes to historical materialism, I am agnostic. It is of course true that the productive forces have developed throughout history and had an enormous impact on human life. But to what extent the development of the productive forces can explain societal transformation over time is something I am unsure about. It seems that societies have historically developed in a more experimental, unpredictable, and unsystematic manner than the fairly linear transformations posited by historical materialism (cf. Graeber & Wengrow, 2021). When trying to demonstrate compatibility between historical materialism and degrowth, it is not because I am a convinced historical materialist. Rather, it is because it will be hard to convince traditional Marxists that the degrowth perspective has valid points without demonstrating this compatibility. In short, I want traditional Marxists to give degrowth a chance. In particular, I hope that this framing can make them more receptive to arguments about the material limits on growth—limits that the degrowth literature has demonstrated both theoretically and empirically (Hickel & Kallis, 2020; Vogel & Hickel, 2023).

G. A. Cohen's Analysis and Defense of Historical Materialism

We will now turn to Cohen's (1978) analysis and defense of Marx's historical materialism. It should first be noted, however, that Cohen's interpretation of Marx is contested (Rigby, 1987; Meiksins Wood, 1995; Chibber, 2011). Many analysts, including Saito (2025, chapter 4), argue that Marx eventually distanced himself from his previously deterministic view of history and the primacy of the productive forces (cf. Mau, 2023, chapter 5). I agree with S. H. Rigby (1987) that enough ambiguities and inconsistencies exist in Marx's body of work to support both a "productive force deterministic" reading and a "class agency" reading of his theory of history. However, given the broad influence of his productive force determinism, I will limit my focus to classical historical materialism in which the productive forces function as the primary drivers of history. This classical interpretation is most authoritatively defended by Cohen.

Let us then examine Cohen’s analysis of Marx’s theory of history. In this analysis, history is roughly divided into “four epochs” based on society’s ability to produce a material surplus (Cohen, 1978, p. 198).

Table 1: Historical epochs in classical historical materialism

Historical epoch (Economic structure)	Level of productive development
1) Pre-class society	No ability to produce a surplus
2) Pre-capitalist class society (slavery, serfdom)	Some ability to produce a surplus
3) Capitalist society	Moderately high ability to produce a surplus
4) Post-class society (socialism, communism)	Massive ability to produce a surplus

Pre-class societies had limited technological development, making it necessary for everyone to work in order to survive. Due to society’s inability to produce a surplus, a class division between those who produced and those who lived off surpluses produced by others could not yet emerge. However, such a class division became possible in *pre-capitalist class societies* where the invention of agriculture and simple tools created surplus-producing capacity. In other words, a person could produce more than they needed to survive. It was no longer necessary for all members of society to work. Gradually, society was divided into producing and non-producing classes (slave/slaveowner; serf/landowner). Class society was born. With *capitalism* came competition, which created strong incentives to develop the productive forces. Technological innovations emerged in rapid succession and society’s surplus-producing capacity reached unprecedented levels. The class division now runs between workers and capitalists. The workers are freer than slaves or serfs, but lacking the means of production, they must sell their labor power as a commodity to the highest-bidding capitalist, who does not produce but merely owns the means of production. The worker always creates more value for the capitalist than he receives in wages and this creates the enormous inequalities found in all capitalist societies. Finally, we have the elusive *post-class society*, which lies somewhere in the future when the oppressed workers have taken power through revolution. In this society, classes are abolished and no one exploits others. Working

hours and burdens will be drastically reduced, but this also requires a massive surplus-producing capacity through highly developed productive forces (Cohen, chapter 7).

This is the classical historical materialist narrative of history. The historical accuracy of these epochs will not be discussed here. What is more interesting for the degrowth discussion is how Marx envisioned a society transitioning from one epoch to another. For Marx, it was the development of the productive forces that drove these transitions from one social form to another. Marx sometimes saw the development of the productive forces as almost synonymous with social development, but he was clear that the former governed the latter.³ Classical historical materialism has therefore been criticized for appearing to attribute agency or a kind of historical will to the productive forces (Rigby, 1987, p. 100; Mau, 2023, chapter 3). A social form and its class relations exist solely to develop the productive forces. Not only that, but any class that takes power in a society does so by virtue of being “the class best suited, most able, and disposed, to preside over the development of the productive forces at the given time” (Cohen, 1978, p. 149). That is why classical historical materialists argue that capitalist rule has a “historical mission” (to develop the productive forces) and can be justified despite the many injustices it also brings (Cohen, 1978, p. 201). This justification does not last forever. As the productive forces develop, the ruling class gradually loses its ability to maximize society’s productivity. Instead, existing class relations become a “fetter” on the development of the productive forces (for example, when capitalists begin investing more in stocks than in production). At that point, the ruling class has outlived its historical role and is eventually replaced by a new class better suited to carry out the historical mission (Cohen, 1978, pp. 160-161). According to classical historical materialism, that role will fall to the working class, who will overthrow capitalism, abolish class society, and unfetter the productive forces.

It is striking how mechanical this theoretical framework can be. No social formation can be overthrown or ended before it has fulfilled its historical role and developed the productive forces to the greatest extent possible within its limits. Cohen describes the conditions for a socialist revolution as:

³ This view is especially pronounced in Karl Marx (1859).

No socialist revolution will succeed until 'capitalist production has already developed the productive forces of labour in general to a sufficiently high level.' Premature attempts at revolution, whatever their immediate outcome, will eventuate in a restoration of capitalist society. (Cohen, 1978, p. 206)

And in Marx's own words:

No social order is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society. (Marx, 1859)

It is this strong belief in the progressive necessity of developing the productive forces that underpins the eco-modernists' aversion to degrowth. Degrowth necessarily curtails the development of certain productive forces (Hickel, 2021, pp. 208-222; Schmelzer et al., 2022, pp. 237-234). For eco-modernists, degrowth is therefore not only a betrayal of the working class, but also a departure from the natural course of history. How, then, can a historical materialist perspective be made compatible with degrowth?

2. The logic of historical materialism

To find this compatibility, it is useless to look at historical materialism's narrative of history in which human societies move mechanistically from lower to higher forms, culminating with a communism that unleashes unimaginable forces of production. One must examine historical materialism's logic rather than its historical narrative. If we do that, it is possible to interpret historical materialism in a far more open-ended manner than classical Marxists typically do. A focus on logic rather than narrative makes it possible to envision a form of degrowth society as a necessary successor to the present capitalist one.

To grasp historical materialism's logic, we need to answer the following question: Why does classical historical materialism claim that the development of the productive forces is the

mission of history? This is where Cohen's defense of Marx's theory of history enters. While Marx himself never provided a systematic answer to this question, Cohen tries to do so (Shaw, 1978, p. 4; Rigby, 1987, pp. 117-118). Cohen presents three "facts" that he believes explain why the productive forces must be in constant development— a claim he referred to as "the development thesis" (Cohen 1978, p. 134). Cohen's three facts are as follows:

1. Humans are to some extent rational beings.
2. The historical condition of humanity is marked by material scarcity.
3. Humans possess intelligence and are capable of improving their situation.⁴

Cohen (1978) argues that under a human condition characterized by material scarcity, it is rational to use one's intelligence to improve one's situation. Producing surpluses by improving the productive forces is the best way to escape the ever-present threat of scarcity. It is thus a combination of human nature (rationality and intelligence) and material circumstances (scarcity) that makes the development of the productive forces a logical element in the course of history. When I refer to "the logic" of historical materialism, I mean this encounter between human nature and material circumstances, as well as the outcomes this encounter produces.

A focus on logic opens new possibilities for degrowth within a framework of historical materialism. If human nature, in the face of difficult material circumstances, results in the development of the productive forces, then one must also acknowledge that human nature could have produced other solutions if faced with different material circumstances. That is precisely the kind of situation we are in today. Many people still live under conditions of scarcity, but this is not due to underdeveloped productive forces; rather, it stems from a capitalist class division that distributes the surplus inequitably and a mode of production that depends on the creation of artificial scarcity (Hickel, 2021, pp. 232-236). The productive forces have now reached levels that would have been unimaginable in Marx's time. They are already capable of creating prosperity for all. That they do not perhaps indicates that capitalism has outlived its "historical role," to use the language of historical materialism. Scarcity can be overcome, but we are now facing new challenges of almost the opposite kind. The productive

⁴ Paraphrased from Cohen (1978, p. 152).

forces are now able to produce such large surpluses that nature's regenerative capacity can no longer keep up. All production requires resources. If the economy is to grow every single year, production must continuously increase, and resource use will eventually exceed the planet's ecological limits.

The website *Earth Overshoot Day* calculates the amount of ecological resources the planet can regenerate in one year and compares it to humanity's annual use. In 2025, we exhausted our resource quota by July 24 (Earth Overshoot Day, 2025). We are thus using ecological resources in far greater quantities than nature can regenerate. This trend will only worsen the more we produce. The result is soil depletion, crop failures, water shortages, overfishing, deforestation, pollution, biodiversity loss, ecosystem death, and various natural disasters. Additionally, the Earth is warming as increased production leads to higher greenhouse gas emissions. Theoretically, global warming can be slowed by switching to renewable energy; however, the problem of resource overuse can never be overcome as long as the economy and production are expected to grow every year.

It may be true that the logical outcome of human nature's confrontation with scarcity was the development of the productive forces in order to generate as much surplus as possible. But what does human nature do when it now faces new existential threats such as resource depletion and climate change? Does it continue to produce more and more, thereby worsening the problems? That would be neither rational nor intelligent. The rational and intelligent solution to the environmental crisis, in a situation where scarcity is no longer a production problem but solely a distribution one, is to curb production and equalize distribution.

It is fascinating that Cohen himself was deeply concerned about the resource problem when he wrote his defense of historical materialism nearly half a century ago. In several places in the book, Cohen raises the resource problem and discusses its implications for the post-capitalist society. For example, he writes:

If the 'crisis of resources' is as serious as some say, it is a genuine threat to the realization of forms of communism which depend upon a radically reduced working

day, for those forms require astronomically high levels of productive power. (Cohen, 1978, p. 61)

If the material circumstances change, and resource depletion is definitely such a change, then it follows logically that humanity's rational and intelligent response must also change. It is not a break with historical materialism to halt an overproduction that will, over time, threaten our existential foundation. Overexploitation of nature is a different kind of threat than scarcity, but both responses to scarcity and to resource depletion are responses to material conditions. A form of degrowth could very well be a logical outcome of new material circumstances. In fact, it would be in line with the logic of historical materialism.

3. The limits of compatibility

Does this then mean that degrowth fits frictionlessly into a historical materialist framework? No, it does not. There is friction there, but the strength of that friction depends on what kind of degrowth and what kind of historical materialism we are dealing with. Orthodox versions of historical materialism that insist on the development thesis (the incessant development of the productive forces) will not be compatible with degrowth since degrowth aims to reduce certain harmful and/or unnecessary productive forces such as those that produce fossil fuels, weapons, beef, advertisement, and luxury goods (Hauge & Hickel, 2025, pp. 886-888). Another incompatibility can be found between degrowth and mechanistic variants of historical materialism which insist that developing countries in the Global South must undergo the same capitalist development as the Western countries. Marx famously argued that "[t]he country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future" (Marx, 1867a). Saito (2025, pp. 109-113) shows that Marx eventually distanced himself from such a teleological position, but the idea that the Western industrial capitalist model is a necessary stage in history long outlived Marx.

Dogmatic variants of historical materialism have insisted that "the transition from one social formation to another [...] proceeds in accordance with a natural and historical necessity" (Kelle & Kovalson, 1973, p. 112). Such a view breaks with degrowth's strong focus on global ecological justice, which holds that the Global South must be allowed to develop in its own

manner and at its own pace. Far from seeing the Global North's extractivist capitalism as a necessary development model for the Global South, degrowthers conversely identify it as one of the key factors that have prevented development in the Global South (Gräbner-Radkowsch & Strunk, 2023). Neo-colonial relations, characterized by unequal exchange, biased international financial institutions, and the externalization of environmental burdens, have been indispensable building blocks of the Global North's capitalist model. Since this model depends on the exploitation of the Global South, it cannot be emulated by the Global South (Saito, 2025, pp. 227-228). This is why degrowthers insist that the Global South must chart its own path of development free from neo-colonial relations.

Marxists (and others) sometimes accuse degrowthers of wanting to implement a program of immiseration for developing countries, condemning them to "remain stuck in the swamp of poverty, constantly on the brink of famine" (Carchedi & Roberts, 2023, p. 37). This is a rather disingenuous critique since almost all degrowth literature stresses that the Global South must be allowed to develop and grow while degrowth should primarily be limited to high-income countries in the Global North (Kallis et al., 2020, p. 123; Hickel, 2021, p. 21; Schmelzer et al., 2022, p. 287; Gräbner-Radkowsch & Strunk, 2023, p. 5; Hauge & Hickel, 2025, p. 890; Saito, 2025, pp. 66-67). In fact, given that it is these high-income countries that bear the main responsibility for the climate crisis, many degrowthers argue that they should pay climate reparations to the Global South to help finance green transitions there. Degrowth's strong insistence on global ecological justice is incompatible with dogmatic versions of historical materialism that see Western capitalism as a historically necessary stage of development.⁵

Just as there are specific forms of historical materialism that are incompatible with general degrowth, there are specific forms of degrowth that are incompatible with general historical materialism. These are variants of capitalist degrowth: forms of degrowth that do not seek to break with capitalism but rather strive for degrowth reforms within the capitalist mode of production (Schmelzer et al., 2022, p. 16). For example, the late Herman Daly, a degrowth veteran and originator of the concept of a "steady-state economy," opposed the idea that

⁵ Admittedly, this kind of dogmatic historical materialism has waned over the past 50 years and is not very common today. Most historical materialists distance themselves from the strong determinism of the theory's earlier days.

“we should just abandon capitalism and opt for eco-socialism” (Daly & Kunkel, 2018, p. 96). Such capitalist degrowth visions are obviously incompatible with an orthodox and deterministic reading of historical materialism that insists on the development thesis (in fact, all degrowth versions are), but it is also incompatible with a more open-ended, logic-based reading of historical materialism that rejects the development thesis as presented in this text. This reading of historical materialism holds that degrowth is a rational and intelligent response to the material, ecological crises produced by the capitalist system. Degrowth models that do not seek to supersede capitalism clearly contradict this logic. Reducing growth within a system that must grow appears neither rational nor intelligent as it dismisses or misdiagnoses the cause – capitalism – of our material predicament.

In short, orthodox understandings of historical materialism that require the productive forces to grow constantly or that posit Western-style capitalist development as a necessary stage for the Global South are incompatible with all forms of degrowth, while degrowth visions that do not seek to break with capitalism are incompatible with all forms of historical materialism.

4. A potential field of compatibility: capitalism as a fetter

Marxian degrowth has been criticized by historical materialists for foolishly relinquishing technology’s potential under socialism. Matt Huber and Leigh Phillips (2024) accuse degrowthers of rejecting a longstanding Marxist belief that “socialism would release production from the fetters of capitalism [...]”. As mentioned, traditional historical materialism holds that the productive forces are now fettered by capitalism’s class relations and will be unfettered by a socialist transformation. Socialism will, according to this perspective, massively develop the productive forces and provide unprecedented material abundance for all.

Given the already deadly levels of climate change, pollution, and resource depletion caused by the productive forces under capitalism, this productivist vision of socialism seems unrealistic from a degrowth perspective. Interestingly, it is also being challenged by some scholars within the historical materialist tradition who have begun to reconceptualize the Marxian concept of “fettering” in ways that establish points of connection with degrowth. For

instance, Finn Bowring (2011, p. 149) worries that “the theory of fettering is seriously impaired by a nineteenth-century productivist paradigm” that might be out of touch with today’s anti-capitalist struggles. These struggles are not about capitalism’s fettering of the productive forces, but about precarity, inequality, injustice, corporate unaccountability, and ecological breakdown. Bowring (2011, p. 137) thus argues that the fettering concept should be “prised free from its narrow productivist origins to demonstrate Marx’s relevance to the broader public critique of the social and environmental irrationalities of modern capitalism.” To do so, he introduces the distinction between “development fettering” and “use fettering.” Development fettering refers to capitalism’s growing inability to develop the productive forces, which aligns with traditional predictions in historical materialism. Now, this is a tough sell, given the seemingly never-ending array of technologies capitalism continues to invent and produce. Bowring therefore suggests that use fettering is a more accurate concept in modern analyses. Use fettering refers not to a failure to develop the productive forces, but to “the destructive use, and indeed *overuse*, of society’s productive forces” (Bowring, 2011, p. 150).

In what way, then, is capitalism *use fettering* the productive forces? Here Bowring’s (2011) argument converges with that of Raju J. Das, a fellow historical materialist. They both stress that capitalism’s fettering becomes clear if one includes “nature and human beings” (workers) as the central part of the productive forces (Das, 2024, p. 393). While traditional historical materialists have usually included raw materials, soil, and labor in their definition of the productive forces, their discussions of fettering have nonetheless almost always prioritized the technological components of the productive forces (e.g., Cohen, 1978; Shaw, 1978). Bowring (2011) and Das (2024) take Marx’s grand claim that nature and labor are “the original sources of all wealth” (Marx, 1867b) seriously and treat them as the central components of the productive forces. Thus, when capital exhausts its workers through exploitation and precarity, and destroys nature through extraction and pollution, it may increase production in the short term, but it will gradually deplete the foundational elements of the productive forces.

Consequently, capitalism fetters the flourishing of humanity which our productive forces were supposed to ensure (Bowring, 2011, p. 151). Das writes that “capitalist relations of

production fetter not development of the productive forces *per se*, but *sustainable* development of these forces” as the long-term reproductive needs of both human labor and nature are unmet (Das, 2024, p. 400). This reconceptualization of capitalism’s fettering effects, not immediately on production but gradually on the foundations of production, implies that a socialist transition would require a “transformation in the nature of the productive forces, including a reduction in their scale, speed of operation, and complexity” (Bowring, 2011, p. 153). This analysis overlaps both with the degrowth critique of capitalism as being a system that operates according to the unsustainable principle “take more – from nature and labour – than you give back” (Hickel, 2021, p. 40) and the degrowth vision of a socialism with a reduced material footprint.⁶

We see that compatibilities between degrowth and historical materialism emerge when we focus on the latter’s logic rather than its narrative. Similarly, compatibilities open by recentering nature and labor within the productive forces.

5. Conclusion

Degrowth can be compatible with historical materialism. One might even say that a form of degrowth is a natural outcome of the logic of historical materialism. By showing this compatibility, I hope that Marxist eco-modernists, whose theoretical outlook is underpinned by historical materialism, will at least acknowledge that degrowth is not an antithesis to their worldview. More ambitiously, I hope they will be more open to key arguments in degrowth, especially those surrounding planetary and ecological boundaries. If the importance of class is the main lesson degrowthers can learn from the Marxist eco-modernists, then a serious recognition of boundaries is the main lesson eco-modernists should learn from degrowth.

The fact that a near-dogmatic materialist like Cohen recognized the problem of boundaries and limits suggests that today’s eco-modernists, too, should be capable of showing more understanding and perhaps humility toward degrowth arguments, which are rooted in

⁶ Unlike Bowring, Das (2024, p. 399) admittedly does not frame his argument in an anti-productivist manner (in fact, he criticizes Bowring’s “anti-production tendency”), but his argument that capitalist relations “fetter the development of nature” because capitalist “society takes a lot more useful material out of nature than it returns to it” strongly implies that some kind of productive moderation is needed.

material changes. Cohen acknowledged that “We can no longer be confident that the earth’s resources will permit the astronomical productivity [Marx] appears to have thought inevitable [under socialism]” (Cohen, 1978, p. 207). But he did not see this as a death sentence for socialism. On the contrary, he saw it as a crisis for capitalism. Capitalism has now reached an immense level of productivity. This productivity can either be used to keep production constant while reducing labor time, or to keep labor time constant while increasing production. Cohen pointed out that capitalism, with its greed and shortsightedness, always chooses the latter option: growth over burden reduction (Cohen, 1978, chapter 11). Only a socialist system can choose to reduce the burdens of labor. If capitalism has developed the productive forces to a level that can eliminate the scarcity problem but still imposes a life of scarcity on millions of workers, then capitalism is no longer a progressive force in history, but rather a fetter on human progress. Such a system, Cohen wrote, has become reactionary: “It cannot realize the possibilities of liberation it creates. [...] It brings society to the threshold of abundance and locks the door” (Cohen, 1978, pp. 306-307). Such a system has outlived its historical role.

This means that there are clear overlaps between degrowth and historical materialism. Both positions recognize that the material scarcity under capitalism differs from the “natural” scarcity that existed in pre-capitalist societies, which necessitated the development of the productive forces. Under capitalism, scarcity could theoretically be overcome but is maintained artificially to spur profits. Artificial scarcity is constructed by the commodification of an increasing number of elements of social life. Capitalism’s commodification of everything is a common theme in both historical materialism and degrowth. The former shows us that commodification has been part and parcel of capitalism since its earliest days of primitive accumulation, i.e., the enclosure of common lands (Cohen, 1978, p. 176), while the latter critiques modern forms of artificial scarcity such as planned obsolescence, privatization of public services, and austerity (Hickel, 2021, chapter 5; Saito, 2025, chapter 6). As Marx observed, capitalism can only function by creating “wealth at one pole” and “misery, agony of toil slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation, at the opposite pole” (Marx, 1867c). Degrowthers propose decommodification of essentials such as housing, transportation, education, and health care as a vital part of the degrowth program. But it is hard to imagine significant advances in decommodification as long as we operate within a system dictated by

“the capitalist principle”, i.e., a system in which use values are produced only insofar as they generate exchange values in excess of production costs (Cohen, 1978, p. 300).

Despite its enormous potential, capitalism is a system that can neither guarantee human flourishing nor ecological sustainability. Cohen was clear-eyed about these major flaws: “The dynamic of advanced capitalism is, arguably, hostile to the prospect of a balanced human existence. It certainly upsets the equilibrium of physical nature” (Cohen, 1978, p. 307). With the benefit of half a century worth of research on climate change, we know that the effects of capitalist growth are far worse than what Cohen could have known. Cohen (1978, p. 310) argued that capitalism had begun to “function irrationally” because it continued to promote production and consumption even “when it becomes possible and desirable to reduce or transform unwanted activity.” Cohen’s point about capitalist irrationality has only become truer in the years since he wrote his classic work on historical materialism. As we have seen, there are modern works within historical materialism that no longer regard capitalism’s failure to develop the productive forces *per se* as the fetter spurring social transformation. Instead, they hold that social transformation is necessitated by capitalism’s failure to develop the most vital components of these forces, labor and nature, in a sustainable manner. Capitalism has become a fetter on human and non-human life. The logic of historical materialism implies the necessity of a transformation from the capitalist mode of production into something more conducive to biological survival. The material conditions the future society inherits from the previous one will likely make it impossible to continue the growth obsession that characterized capitalism. As I see it, there should be no reason for historical materialists to disagree with such a conclusion.

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