

# Review: On Kohei Saito, Marx and Ecosocialism

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## ***Karl Marx's Ecosocialism***

### ***Capitalism, Nature, and the Unfinished Critique of Political Economy***

**By Kohei Saito**

**New York: Monthly Review Press, 2017, 308 pages, \$29 paperback.**

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MAINSTREAM ECOLOGISTS OFTEN dismiss Karl Marx as “productivist” and blind to ecological problems. A growing body of eco-Marxist writings that sharply contradicts this conventional wisdom has been recently developed in the United States.

The pioneers of this new research were John Bellamy Foster and Paul Burkett, followed by Ian Angus, Fred Magdoff and others. They contributed to transforming *Monthly Review* into an eco-marxist journal. Their main argument is that Marx was highly aware of the destructive consequences for the environment of capitalist accumulation, a process which he described by the concept of metabolic rift.

One may disagree with some of their interpretations of Marx's writings, but their research was decisive for a new understanding of his contribution to the ecological critique of capitalism.

Kohei Saito is a young Japanese Marxist scholar who belongs to this important eco-marxist school. His book, published by Monthly Review Press, is a very valuable contribution to the reassessment of the Marxian heritage, from an ecosocialist perspective.

## **Restoring Unity**

One of the great qualities of Saito's work is that — unlike many other scholars — he does not treat Marx writings as a systematic body of writing, defined from beginning to end by a strong ecological commitment (according to some), or a strong un-ecological tendency (according to others).

As Saito very persuasively argues, there are elements of continuity in Marx's reflection on nature, but also some very significant changes and re-orientations. Moreover, as the book's subtitle suggests, his critical reflections on the relation between political economy and natural environment are “unfinished. ”

Among the continuities, one of the most important is the issue of the capitalist “separation” of humans from earth, i.e. from nature. Marx believed that in pre-capitalist societies there had existed

a form of unity between of the producers and the land. He saw restoring the original unity between humans and nature, destroyed by capitalism, but on a higher level (negation of the negation) as one of the key tasks of socialism.

This explains Marx interest in pre-capitalist communities, both in his ecological discussion (for instance of Carl Fraas) or in his anthropological research (Franz Maurer): both authors were perceived as “unconscious socialists.”

In his last important document, the letter to Vera Zassoulitsch (1881), Marx claims that thanks to the suppression of capitalism, modern societies could return to a higher form of an “archaic” type of collective ownership and production.

I would argue that this belongs to the “romantic anti-capitalist” moment in Marx’s reflections. In any case, this interesting insight of Saito is most relevant today when indigenous communities in the Americas, from Canada to Patagonia, are in the front line of the resistance to capitalist destruction of the environment.

## **An Evolution in Thought**

Saito’s main contribution, however, is to show the movement, the evolution of Marx’s reflections on nature, in a process of learning, rethinking and reshaping his thoughts. Before *Capital* (1867) one can find in Marx’s writings a rather uncritical assessment of capitalist “progress,” an attitude often described by the vague mythological term “Prometheanism.”

This is obvious in *The Communist Manifesto*’s celebration of capital’s “subjection of nature’s forces to man” and the “clearing of whole continents for cultivation;” but it also applies to the *London Notebooks* (1851), the *Economic Manuscripts of 1861-63*, and other writings from those years.

Curiously in my own view, Saito seems to exempt the *Grundrisse* (1857-58) from his criticism. This exception is not justified, considering how much Marx in this manuscript admires “the great civilising mission of capitalism” in relation to nature and to the pre-capitalist communities, prisoners of their localism and their “idolatry of nature”(!)

The change comes in 1865-66, when Marx discovers, by reading the writings of the agricultural chemist Justus Von Liebig, the problems of soil exhaustion, and the metabolic rift between human societies and the natural environment.

This will lead, in *Capital* volume 1 (1867), but also in the two other unfinished volumes, to a much more critical assessment of the destructive nature of capitalist “progress,” particularly in agriculture. After 1868, through reading another German scientist, Carl Fraas, Marx will discover also other important ecological issues, such as deforestation and local climate change.

According to Saito, if Marx had been able to complete volumes II and III of *Capital*, he would have more strongly emphasized the ecological crisis. This also at least implies that in the unfinished state in which Marx left these volumes, there wasn’t a strong enough emphasis on those issues.

This leads to my main disagreement with Saito. In several passages of the book he asserts that for Marx “the environmental unsustainability of capitalism is the contradiction of the system” (142, emphasis by Saito); or that in his late years he came to see the metabolic rift as “the most serious problem of capitalism;” or that the conflict with natural limits is, for Marx, “the main contradiction of the capitalist mode of production.”

I wonder where Saito found in Marx's writings, published books, manuscripts or notebooks, any such statements. They are not to be found, and for a good reason.

The unsustainability of the capitalist system was not the decisive issue in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that it has become today, or more accurately since 1945. Ian Angus most cogently argues that this is when human activity began to constitute the dominant shaper of the planetary environment. He sees this as when the planet entered a new geological era, the "Anthropocene."

Moreover, I believe that the metabolic rift, or the conflict with natural limits is not adequately described as a "problem of capitalism" or "contradiction of the system."

It is much more! It's a contradiction between the system and "the eternal natural conditions" (Marx), and therefore a conflict with the natural conditions of human life in the planet.

In fact, as Paul Burkett (quoted by Saito) argues, capital can continue to accumulate under any natural conditions, however degraded, so long as there is not a complete extinction of human life. Indeed, human civilization can disappear before capital accumulation becomes impossible.

Saito concludes his book with a sober assessment that seems to me a very apt summary of the issue: *Capital* (the book) remains an unfinished project.

Marx did not answer all questions nor predict today's world. But his critique of capitalism provides an extremely helpful theoretical foundation for the understanding of the current ecological crisis.

Therefore, I would add, ecosocialism can build on Marx's insights, but must fully develop a new, eco-marxist, confrontation with the challenges of the Anthropocene in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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**P.S.**

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