

A critique of Saito's *Slow Down*

Saito, Kohei. 2024. *Slow Down: How Degrowth Communism Can Save the Earth*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

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Introduction

This book has been remarkably popular, having sold half a million copies in Japan in its first two years. It adds weight to the growing discontent with capitalism and argues that the alternative must be a new form of communism. It is particularly valuable in drawing renewed attention to the changes in Marx's thinking during the last decade of his life. It is clearly expressed and easily followed. The book is welcome as offering another detailed and plausible case for scrapping capitalism, and for putting forward the general kind of alternative that most people in the degrowth movement are in favour of.

The novel aspect of the book is the grounding of "Degrowth Communism" on the late works of Marx. Saito is claiming that "Degrowth communism" is the answer to the global predicament, that Marx saw this, and that it and Marx's transition to this perspective are revealed by Marx's writings in this late period.

There are three major reasons for significant dissatisfaction with the book. The first is that although the lengthy critique of capitalism can be regarded as sound and persuasive, it could be stronger and does not seem to add significantly to the frequently stated case against it documented by reference to the many current global problems. Nevertheless, it is a useful summary, detailing many faults with the claim that capitalism can solve the major global problems confronting us (... such as Green Growth, technical fixes and the "decoupling claim".) and exploring basic counterarguments.

The second concern is that the nature of "Degrowth Communism" is hardly explained at all. Various utopian claims at an abstract level and vague level are stated but no detail about form and function is given and many questions remain unanswered. Some of these will be addressed below. However, it will be argued that Saito is correct regarding the general form that a sustainable and just society must take. The reasons will be detailed below, and a much more comprehensive and convincing account of the necessary alternative will be offered.

However, the main problem evident in the book is to do with Saito's account of the changes in Marx's thinking late in his life, and their significance for the form a satisfactory alternative society may take and the transition to it. The critique to follow is essentially that Saito's derivation of his "Degrowth Communism" solution is obviously invalid. It is not given by Marx and it does not follow from his late writings. The reasoning underlying Saito's claim is quite mistaken; the conclusion is

a non-sequitur and cannot be derived from Marx's writings. Saito makes far too much of what Marx has said in a brief letter, making claims that are not supported by the quoted writings. Yet Saito is absolutely certain both that Degrowth Communism is the answer and that Marx came to this conclusion.

It will be argued that the Simpler Way vision of the required alternative to be outlined below, and endorsed by many sustainability theorists and activists now, could actually be regarded as a kind of Degrowth Communism as described by Saito. However its form and the case for it go well beyond Saito's account.

The core claim and its invalidity

It is necessary to provide some background here on how Marx's views changed in the last years of his life, the huge significance of these changes, and what Marx said about them. Saito's case rests on what he said. Following is a rough but indicative outline of some key themes.

Marx's early works put forward an analysis of social change and capitalism's origins, history, nature and trajectory in which a number of elements were very confidently asserted. To summarise some of these crudely, the laws of history had been discovered, societies develop up a uni-dimensional slope leading to mature capitalism in which its contradictions would bring about its destruction. Undeveloped countries stagnating in squalor would eventually struggle up the slope, involving the dissolution of their tribal or peasant structures as they move towards revolution via capitalism. The development of industry would generate a working class which would be the agent of revolutionary change. The revolution will release the productive forces from the contradictions of capitalism to raise the living standards of the working class.

By the time Marx was old these kinds of principles had become gospel for large numbers of devotees, theorists and movements across Europe. However, Marx became concerned about the effects of capitalism on agriculture, especially the damage it caused to soils. He became acquainted with literature on the way the Russian peasants had farmed for long periods without ruining their lands, and this led him to devote years to learning about the social structures and systems involved in the peasant commune, the Mir. The central elements in this were collectivism, common lands, self-government, sustainability and stability.

Some within his circle began to question how this peasant model might fit into the taken-for-granted and long-standing Marxist general theory of change. Are peasant ways inevitably going to be eliminated by the maturing of capitalism, could they continue to exist after capitalism had been overthrown by the industrial working class, and could they contribute to the revolution?

One of Marx's greatest merits would seem to have been his conscientiousness and intellectual integrity. These questions fundamentally challenged his basic and widely accepted account of history, the future and social change. It seems that they came to impact on him very seriously. He might have clung to the old doctrines but throughout his last ten years he grappled with what this domain actually meant for the understanding of change and post-capitalist society, and for his widely accepted explanation. In this period of many years (suffering serious illness and poverty) he did not publish, taught himself Russian in order to study Russian peasant society, and took thousands of pages of hand-written notes.

Saito rightly points to the profundity of the challenge. The Mir indicated a social form that was “... completely different from a ... view that sees the increase in productivity as the key to conquering nature and eventually overcoming capitalism.” It questioned “...the view of history as uni-dimensional progress, evident in the well-known dictum, “The country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future.” (Saito, p.13.) It challenged his earlier disdain for the peasant, and for “stagnant” India whose problems were “... precisely due to their steady-state economies.” (Saito p. 16.) It therefore took the incursion of a capitalist nation like Britain to drive history from the outside. The Russian peasant commune confronted the previous productivism and Eurocentrism central in Marx’s account.

The crucial turning point came in the form of a letter sent to Marx by Vera Zusulch, a revolutionary, asking about the fate and role and future of the Russian peasant communes (in which the majority of Russians lived at that time.) Marx’s reply to the letter is taken by Saito to reveal the radical change in his thinking and in his conversion to Degrowth Communism. Marx took a long time to reply, writing four drafts, one 4,500 words long and two of 2,000 words, before finally sending a 350-word reply. (These can be found at Militant Archive, Undated.) Saito’s book is built on his interpretation of this reply, and the following argument is that his interpretation is clearly grossly mistaken.

As in the drafts, most of the final letter is barely relevant, dealing with the history of the peasantry etc. Marx says that his account of history applies only to Western Europe, meaning that it should not be taken to state what will happen to the Russian peasantry. “The “historical inevitability” of this course is therefore expressly restricted to the countries of Western Europe.” This did not align with general laws of history, which determine that what happens in Europe will “show the way” to the rest of the world. And it indicates that there is not necessarily just one path out of capitalism.

The crucial two sentences in the reply are,

“The analysis in Capital therefore provides no reasons either for or against the vitality of the Russian commune. But the special study I have made of it, including a search for original source material, has convinced me that the commune is the fulcrum for social regeneration in Russia. But in order that it might function as such, the harmful influences assailing it on all sides must first be eliminated, and it must then be assured the normal conditions for spontaneous development...”

There are two critical points here. The first is, what does Marx mean by the ten words, “... the commune is the fulcrum for social regeneration in Russia”? There seems to be no way of knowing, and it could mean any of a wide variety of things, including that the revolution is going to be determined by peasants not the industrial working class. But the second sentence seems to make it clear that any progressive role of the commune can only be fulfilled after the revolution when the forces repressing it have been overcome. It is not clear whether the commune can overcome them or it has to wait until some other player removes them. The former interpretation would mean that the commune can be a major revolutionary agent.

The long time it took to send the letter and the scrapped draft would seem to indicate that Marx hoped the final letter would suffice as an escape from his predicament. Saito’s suggests that being confronted with this conundrum contradicting his previously fundamental doctrine on the mission

of the industrial working class explains why he went for years without finishing the remaining volumes of Capital.

But our concern here is with what Saito makes of this encounter with the peasant commune. Following are reasons for concluding that he builds far too much on it, via clearly faulty logic.

What precisely is Saito saying?

It should be pointed out that Saito's argument is derived only from the letter; he does not refer to other writings or evidence, apart from where he comments on the Gotha Program, but it is not clear what point he is trying to make there, and it does not seem to provide any support for his claims. Saito is making two major claims. The first is, as he says several times, the letter is saying that Marx has shifted his outlook to the adoption of Degrowth Communism. The heading for one section (p. 121) is "MARX'S MOVEMENT TOWARDS DEGROWTH" but that is a heroic interpretation of what the letter is saying.

Saito claims that, "The main thing the letters are saying is that Russia could transition to communism without passing through ... a capitalist stage of development." (Saito, p.110.) Marx's letter "... represents a fundamental change in the nature of Marx's conception of communism itself, its new face revealed at the end of his life." "What Marx achieved at the end of his life was a vision of degrowth communism." (Saito, p. 110.)

Saito says communism "...has various possible definitions. I stand with Marx's definition at the end of his life". But in his voluminous writings Marx had little to say about the nature of communism, apart from that it would involve each contributing according to abilities and receiving according to needs. Saito does not show that Marx defined it as he claims. At one point (p.129) he recognises that "Marx left behind no piece of writing laying out exactly what his vision of degrowth communism might be."

Carson (2021) indicates that Marx saw the commune as a model, without causal significance. "Marx saw cooperatives mainly as a demonstration effect of what was possible, and not as a primary approach to constructing socialism within the interstices of the capitalist economy." A minor point here is that Saito says that this change "...is the aspect of Marx's thought that has not been fully investigated previously." (Saito, p.113.) It is "... a version of Marx never before contemplated..." (Saito, p.129.) Saito's interpretation might not have been previously contemplated but the change in Marx's thinking was thoroughly discussed forty years ago by the eight authors contributing to the 1983 book Shanin edited, *Late Marx and the Russian Road*, and by others such as Dussel, (1990), and Chatctopadhyay (Undated.) Saito knows this because he refers to Shanin's book.

Saito 's second major claim is that Marx is saying that the commune can have a causal role in the revolution. Cause is assumed in the statement, "... Marx ends up asserting a form of Western European society founded on principles of sustainability and equality that it's precisely the steady state of the commune's economy that allows it not only to resist colonial domination but also to hold within it the possibility of toppling the power of capital and achieving communism." (Saito, p 123.) On pp. 126-7 he says Marx came to "... the point of imagining degrowth communism as a project that might truly topple Western European capitalism." "Toppling" is a strong causal term.

A statement on p. 121 seems to be stating a causal claim. "...the question posed by this Russian activist provided the opportunity for Marx to reimagine the ideal way to bring about a form of Western European society founded on principles of sustainability and equality." However, the words "bring about" could conceivably mean only that the commune is a model or goal. The term "fulcrum" in the letter also suggests a causal significance. Another phrase seems to have a causal implication; "If the communes were left in their original form in Russia, the transition to communism could take place there based on their power." (He says (p. 123) that after their liberation they would adopt modern technology, further confusing the intended form).

The letter does not contradict the central Marxist claim that the transition from capitalism must involve the maturation of capitalism, including the modernisation of the technical machinery. As Smith says, the standard view is that "... capitalism is a necessary step on the path towards an abundant socialist society – and that only by capitalising on social-technological advances within capitalism can the working class then bring about a socialist world." He says Marx "...does not deny that capitalism is a necessary step..." Huber and Phillips (2024) make the same point.

This weighs heavily against the suggestion that the commune can have a causal role in the elimination of capitalism. It means that its transcendence will be due to processes which, among other things, liberate the commune. As Hubert and Phillips say, "... the Russian *mir* could leapfrog capitalist development because capitalist development had occurred elsewhere."

At no point in any of the drafts did Marx suggest humanity as a whole could have taken a non-capitalist path through to communism.

This also weighs against the notion that the commune can be a model for society in general. The form of post-capitalist society will have matured to become for instance capable of providing modern machinery. It is conceivable that the commune might continue as an atypical kind of sub-system within an industrialised etc. society, but this would seem to contradict any notion that it could be a model or a fulcrum. Again, the flourishing of the commune will be enabled by the revolution that takes place somewhere else, not a cause of it or the form post-capitalist society could take.

These two claims are clearly incorrect; they do not represent what Marx is saying in the letter, or anywhere else. Marx says nothing in the letter about having come to envision a new form of communism, or that the Russian peasant commune is a model for post-capitalist society, or that the commune can be a causal agent in a transition. At best Marx can be interpreted as having come to appreciate the peasant commune, and to think that it could go directly to communism after the revolution that removed its oppression. The claims are no more than utterly implausible interpretative leaps, or imaginations of what Marx might conceivably be thinking.

To summarise, it would be inaccurate to say that Saito's case is flimsy. It would be more appropriate to say that he does not present a case at all; he merely asserts a conclusion, which is no more than an interpretation lacking any rational support. He goes from a vague ten-word statement to adamant conclusions and a book about Marx having shifted to a new complex grand theory containing many elements that contradict his old theory, and this leap is illogical. Various reviewers see this but do not analyse it or show the invalidity. Ahern (2024) regards the leap as problematic. Graham-Leigh (2024) says, "Saito's interpretation of Marx is decidedly controversial." Gibson and Empson are more accurate; "Saito's insistence that Marx developed a "degrowth"

framework in this period is fundamentally mistaken and lacks any clear evidence from Marx's work." Huber and Phillips (2024) say the derivation is "...utterly unconvincing." Smith (2024) makes much the same point.

Above all, it is not clear what all this has to do with degrowth. Saito endorses and dwells on the collectivism, sustainability, equity and especially the stability of the commune, but does not discuss the fact that it's "living standards" were very low, and the book gives hardly any attention to any need for rich countries to degrow down to such levels. (It is argued below that a sustainable and just world cannot be achieved unless there is degrowth down to a very small proportion of present rich world per capita levels of consumption.) Saito does not discuss what our lifestyles and systems might be like under Degrowth Communism; nor does Marx.

What, after all, is "Degrowth Communism"?

Saito provides almost no detail on its nature, beyond the frequent reference to those four elements evident in the Russian commune, viz., stability, collectivism, equality and sustainability. We are given no information on the many questions that arise when "communism" is being advocated. Would there be a state? Will it be an industrial society, with big cities, heavy industry, technocrats and nationwide bureaucracies, or made up of small isolated self-governing communities. How will things be governed, by an authoritarian top-down apparatus, or is it to be a form of bottom-up Anarchism (...which is a term that does not seem to appear in the book.)

It is not clear why Saito applies the term "degrowth" to what he thinks Marx is for. Marx became interested in the commune through his concern with the destructive effect capitalism was having on agriculture, and this led him to be impressed by the fact that the commune did not have this effect. It was the stability of the commune that seems to have been upper-most in Marx's mind, its steady-state economy. He says nothing about any need for degrowth down to the commune's low living standards. All of the commune's four characteristics could be there in a society with very high and indeed, unsustainable living standards. Saito's use of the term would make sense if the post-capitalism goal was an economy delivering lower living standards than we have now, and again Marx does not discuss or advocate this. So, Saito has no justification for labelling what Marx is for as an instance of degrowth.

Saito does not clarify how Degrowth Communism compares with the commune. Is he saying that today we should adopt that social form, or a version of it? If the latter, what aspects are we to adopt? Late in the book he does endorse present day ventures illustrating localism but he says little or nothing on the major questions, such as how national societies will be governed or how high living standards will be.

Other statements seem to further confuse his position. Late in the book Saito gives five elements as defining Marx's idea of communism. These are, 1) the transition to an economy based on use-value, 2) the shortening of work hours, 3) the abolition of the uniform division of labour, 4) the democratization of the production process, and 5) the prioritization of essential work. (pp. 208,231-232.). These elements have nothing to do with degrowth. All could be achieved in a rapidly growing economy. On p.208, after discussing his ideal communism, he says "The result of all this would be the slowdown of the economy." This is not about degrowth; it seems to imply that the economy would still be growing.

Towards a more substantial case

Despite the insufficiency of Saito's account of post-capitalist society, he is heading in the right direction. The rapidly increasing degrowth movement and the many associated movements such as those for Ecovillages, Transition Towns and Voluntary Simplicity recognise that a sustainable and just society has to be characterised by localism, collectivism, grass roots action, participatory decision making, stable economies and small self-governing communities. Following is an indication of the detailed case that can be given for this general vision, and of how far short of it Saito's account falls. Most importantly it reveals Saito's fundamental mistake. Post-capitalist society cannot be Socialist or Communist; it must be Anarchist.

The discussion here must begin with an understanding of the magnitude of the degrowth required, which Saito does not recognise. When this is understood, many aspects of post-capitalist society are determined and more or less beyond dispute. Global rates of resource consumption and ecological impact are now far beyond levels that are sustainable, or that technical advance could make sustainable. Rich world per capita levels of consumption could never be extended to all the world's people. Trainer (2021) provides a numerical argument, based on the World Wildlife Footprint indices, that for a sustainable and just world rich world per capital levels of consumption and GDP would probably have to be reduced to less than 20% of their current levels. There are a number of factors that would worsen the multiple significantly, especially the fact that economic growth is constantly increasing. (See TSW Decoupling, 2024.)

The only social form that can accommodate this finding while ensuring a high quality of life for all people is that which has been labelled "The Simpler Way". (TSW 2020.) This involves most people living in small, highly self-sufficient and self-governing cooperative communities in control of their local economies, which are not driven by profit, market forces or growth. This kind of society cannot function unless there has been profound cultural change, to a willing concern to embrace far simpler lifestyles and systems.

This conclusion could only be refuted by demonstrating that technical advance will enable an enormous absolute decoupling of resource demand and ecological damage from GDP growth. There is now extensive and clear evidence that this is not happening and is not possible. (Haberle 2020, Parrique 2019, Kallis and Hickel 2019, Lenzen et al. 2022, Zheng 2018.) Saito argues against the possibility of decoupling but does not refer to these studies.

The reason why this social form would have to be adopted is made clear by a study of egg supply by Trainer, Malik and Lenzen (2019.) The dollar and energy cost of eggs supplied via the typical supermarket path were found to be over 100 times those of eggs produced in backyards and village cooperatives. The smallness of scale, and the proximity and integration of functions enables many very large savings in resource use. For instance, all "wastes" can be returned to soils by being fed to nearby animals or taken to compost heaps and methane digesters which yield useful gas. There would be no need for a chicken feed or fertilizer industry given the closed nutrient recycling loop and free ranging, or for a sewage treatment industry. People could walk or use bicycles to get to the nearby "work" of looking after poultry. There would be no need for marketing, packaging, transport, electricity or fuel, chemical industry inputs, agribusiness feed production, factory farming, corporate bureaucracies, insurance, OH and S, or offices containing expensive technocrats and computers. The "work" would be carried out by rosters and informal arrangements among ordinary people, adding to leisure activities and reinforcing community solidarity.

These elements would be evident in most other productive domains within the local economy. Saito does not mention these kinds of processes and effects and their ecological significance. He refers only to factors such as stability and collectivism as the important merits of the new way.

There are many other structures and processes that the above degrowth multiple determines, such as the need for highly self-sufficient local economies under the control of towns and regions, not driven by profit and market forces (although there could be a minor role for both.) Town working bees and committees would enable management of planning, production and maintenance, eliminating the need for distant councils. Many goods and services would come freely from the many commons, the orchards, forest gardens, woodlots, ponds, community workshops etc.

Most production of the mostly simple goods and services required could be via craft and hobby means, enabling production to be enjoyable and fulfilling artistic activity, as William Morris wished. Decision making would be via town assemblies and thoroughly participatory democracy. Unemployment and poverty would be easily eliminated; communities would make sure that everyone would have a respected livelihood.

Many people living simply with access to many free goods would need to work for money only a few days a week. Wealth, money and property would not be important, because all would recognise that their quality of life, their welfare, would depend entirely on how well the town was functioning. This situation requires contributions from good conscientious, generous citizens and making these contributions rewards and reinforces these dispositions. Saito does not go into any of these structures and processes.

In a situation where it is obvious that the welfare of the individual depends heavily on the welfare of the town and the maintenance of empowerment, conscientiousness, care, and pride in the town there are not likely to be significant problems of poverty, exclusion", loneliness, depression, mental illness, domestic violence or drug and alcohol abuse. Thus, there is likely to be negligible need for expenditure on psychiatric services, police, courts and prisons.

Conclusion

A final criticism of Saito emerges from this Simpler Way understanding of the basic form that post capitalist society must have. It will not be a Socialist society, let alone a Communist society. It must be an Anarchist society, and the difference is profound. The Simpler Way contradicts the fundamental assumption in Socialist thinking, the centralised control by a state that rules us, whether in a benign way through elected representatives, or by oppressive authoritarians. The required way does not involve state power. There will be a need for a remnant "state" in the form of a relatively small administrative apparatus overseeing the implementation of policies decided down at the level of the town assemblies. Thus, the small communities manifest the Anarchist principle of "subsidiarity", having decisions made at the lowest level possible, and the principle of "spontaneity" whereby many functions and needs are dealt with by informal cooperation among ordinary citizens. The overriding concern is for the welfare of the town, its people and the local ecosystems it depends on. Thus, mutually beneficial solutions are sought. Above all the concern would be the central Anarchist determination to minimise or eliminate the domination of some by others.

The key to the viability of such communities is cultural. Obviously, all citizens must share some specific ideas and values, especially willing acceptance of radically simpler ways. The marked extent to which these can reduce resource consumption without jeopardising the quality of life is illustrated by Trainer (2022a, 2023.) These ideas and values cannot be given or enforced by the centralised state. They can only emerge as “ordinary” citizens at the grass roots local level grapple with deteriorating conditions as the coming time of great troubles impacts. (See on transition theory: Trainer 2020.)

This perspective means that standard Socialist assumptions concerning the nature of post-capitalist society and the strategy for achieving it are mistaken. These communities cannot be run by the centralised state, citizens must rule themselves (within national laws and arrangements.) And the standard Socialist transition strategy, “taking state power”, which might have made sense in previous revolutionary situations, is now also mistaken. The state cannot initiate the required kind of communities, and a state that wanted to establish them could not be elected unless people in general had previously come to be committed to a Simpler Way vision. Again, the cultural revolution must come first; change in structures would then be consequences of the revolution, not initiators of it. (For a detailed criticism of the significance of Socialism for this revolution see Trainer 2018, 2022b.)

The foregoing analysis of Saito’s logic shows that the popularity of his book cannot be attributed to a convincing argument. It is likely that as Graham-Leigh says, it reflects the now widespread discontent with capitalism and the eagerness to consider alternatives. The book is a mixed blessing, containing lengthy and sound explanations of the need for system change and arguments against defences commonly advanced for it such as Green New Deal and decoupling. The latter pages are also valuable in pointing to some of the many impressive alternative local initiatives that are emerging such as in Barcelona. The book will be making a significant contribution to raising awareness of the need to transcend capitalism and of the kind of alternative needed. However, it is unfortunate that it is framed around an attention-gabbing claim for which no convincing support is given. Huber and Phillips see the book as “... a *desperate* attempt to contort Marx and Marxism into a post-1970s environmental and degrowth ideology.”

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