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Environment

Was Marx an ecosocialist? A reply to Kohei Saito.

- IV Online magazine - 2020 - IV540 - January 2020 -

Publication date: Sunday 12 January 2020

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Kohei Saito's book *Marx's Ecosocialism* is an essential contribution to the current debates on Marxism and the environmental question. [1] What makes Saito's work particularly interesting is that it traces the evolution of Marx's thought from a "productivist" to an "anti-productivist" vision of human development, in particular by incorporating natural limits into perspectives for agriculture. This historical approach allows the author to transcend the quarrels between Marxists who see Marx's ecology as a glass which is empty, half empty, half full or full.

Thanks to careful reading of Marx's *Notebooks*, Saito brilliantly shows how Marx abandoned the idea that agricultural productivity could increase indefinitely under socialism until, in 1865-1868, he came to the opposite conclusion that only socialism could stop the absurd and destructive capitalist tendency to unlimited growth.

John Bellamy Foster, in his book *Marx's Ecology* [2], highlighted the impact of Liebig's work on Marx's understanding of the problem of soil depletion. Like Foster, Kohei Saito considers that the disruption of the exchange of matter between humanity and nature (metabolic rift) - caused by the combined processes of enclosures, capitalist industrialization, urbanization and the breaking of the cycle of nutrients that resulted - is a fundamental concept of "Marx's ecology".

But Saito goes further: he shows that Marx, because he still believed in the unlimited potential of agricultural production, was initially interested in Liebig because the German chemist provided arguments against Ricardo's "law of diminishing agricultural returns" and Malthus's "theory of absolute overpopulation". However, in the seventh edition of his "Agricultural Chemistry", Liebig distanced himself from his own overly optimistic positions, "recognizing that there are natural limits to agricultural improvements" and concluding that fertilizers could not compensate for "robbery agriculture".

"Liebig did not highlight his change of position," says Saito. But Marx was so focused on the debate over the (non) proportionality between agricultural productivity and capital investment "that this hidden modification did not escape him." On the contrary, he remarked that "the new formulation [of Liebig] implied a critical point of view on agriculture subjected to profit by capitalist relations, incapable of improving the soil sustainably and in the long term".

For Saito, the German chemist's turn was "decisive" for Marx's break with productivism. Hence the fact that this rupture occurred "relatively late", from 1865. Saito writes: "In the London Notebooks, the Prometheanism of Marx is always discernible, but, having integrated Liebig's reversal, he corrected, during 1860s, his own optimistic view of the possibilities of agriculture."

Of course, Marx did much more than correct his vision based on the work of Liebig. The chemist was a great scientist but also an industrialist producing fertilizers for profit. He had no social or historical understanding of soil depletion. Marx, on the contrary, immediately perceived the parallel between the exploitation of labour and the destruction of nature by capital. From this moment, he saw the two phenomena as a common result of mediatization by the abstract value of the relationships between humans as well as between humans and their environment.

Kohei Saito rightly insists on the general importance in *Capital* of the concept of a humanity-nature "metabolic rupture". Even if Marx concentrated on agriculture and other sectors directly exploiting natural resources (forestry for example), it is obvious that the concept, for him, transcends the problem of soil exhaustion to include all trade of material (*Stoffwechsel*) between humanity and its environment. Agriculture is a starting point, because Marx had a major theoretical interest in the question of rent, and he saw the enclosures as "the great tearing apart" of the

relationships between humans and nature.

We can only agree with Saito when he emphasizes that Marx saw the “breaking of the metabolism” as a global phenomenon, aggravated in particular by the imperialist plunder of colonised countries, such as India and Ireland for example. Thus, Marx was aware that the nutrients included in Indian cotton manufactured in British factories would never return to the soils where the cotton had grown. This is another example showing that “Marx did not integrate Liebig’s theory passively but quite actively, applying it to his own political analysis.”

The historical approach by Saito to the evolution of Marx’s thought on the issue of natural limits is similar to that used Kevin Anderson in his book *Marx At The Margins*, devoted to non-Western societies - another area where the views of the author of *Capital* changed remarkably. For Saito, there is a link between these two research fields since Marx, in his Promethean period, “attributed soil depletion to the technological and moral backwardness of so-called primitive farming techniques.” In this regard, it is undoubtedly likely that “Marx’s critique of modernity deepened during his investigation of natural sciences in 1865” as Saito says.

On the basis of his careful study of Marx’s *Notebooks* Saito argues that Marx nuanced his enthusiasm for Liebig after 1868. The reasons could be twofold: first, Marx could only oppose the development of Malthusian tendencies in Liebig’s thinking; secondly, he discovered the work of other scientists, especially Fraas who defended the idea that nature, under certain climatic and alluvial conditions, could compensate for the loss in the soil of nutrients absorbed by plants.

For Fraas, Liebig “magnified the risk of soil depletion, in order to popularize his theory of fertilizer.” Moreover, Fraas also supported the idea that agriculture, because it involves deforestation, brings local climate change which in the long term results in the decline of civilization. It is clear that such a theory would stimulate Marx’s thinking on the conditions for a “rational management” of human-nature metabolism.

The concept advanced by Saito of an “unfinished critique of political economy”, particularly in the field of ecology, creates an adequate framework for debates between Marxists, not only on the assessment of the work of Marx but also on research fields open to continuing the development of an eco-socialist alternative.

I leave aside Saito’s criticisms of my own work on the theme of “Marx and ecology”. According to Saito, “Daniel Tanuro maintains that the Marx era is now so distant in terms of technology and natural sciences that his theory is not appropriate for a systematic analysis of current environmental issues, in particular because Marx did not pay enough attention to the specifics of fossil energy compared to other forms of renewable energy.” This criticism is so contrary to my writings for over 20 years that an answer is superfluous.

In my opinion, there is indeed something like an “ecology of Marx”, but it is incomplete and sometimes contradictory. If I really appreciate “Marx’s Ecosocialism”, it is precisely because Saito gives a dynamic, historical and consequently non-apologetic explanation of this incomplete and contradictory character. What is more, he gives this explanation without falling into the Althusserian theory (false, in my opinion) of the so-called “epistemological break” in the development of Marx’s thought.

It is certain that ecosocialists have different opinions on the degree of incompleteness and contradictions in Marx’s ecology. At the end of his chapter “Capital as a theory of metabolism”, Saito devotes a few pages to the “contradiction of capital in nature”. I am in general agreement with the content of this text, but it essentially consists of a (re) construction of Marx’s ecology by Saito himself. I admit that Marx could possibly have written something like this at the end of his life. But he did not, probably because he was not confronted with the global ecological crisis.

Saito says that Marx “did not elaborate on the waste of natural resources in as much detail as on the cruel exploitation of labour power”. It is indeed the least we could say. Therefore, it is, in my opinion, exaggerated and counterproductive to claim that Marx would have analysed “the problem of the ecological crisis as the central contradiction of the capitalist mode of production.”

It seems to me preferable to consider “Marx’s ecology” as an unfinished project. The practical question, therefore, is: “what should we, as ecosocialists, do to continue the work?” Obviously, the priority is to apply the brilliant concept of capitalist rupture of metabolism to ecological imbalances other than the depletion of soils, on which Marx focused. As far as I know, the possibility of a global energy imbalance in the Earth system due to the burning of fossil fuels did not catch his attention. It could have been otherwise - John Tyndall discovered the radiative power of CO₂ and other atmospheric gases in 1859. But Marx’s interest in science was mostly focused on other areas of research. (Let’s add that Fraas was talking about local climate change caused by deforestation, not global warming.)

But the most important ecosocialist task is clearly to identify new areas of research, fuelling new programmatic developments. In my view, three areas are particularly fertile from an ecosocialist point of view.

The first is the deep connection between the exploitation of nature, exploitation of labour and oppression of women by the patriarchy. Marx’s formula (in *Capital*) on “the only two sources of all wealth, nature and the worker”, takes into account neither the reproductive work mainly performed by women, nor the specific exploitation of female employees. This specific exploitation and oppression constitutes a pillar of capitalism, as important as the exploitation of nature and that of labour in general.

The second area is the necessary break with scientism. This is an important question because scientism had an influence on Marx (and even more on Marxists of the 20th century). As an example of this influence, I mentioned the fact that Marx considered the notion that certain plants could fix nitrogen from the air in soils as a fable. Saito replies that “it is expeditious to criticize Marx on this one point”: what Marx rejected as fable, according to him, was not the possibility of this mechanism but Lavergne’s idea that it could favour short term crop growth. However, I maintain my interpretation. I think there is little doubt that Marx in this quote expresses a disdain for what he sees as the superstitions of peasants (and those of indigenous peoples). We find a trace of this scientism in Marx’s admiration for Liebig’s theory that chemical nutrients are the main explanation for soil fertility: it is certain that peasants knew the role key of earthworms and other organisms of soil fauna – a role confirmed by Darwin in 1881 - but peasant knowledge did not hold the attention of Marx (who was on the other hand quite aware of the knowledge of artisans).

The third area is the place and the role of peasants in contemporary capitalism. Marx believed that peasants were doomed to disappear by the evolution of capital, but the reality was different. Because of the gap (identified by Marx) between production time and labour time in agriculture, capital chose not to invest directly in agriculture in the strict sense but to indirectly control upstream (machinery, seeds and so on) and downstream (processing, distribution and so on). The result of this process is that a large fraction of the peasantry (and even more of the landless peasantry) does not act as an intermediate class oscillating between bourgeoisie and proletariat but rather as a layer opposed to the multinationals and financial capital. This is why peasants often play a vanguard role in ecosocialist struggles, as seen in the action of Via Campesina. The strategic implications of this should be discussed carefully by ecosocialists.

In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels defined communism as “the real movement which abolishes the present state of things”. They added that “the conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence”. Because it defines “Marx’s ecosocialism” as an “unfinished criticism of political economy” and underlines the general direction of its development, the works of Kahei Saito constitute a powerful invitation to ecosocialists to unite in order to debate and collaborate in the elaboration of a new eco-communist program.

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[1] Kohei Saito, *Karl Marx's Ecosocialism. Capital, Nature and the Unfinished Critique of Political Economy*, Monthly Review Press, 2017.

[2] John Bellamy Fost *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature*, Monthly Review Press, 2000.