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Writing a book on communism in the 21st century

Kohei Saito

Today, rising economic inequality, ecological degradation, and the erosion of democracy have plunged Western values into a deep crisis. The normative force of modern ideals – universal human rights, progress, justice – proves ineffective against xenophobia, genocide, and the climate crisis. The Global South's critique of these ideals as hypocritical and double-standard seems entirely justified. In fact, Western elites passionately defend these "universal" values against Russia, China, and Hamas, while they remain indifferent to the suffering and death in the Global South. This hypocrisy undermines their credibility, exposing the modern concepts of progress, emancipation, and autonomy as tools for masking ongoing colonial violence, environmental destruction, and unequal exchange. We may well be witnessing the new era of the "end of progress."

This situation has serious consequences for both proponents of capitalism and progressives alike. The emancipatory power of critical theory appears exhausted. Despite the deepening polycrisis (Albert 2024), critical theory is not able to engage effectively with the brutal reality. This reflects a deeper crisis within *normative* critical theory itself, namely, its normative critique of capitalism as such. Abstract meta-critique of capitalism has little relevance to those who suffer exploitation and oppression in their everyday life. Critical theory especially after Jürgen Habermas avoids direct political engagement in the face of concrete issues by devoting their theoretical investigation to *meta*-critique by asking what are general conditions and criteria under which capitalism can be adequately called wrong or bad rather than directly addressing its flaws and proposing solutions (e.g., Jaggie 2013).

The retreat to the meta question already began with the first generation of the Frankfurt School, who witnessed the waning revolutionary power of the working class in post-WWII Western societies. The welfare state's redistributive policies and rising wages obscured capitalism's inherent flaws, necessitating a deeper investigation into the post-war regime of stable capital accumulation. As the law of immiseration appeared less relevant due to improved material conditions for the working class, the Frankfurt School increasingly focused on cultural and psychological issues like alienation, atomization, and conformity under late capitalism, rather than on exploitation, immiseration, and economic crisis (Benanav and Clegg 2018).

To justify the importance of critical theory in the face of capitalism's apparent success in delivering prosperity and affluence to many, Adorno and Horkheimer felt compelled to establish normative criteria for critiquing capitalism. This was crucial after the working class retreat from revolutionary struggle. This necessity, however, contributed to the shift in Western Marxism from political economy to philosophy (Anderson 1976).

This attitude of Western Marxism is no longer valid today. The devastating power of capitalism is coming back, together with the law of immiseration as well as planetary environmental destruction. In this situation, it hardly makes sense to keep asking what is wrong about capitalism and to attempt to establish some normative criteria to criticize it. That capitalism is bad (especially for the environment) is almost a commonplace. What is at stake today is whether critical theory turns into something "positive" – in contrast to its fetish for "negativity" – offering a concrete vision of the future.

Of course, the absence of a positive vision of the future is not simply a problem of critical theory. The whole tradition of Marxism has been characterized by the so-called *Bilderverbot*, which recommends not to

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provide a blueprint of future society. This originates from Marx himself. Famously, he wrote that he "confine[d himself] to the mere critical analysis of actual facts, instead of writing recipes … for the cook-shops of the future" (Marx 1976, 99).

This attitude is no longer justified today, when people are looking for an alternative vision of the future due to their daily sufferings and hardships. The collapse of "actually existing socialism" made Marxism and socialism obsolete in the 1990s even for the left, but precarious jobs, stagnating wages, and rising economic inequality as well as planetary ecological crisis have generated renewed interest in his critique of capitalism in the last two decades, especially among younger generations (Milburn 2019). In the absence of a left-wing alternative, right-wing populism profits from the situation, mobilizing discontent among the masses much more effectively.

Certainly, the new emancipatory project is not mere nostalgia for an old critique of capitalism. Today's critical conjuncture inevitably demands a radical reconceptualization of the modern idea of freedom and emancipation. What is at stake is whether a self-critical reexamination of the Western intellectual tradition can offer an alternative vision to neoliberal capitalism that is able to regenerate the critical power of reason. For this theoretical endeavor, I believe that Karl Marx remains an essential reference point. Clearly, it is pointless to repeat the old socialist dogmas, which not only failed in the USSR but were also criticized by various progressive movements. The new vision of the future must be radically different from the old ones.

This is how I started my project for *Slow Down* (Saito 2024). I also belong to this post-Soviet generation, and I started my activism for rebuilding anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, and ecological movements in Japan in the aftermath of the Iraq War, the economic crisis of 2008, and the nuclear disaster in Fukushima in 2011. In order to reformulate a Marxian critique of capitalism in the 21st century, it was essential to respond to various criticisms from environmental, feminist, and post-colonial movements. In attempting to provide an alternative vision to mainstream ideas of green growth, sustainable development goals (SDGs), and environmental, social and governance (ESG), *Slow Down* largely drew upon Marx's critique of capitalism. This is because recent publication of new materials in the *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA) provides a foundation for a radically different interpretation of Marx's communism (Saito 2017). The MEGA turns out to be especially useful for revealing unknown aspects of his intellectual development during the last 15 years of his life. Interestingly, the late Marx confronted a series of problems like productivism, Eurocentrism, and anthropocentrism, as we still do today. This is why his last vision of post-capitalism, which should be characterized as "degrowth communism," matters more than ever in the Anthropocene.

Surprisingly, the idea of degrowth communism has resonated strongly in Japan, and *Slow Down* sold more than half a million copies despite its radical proposals. The key background is that the Japanese economy has stagnated for over three decades. Attempts to revive it through structural reforms and quantitative easing have failed. With a rapidly aging population and a reluctance among the homogenous society to accept immigrants, sustained economic growth seems increasingly unlikely. Consequently, calls for degrowth have gained traction. However, this has often created intergenerational tension, as degrowth advocates – frequently retired professors who benefited from Japan's economic golden age, such as Chizuko Ueno, Kazuo Mizuno, and Tatsuru Uchida – are perceived by those who entered the workforce after the 1991 economic bubble (the generation of "the Unemployment Ice Age") as advocating for degrowth at the expense of a generation facing precarious employment and low wages. These younger individuals feel that the older generation, having enjoyed economic prosperity in their youth and now receiving substantial pensions, is advocating for degrowth policies that unfairly burden those who have faced hardship.

In this context, *Slow Down* offered a different perspective, which contributed to the popularity of its argument. As a millennial who came of age after Japan's economic bubble and during a period of prolonged stagnation, I experienced the 2008 financial crisis firsthand during my senior year of college. My generation harbors no illusions about perpetual growth or economic recovery in Japan; instead, stagnant wages, precarious employment, and widening economic inequality are perceived as the realities of capitalism. Furthermore, the impetus for degrowth stems not merely from an aging population but also from the climate crisis, a concern largely neglected by previous generations. *Slow Down*'s advocacy for degrowth communism resonated powerfully with those seeking alternatives to neoliberal policies.

This does not deny the popularity of the book among older generations. Here communism played an important role. Japan is a unique capitalist country, where Marxism became the strongest intellectual trend after WWII. Unlike my generation, older generations were thus more exposed to Marxist ideas when they studied at university in the 70s and 80s. This tradition declined quite rapidly after 1991, for obvious reasons. Today, Marxian economics is almost completely eradicated from the curriculum of the department of economics, and I am now the only professor

of Marxism at the University of Tokyo. In this situation, it is very rare to see open criticism of capitalism. The paradoxical situation is that due to the weakening of the left, the contradictions of capitalism become more obvious, but the very weakness of the left and the conservative character of Japanese society make it hard to advocate radical left-wing ideas. It was in the middle of this intellectual desert that my book, which combines the rich tradition of Japanese Marxism and the new findings of the *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe* from German, created a revival of Marxism.

Of course, a single book does not radically transform the conservative character of Japanese society and the weakness of today's progressive movements. Climate justice movements are much smaller in Japan compared to, say, in Germany. Nevertheless, the influence of the unexpected success was discernible in 2021 when the prime minister, Fumio Kishida, started to criticize his own party's neoliberal policies in the last 20 years during his first speech in parliament and put forward "New Capitalism" as his main policy to fight social problems that became apparent during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Kishida's attempt to reform neoliberal capitalism ultimately proved insufficient, leading to his resignation in September 2024. Meaningful reforms to the financial markets, tax system, and energy sector were impossible without the strong pressure of social movements. However, *Slow Down* suggests that transformative ideas can still shift the political discourse, even within a conservative society like Japan.

The significance of degrowth extends beyond Japan, as evidenced by *Slow Down*'s translation into eighteen languages. Germany, another aging nation, is entering a period of non-economic growth, a challenging time exacerbated by inflation, the war in Ukraine, and the rise of right-wing populism. The experiences of Japan and Germany – both post-WWII economic powerhouses – demonstrate that sustained growth is not always attainable. However, acknowledging the planet's finite resources reveals that perpetual growth is neither necessary nor desirable. It is time to critically assess the true costs of a growth-oriented society and explore radical alternatives to capitalism by engaging with the ideas of Karl Marx rather than dismissing him outright.

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