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Slow Down: How Degrowth Communism Can Save the Earth *Kohei Saito*
(translated by *Brian Bergstrom*), *Weidenfeld and Nicolson*, £22 –

[Review by Danny Dorling]

At the end of *Slow Down*, Kohei Saito, a young Japanese philosopher, calls for action this day, for the 99 per cent to be united, for the 1 per cent super-rich elites to be overthrown. Why? Because, ‘the only hope humanity has left for surviving the climate crisis and bringing about a sustainable, just society is degrowth communism’ (235).

‘*Slow Down*’ is the latest book to contribute thinking to the degrowth movement, a movement that has grown greatly over the last decade and has many merits, but this book is not the strongest in that field in making a convicting case, despite the original Japanese edition it being reported to have sold half-million copies. It may be partly that the subtlety of language in the original version has been a little lost in translation. However, I think that the message is not convincing and in this review aim to demonstrate that by quoting from the book, working backwards from its conclusion.

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The way forward presented in *Slow Down* is simple: ‘...we must choose communism. We must overcome our reflex to rely on experts and the state and proceed down the path to self-governance and mutual aid’ (185).

Saito believes he can already see a ‘groundswell’ in the American city of Detroit with the cultivation of ‘fruit and vegetables in the streets’ (191). The revolution has begun with urban organic farming, we are told, and will overthrow democracy. Democracy is still quite new in the lives of most older people or their parents in most of the world – but here we learn that it cannot prevail much longer. He writes: ‘In this, [Thomas] Piketty and I are in total agreement’. (187) This may be news to the French economist Piketty.

Long before this, however, Saito exhibits delusions of grandeur. In spelling out how his vision of degrowth might become real, the book begins: ‘I intend to excavate and build upon a completely new, previously unexplored facet of Marx’s thought that has been lying dormant for the past one hundred and fifty years’ (xvi).

In doing so, Saito lambasts a number of thinkers and writers for misunderstanding Marx: the British geographer David Harvey, the co-founder of Novara Media Aaron Bastani, the late French philosopher and sociologist Bruno Latour, the University of California sociologist Kevin Anderson – they all get it in the neck. Even Friedrich Engels is scolded for over-editing Marx. Each it would seem, falls short of Saito himself who, in *Slow Down*, completes what Marx ‘... started in *Capital* by fully theorizing what degrowth communism might look like, creating a major new analysis adequate to this new age’ (130).

Useful work is mentioned (should you be interested in degrowth), such as that of Jason Hickel, author of *Less is More*. Hickel's explanation that austerity generates growth by causing scarcity, whereas degrowth would require the provision of an abundance which, in Hickel's words, would 'render growth unnecessary' (173). Hickel demonstrates how most of the more interesting arguments in *Slow Down* have been explained elsewhere, and more convincingly.

Climate change also produces scarcity and thus a business opportunity, and it's here that 'Slow Down' is more effective: 'Climate change renders water, farmland and habitation scarce. As this scarcity rises, demand rises too, until it surpasses supply and provides a prime opportunity for capitalists to reap huge profits.' (160-161).

As to how we get what we need, the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers of 1844 is mentioned (168), but not why co-operative movements do not yet sufficiently scale-up or how that could be achieved. ON both co-ops and in general, the book provides more examples from the UK than anywhere else. But just as capitalism does not always produce artificial scarcity, thoughts formed in England are not the only fruit. The Mondragon Corporation is the world leader in the co-operative movement, but highlighting it's success might imply that there is an alternative to Saito's global vision already in existence.

Many problems blight Saito's recipe for revolution and a new world order. Here are just two relating to his framing of the 99 per cent and the 1 per cent.

First, the 99 per cent that he describes are not as one. Instead, they range from the poorest souls on Earth to those who are within a whisker of being in the top

1 per cent of the income or wealth distribution. Some are exploiters, others are entirely exploited.

Second, hardly any of the 1 per cent are the super-rich elite. On a global scale they are likely to include many people that the Western readers of this article will know. The potential readers of 'Slow Down' almost all live in rich countries. Many may not know they are in the global 1 per cent.

Nor is it true that, should global-warming melt a little more of the Antarctic ice sheets, the number of people who '...have to evacuate their current home [will be] in the hundreds of millions.'⁽⁵⁾ Climate change is far more predictable than, say, a nuclear Third World War, and will probably allow for regrettable but managed and slow relocation, not mass sudden evacuation.

Saito's writing also suffers from its reliance on the thinking of the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, in particular he may suffer from what the late sociologist Zygmunt Bauman said was Žižek's falsifying of the reality of communism. 'I am amazed (and angered!) by the widespread tendency to consider Žižek a left-wing person,' Bauman wrote in his final publication. Saito adopts Žižek's definitions of commons (91), his criticisms of Piketty (186), and his critique of Stiglitz (80, 136). Žižek is never questioned.

If you want to know what half a million¹ people in Japan have read about a particular take on Žižek's ideas, then read a copy of Slow Down. But if you want an understanding of where we might be heading and how hard it is to get there,

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/09/a-new-way-of-life-the-marxist-post-capitalist-green-manifesto-captivating-japan>

read Bauman's final book, *My Life in Fragments* – and heed his warning about ideas of Žižek's kind, reproduced here in Saito's words.

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Further Reading:

'Less is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World' by Jason Hickel (2021) or for a broader take on our past and the future 'Why Men?: A Human History of Violence and Inequality' by Nancy Lindisfarne and Jonathan Neale (2023).
