

'We need a radical Red Marx, not a cuddly Green Marx': Climate change as class war

Assuming that the free market and contemporary democratic states are not up to the job, and that the climate crisis is getting worse, then what can the radical left offer? The Japanese Marxist Kohei Saito says we should simply slow down our consumption habits, learn from Marx, and form small communes. His book, 'Slow Down – How Degrowth Communism Can Save The Earth' is a fusion of Marxism, the ecological crisis, and degrowth economics. It was an unlikely hit, selling over half a million copies in Japan. It was published in English in February 2024. As [The Guardian](#) gushed: 'A new way of life': the Marxist, post-capitalist, green manifesto captivating Japan.

Saito cuts through many climate crisis initiatives such as green technological utopianism, sustainable development goals, green consumption, variants of doughnut economics, and so forth. All share the notion that the economy can continue to grow or at least sustain itself. And that capitalism can, in some wilted form, still save the planet. Ultimately the effect of these initiatives is merely to buy more time for capitalism. They do more harm than good in easing the pangs of conscience like the buying of Catholic indulgences: "The road to extinction is paved with good intentions." (57).

Saito proposes a – third volume *Capital* – late Marx who saw that capital ruptures and creates a rift in the reciprocal metabolic interaction between nature and man. This extraction and exploitation without return has contributed to the crisis. Here is a late Green Marx, as eco-conscious, who apparently repudiates his younger self as a proponent of productivism and history as progress. Marx moves through three phases Saito suggests: the Productivism of the *Communist Manifesto*, 1840s-1850s, which affords growth but not sustainability; the Ecosocialism of *Capital*, volume one, 1860s, which affords both growth and sustainability; and the Degrowth Communism of *Critique of the Gotha Program*, 1870s-1880s, which disavows growth but affords sustainability.

This final Green Marx is the position Saito takes and argues we must take – degrowth communism. 'Sustainable development' is held to be oxymoronic and greenwashing at its ideological best. There cannot, on this planet with its run-down resources, be development and growth as well as sustainability. Saito identifies the incessant growth model of capitalist economics as the problem - infinite accumulation on a finite planet. "Can this type of growth really be compatible with the planet's limitations?" (34) he asks, and no it can't, he answers. This must stop if the challenge of the climate crisis is to be seriously met. He proposes a form of slowing down the economy to somewhat of a halt, with degrowth initiatives organised by democratic socialism from below and originating from the commons. Eventually, with degrowth growing, the planet will be saved.

We are presented with four choices and four possible futures he suggests: Climate Fascism (with wealthy elites fighting off climate refugees); Climate Barbarism (with starvation, poverty, civil war, and unpleasant uprisings); Climate Maoism (with top-down climate change policies); and Degrowth Communism (a democratic 'commons' forms of mutual aid). It is the latter that will save us. No one wants fascism or barbarianism, and the practice-before-theory of Mao is apparently too scary for Saito to even discuss any further.

This all sounds quite radical, but one can see immediately that this will not affect power in any real sense, indeed the middle classes would love this new Green version of Marx suggesting we all just slow down a bit. It taps into the green-conscious consumption habits of meat-substitutes, recycled fashion, showers-instead-of-baths, thrift-shop upcycled furniture, wild gardening, 'plant a tree' initiatives, sharing our new solar panels on social media, cake-baking to save the whale, constant self-surveillance of one's carbon footprint, and green corridors for the bees.

Yes, remind me to tell the gardener to leave the privet hedge on South side of the borders of my expansive private property to grow a bit wild to create a corridor for the bees. 'But what will the neighbours think?' They will think I'm saving the planet. Now, off you go Geoffrey, don't forget your bicycle clips, that resource hungry military-industrial-oil complex needs all the middle-managers it can get.

Or, 'Daddy, daddy, what did you do during the climate war?' Well son, we made the necessary sacrifices, we took one less flight abroad per year, your mum went vegan for a week, and I'd labour every other Thursday with the wine bottles to leave near the recycling bin. These were dark days, my boy, before the series of isolated degrowth pre-industrial agrarian communes grew and grew and the siren call of eco-poetry and smell of freshly baked tofu was simply too much to resist. 'Wow dad, wow.'

Imagine if someone said, for instance, of the housing crisis that well, we just have to squeeze together a bit more, share our space, rough it out, there are simply not enough housing resources, we must degrow/despace/dehouse/dehome. This would very much suit the landlords supply and demand chain and there would, quite rightly be uproar from the left. The housing crisis is due to private ownership, there is no shortage of space – the problem is the ownership and control of housing and hoarding of 'private property'. Likewise with the environment – perhaps it is not about degrowth and personal austerity but about public ownership and proper management of the environment.

Saito has the very good intentions he decries in others. But it would be a shame if this is all that the radical left offers. Fortunately, it is not. What are the problems with Saito's degrowth? Apart from the [bad science and bad politics](#), it might be the focus on consumption habits and individual responsibility, rather than production and collective action. The focus on individualism, a neoliberal norm, is compliant with the oil industries marketing and billions spent on lobbying, donations to political parties, and influence. ExxonMobil advertisements, for instance, systematically worked to shift responsibility for global warming away from the fossil fuel industry and onto consumers. And the very notion of a personal 'carbon footprint' was first popularized in 2004-6 by oil firm BP. Again, this was to divert attention, divide and conquer, and make it all *your* consumer choice fault and therefore all *your* consumer choice solution.

It is focus on production instead, and collective action, that other voices on the radical left argue we need to converge on. We do not need degrowth, which puts demands on an already down-trodden working class without any resources to eschew in any case. Instead, we need fruitful jobs for the working class in galvanising projects to combat the climate crisis. This would be a revision of the Green New Deal on a planetary scale, with cooperative Internationalism, and a working class solidarity. As [Matt Huber](#) argues in *Climate Change as Class War – Building Socialism on a warming planet*, the working class are central to the solution: they have the numbers, a heritage of collective action, and a material interest in challenging the capitalist status quo. "The climate crisis gives us no other choice but to assert global control over our energy and emissions systems." (290) Huber admits that abolishing class and private property is unlikely to happen in time to avert climate catastrophe. We must start somewhere, however, and Huber suggests that this is by resuscitating the notion of the public good over private property. We need a public struggle, integrally involving unionised labour for public ownership of the power industry. We need a radical Red Marx not a cuddly Green Marx.