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Ecosocialism and critical agrarian studies

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ABSTRACT

This paper reconstructs Karl Marx's evolving vision of communism through ecological, agrarian, and decolonial debates. While early Marx was shaped by the trinity of productivism, Eurocentrism, and class reductionism, his later engagement with natural science, agronomy, and ethnology prompted a major reorientation. Influenced by critiques of soil exhaustion and studies of communal property in Ireland, Russia, and non-Western societies, Marx developed the concepts of metabolic rift and multilinear development. In his final years, he envisaged a sustainable, egalitarian, and resilient form of 'degrowth communism', offering a basis for renewed alliances among workers, peasants, feminist, ecological, and decolonial movements.

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Introduction

The end of history proclaimed after the collapse of the U.S.S.R. once consigned Marx to the status of a 'dead dog'. 'Capitalist realism' – 'it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism' (Fisher 2009, 1) – has long constrained our capacity to envision post-capitalist alternatives. Capitalism, meanwhile, has prospered from the stagnation of progressive movements since the 1990s, deepening economic inequality while intensifying environmental degradation. The state of the planet is now dire (Richardson et al. 2023): the yearly average temperature has already surpassed the 1.5° C threshold set by the Paris Agreement, and the measures adopted to avert climate breakdown remain manifestly inadequate.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to deny that capitalism both drives the socio-ecological crisis and obstructs the systemic transformation required to address it. Ambitious measures that could help restore the Earth system, such as abolishing the fossil-fuel industry (Malm 2021), strictly limiting industrial meat production (Vettese and Pendergrass 2022), and expanding nature preserves to restore biodiversity (Wilson 2016), remain unrealised because they would require the destruction of billions or even trillions of dollars in assets and the abandonment of future profits. Ecological survival in the

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Anthropocene demands a far more radical transformation that directly challenges the capitalist principle of profitability.

In this context, a growing number of people and movements have begun to question capitalism once more. Among the various strands of contemporary socialist politics, *eco-socialism* is emerging as a particularly influential counter-narrative. Since the early twenty-first century, scholarly and political interest in ecosocialist critiques of capitalism has expanded markedly (Burkett 1999; Foster 2000; Kovel 2007; Löwy 2015; Moore 2015; O'Connor 1998; Saito 2017). Consequently, the idea of ecological socialism has moved beyond a relatively small Marxist milieu (Klein 2014; Piketty 2024) and has become a widely adopted reference point for progressive movements engaged in anti-capitalist, ecofeminist and decolonial struggles.

To advance this emerging trend, the article calls for a renewed synthesis of eco-Marxism and Critical Agrarian Studies grounded in sustained dialogue and mutual engagement. Such collaboration has so far remained limited, largely due to what Edelman and Wolford (2017, 963) describe as an 'uneasy relation between Critical Agrarian Studies and Marxism'. Although Critical Agrarian Studies retains the Marxist legacy of analysing agrarian social classes as one of its key theoretical foundations (Akram-Lodhi et al. 2023, 3), a notable distance persists between ecosocialism and Critical Agrarian Studies.

This gap is evident even within *The Journal of Peasant Studies*. Despite the journal's Marxist origins, the term 'ecosocialism' appears only rarely and in passing. The absence is particularly striking in its special issue on 'Agrarian Marxism' published to mark the two-hundredth anniversary of Marx's birth, where ecological questions are entirely missing. Instead, the editors lament that the question of socialism has become 'a blank in contemporary Marxian analysis' (Levien, Watts, and Hairong 2018, 878), but this statement is not accurate: eco-Marxism has made socialism a vibrant site of debate once again.

The limited presence of socialist imaginaries within Critical Agrarian Studies is, however, understandable in light of 'the long shadow cast by Stalinist collectivisation' (Bernstein 2018, 1146). The socialist tradition has also been criticised for its recurrent tendencies towards economic determinism, productivism, and unilinear stageism, exemplified in the *Communist Manifesto*. These tendencies contributed to a disregard for the material significance of soil and to enduring prejudices against the supposed 'idiocy' of rural life. Against this backdrop, the insights developed within Critical Agrarian Studies, marked by a more 'non-reductionist, flexible perspective' (White 2018, 1121), provide an important lever for contemporary ecosocialists. They help to overcome the problematic assumptions of orthodox Marxism and open the possibility of constructing a new intersectional alliance between the exploited working class and the oppressed peasantry.

This task has become all the more urgent in the face of accelerating ecological breakdown. Yet building such an alliance also requires addressing certain ambiguities within the concept of 'ecosocialism' itself, since the term encompasses a wide range of interpretations even among ecosocialists. For clarifying and specifying ecosocialist thought in ways adequate to the conditions of the Anthropocene, this paper argues that the critiques and analytical tools developed by Critical Agrarian Studies are indispensable.

This proposed synthesis between eco-Marxism and Critical Agrarian Studies is far from arbitrary, not least because Marx's own idea of ecosocialism is far closer to the concerns of

Critical Agrarian Studies than the dominant forms of twentieth-century socialism ever were. To demonstrate the theoretical significance of Marx's ecosocialist ideas for Critical Agrarian Studies, this paper first outlines the 'Marxian trinity' as a socialist impediment that has historically hindered the formation of a worker-peasant alliance. It is true that his earlier conception of historical progress was marked by a trinity of Prometheanism (Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies 1999, 29), ethnocentrism (Cummins 1980, 63) and class reductionism (Cunningham 1986), which created a significant barrier to forming intersectional alliances with non-socialist progressive movements. Yet Marx's perspective shifted profoundly in the 1870s and 1880s as he confronted the persistent vitality of peasant economies in non-European contexts. Research on agrarian and Indigenous communes, combined with engagement with the natural sciences, was central to the theoretical 'break' (Lindner 2022, xvii) and 'conceptual leap' (Shanin 1983, 33) that Marx undertook in the final decade of his life. He became increasingly convinced that future communist forms were already prefigured at the margins of capitalism.

This shift enabled Marx to formulate a new conception of human history, free development and communism. Although this ambitious project remained unfinished, reconstructing the trajectory of Marx's theoretical development illuminates the extent to which his late vision possesses enduring theoretical and practical relevance for contemporary anti-capitalist, environmental and decolonial struggles. By foregrounding ecological limits, metabolic relations and alternative visions of socio-ecological reproduction, Marx's ecosocialism offers valuable resources for enriching critical frameworks that call into question dominant paradigms.

The Trinity of traditional Marxism

Constructing an intersectional alliance between the working class and the peasantry is an exceptionally difficult task, as the failures of past revolutions attest. Socialist thinkers have frequently placed the blame on peasants themselves. Marx and Engels, for example, attributed this difficulty to what they described as the supposedly 'barbarian' character of the peasantry, offering a series of sharply negative assessments:

> The isolation of the peasant in a remote village with a rather small population … , the stability and monotony of all his conditions of life, the restricted circumstances in which the family becomes the most important, most decisive social relationship for him – all this reduces the peasant's horizon to the narrowest bounds which are possible in modern time sweep him along with them, but he has no inkling of the nature of the motive force of these movements, of their origin and their goal. (Engels 1977 [1848], 519–520)

Marx also compared peasants to 'a sack of potatoes' (Marx 1979 [1852], 187). This dismissive diagnosis helped shape a broader socialist common sense in which the peasantry appeared less a revolutionary subject than an obstacle to be overcome through capitalist development and proletarianisation.

This perspective was shared by later socialists as well. Leading figures of orthodox Marxism, such as G. V. Plekhanov and V. I. Lenin, argued for rapid capitalist industrialisation, accompanied by the proletarianisation of the peasantry and the dissolution of agrarian communes (the *obshchina* in the Russian context). The advance of historical progress – even when it entailed severe destruction and dispossession – was to be

accepted, not resisted, in the pursuit of socialist objectives. This position brought them into direct tension with the Russian 'populists', who defended the revolutionary potential of the *obshchina* and envisioned a socialist transition grounded in peasant communal forms.

Following Lenin's (1960 [1899]) critique of small-scale agriculture, orthodox Marxists called for the transcendence of the antithesis between town and countryside. In *Economic Problems of Socialism in the U.S.S.R.*, Stalin argued that 'antagonism of [workers' and peasants'] interests' could be resolved through the 'immense assistance rendered by the socialist town, by our working class, to our peasantry' and through the 'systematic supply of first-class tractors and other machines' (Stalin 1972 [1952], 24–25). This amounted to a predominantly technical solution. In the aftermath of the disastrous consequences of collectivisation in the U.S.S.R., both for the peasantry and for the environment, the Marxist theory of agricultural development came under increasing criticism and skepticism (Mitrany 1951).

One key problem is that Marx and many of his followers tended to underestimate the fundamental differences between industry and agriculture.[1] Already in the 1920s, Eduard David, the German reformist social democrat, challenged Marx's assumption that peasants would disappear and be replaced by large-scale capitalist agriculture in the course of capitalist development. He argued that 'organic production' in agriculture is qualitatively distinct from the 'mechanic production' characteristic of industry (David 1922, 42). He thus concluded that the Marxian framework of labour and production is not fully adequate for analysing the agrarian question or agrarian societies.

This careful observation made by David remains valid even after the rapid modernisation of the post-war decades, which transformed problems of food scarcity into conditions of food surplus (Auderset and Moser 2016, 158). As Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen (1960) argued in the 1960s, industrial agriculture remained fundamentally dependent on biotic funds and services, which impose specific structural constraints and limits on the growth of biotic resources. In other words, the actual trajectory of agricultural development greatly diverges from the assumptions held by early Marxists. It is noteworthy that the inadequate treatment of agriculture within Marxism reflects deeper theoretical limitations. These can be summarised as three problematic assumptions inherent in traditional Marxism: class reductionism, Prometheanism and ethnocentrism.

First, the neglect of biotic characteristics of agriculture and the one-sided emphasis on industrialisation stem from a socialist worldview that ultimately reduces problems of inequality and unfreedom to the single issue of *class*. This reductionism arises from the privileging of the industrial working class as the principal agent of emancipatory revolution. Yet the proletariat was theorised primarily with reference to the male, white working class of Western capitalist countries, thereby downplaying other axes of inequality, exploitation and domination. Forms of expropriation such as reproductive labour – often performed by women, Indigenous peoples and peasants – as well as the degradation of non-human beings, were systematically undervalued. Caught within class reductionism, the traditional socialist project has repeatedly marginalised issues of gender, race and the environment (Federici 2018).

[1]One exception is Karl Kautsky. In his *Agrarian Question* (Kautsky 1988 [1899], 32), he admitted that industrialisation was 'often difficult, and occasionally downright impossible'.

Secondly, by privileging the working class as the agent of historical progress, Marxism endorsed a Promethean model of development. Prometheanism rests on the assumption that human emancipation depends on an ever-increasing capacity to produce more goods in order to satisfy endlessly expanding desires. According to this view, the more fully society dominates nature through technology, the more human beings are freed from the drudgery of labour and the constraints of natural scarcity. Although Promethean ideas can be found throughout modern thought, from Bacon to Descartes, Marxism distinctively links this outlook to a philosophy of historical progress culminating in socialism. 'Historical materialism', as a worldview, is grounded in the conviction that the development of new productive forces will necessarily transform relations of production and overturn the existing mode of production. The forces of capitalism must therefore be pushed to their limits so that their internal contradictions intensify and ultimately 'blow this foundation sky-high' (Marx 1993, 706), giving rise to a socialist mode of production. In short, productivism is sustained by an optimistic, unilinear philosophy of history that equates rational progress with the continual expansion of the productive forces and with the human domination of the natural world (Salleh 2017, 109). In the context of the contemporary ecological crisis, however, this framework is no longer persuasive: the new productive forces developed under capitalism have only accelerated planetary degradation without delivering emancipation.[2]

Thirdly, Marxism has long been criticised for its naïve Eurocentrism, particularly for imposing a Western model of development on non-Western societies (Gülalp 1998). In line with Enlightenment thought, its productivist vision of human emancipation presupposes a unilinear historical progress driven by the continual expansion of the productive forces. This framework elevates the Western trajectory of industrial development as the normative model of historical advancement, grounded in the presumed 'superiority' of modern science and technology.[3] As Marx famously wrote in *Capital*, 'the country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future' (Marx 1976, 91). From such a perspective, the emancipatory potential of peasant struggles becomes difficult to recognise. It is noteworthy that even Eric Hobsbawm (1959) described these struggles as those of '*primitive* rebels'.

These three problematic elements are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Together they constitute what may be called the *Marxian trinity*. This trinity played a crucial role in shaping how a worker–peasant alliance is imagined, and it inevitably generated tensions with Critical Agrarian Studies, which centres its analysis on anti-capitalism, environmentalism, feminism and decolonisation (Leinius 2021).

[2]The productivist attitude of Marxism should be contrasted with Georgescu-Roegen's bioeconomic perspective because the latter was explicit that 'the current growth must cease' (Georgescu-Roegen 1975, 369).

[3]Early Marxist critics of development associated with the dependency and world-system schools – such as Andre Gunder Frank, Samir Amin and Immanuel Wallerstein – understood struggles over development as central to anti-imperial efforts to reorder the world. Yet these approaches, despite their explicit opposition to Western imperialist domination, remained influenced by key assumptions of modernisation theory. Cultural and historical specificities were often treated as epiphenomenal to the structural dynamics of political economy, which meant that these frameworks ultimately reproduced a Eurocentric model of development rather than transcending it.

The origin of the Marxian Trinity

These criticisms of the Marxian trinity are neither arbitrary nor misplaced. The origin of the trinity can, in fact, be traced back to problematic assumptions in Marx's own writings. First, Marx's unwavering emphasis on the working class as the sole revolutionary subject is well known:

> Of all the classes that stand face to face with the bourgeoisie today, the proletariat *alone* is a really revolutionary class. The other classes decay and finally disappear in the face of Modern Industry; the proletariat is its special and essential product. The lower middle class, the small manufacturer, the shopkeeper, the artisan, the peasant, all these fight against the bourgeoisie, to save from extinction their existence as fractions of the middle class. They are therefore not revolutionary, but conservative. (Marx and Engels 1976 [1848], 494, emphasis added)

By contrast, Marx and Engels characterised the European peasantry as a fundamentally 'conservative' class, insofar as peasants resisted what they saw as their destined dissolution under capitalism. The peasantry together with the petty bourgeoisie could be incorporated into a revolutionary alliance, yet from the standpoint of the working class such an alliance amounted, at best, to a strategic compromise with a less reliable social force.

Since Marx and Engels did not recognise any revolutionary potential within the peasantry even in France and Germany, they attributed no transformative capacity to non-Western agrarian or Indigenous communes (Anderson 2010). Marx regarded such communal forms as historical stages destined for dissolution through the global advance of capitalism, which he celebrated as exercising a 'great civilising influence' (Marx 1993, 409). In *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx also argued that

> no social order is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society. (Marx 1987, 263)

In this framework, India could not advance on its own, for 'Indian society has no history at all, at least no known history' and is an 'unresisting and unchanging society' (Marx 1979a, 217). Hence the impetus for historical transformation had to come from outside, through British colonial intervention, which initiated 'the historic dissolution of this naturally arisen communism' under capitalist development (Marx 1993, 882). It is therefore unsurprising that Edward Said criticised Marx's position on the British colonialism in India as an instance of Orientalism (Said 1979, 154).

As the use of the term 'communism' in this context suggests, Marx acknowledged certain positive features of pre-capitalist societies in the 1850s. He identified an 'original unity' between producers and their means of production, which ensured for members of the commune 'the relation of the individual to the natural conditions of labour and of reproduction as belonging to him' (Marx 1993a, 473). Marx even observed 'relations more fortunate for the immediate producer' (Marx 1994, 247), which allowed for a degree of independence in the labour process.

Yet Marx did not seek to defend these pre-capitalist relations. After all, they are characteristic of *primitive* communism. Their dissolution, he argued, produced the 'propertyless' worker, and this transformation generated the historical conditions 'for the separation, for the rupture, for the antithesis of labour and property'. Capitalism represents 'the most

extreme form of this rupture, and the one in which the PRODUCTIVE FORCES OF SOCIAL LABOUR ARE also MOST POWERFULLY DEVELOPED' (Marx 1993a, 340, emphasis in original). For Marx, the lost 'original unity' could be re-established only on this new material foundation. It is difficult to overlook, however, the traces of ethnocentrism embedded in this position, which rests upon a unilinear and one-directional conception of historical development driven by the expansion of the productive forces.

Marx was certainly aware of the destructive dimensions of this modernising process. Yet he regarded such devastation as an unavoidable and ultimately necessary stage, since it created the preconditions for socialist revolution. As he wrote in the early 1860s,

> although at first the development of the capacities of the human species takes place at the cost of the majority of human individuals and whole human classes, in the end it breaks through this contradiction and coincides with the development of the individual; the higher development of individuality is thus only achieved by a historical process during which individuals are sacrificed. (Marx 1989, 347–348)

Productivism is also evident in Marx's failure, during the 1850s, to acknowledge the fundamental differences between industry and agriculture (Benton 1989). In his *London Notebooks* of the early 1850s, Marx undertook his first serious engagement with agricultural chemistry, a field pioneered by Justus von Liebig (Brock 1997), and he produced extensive excerpts from Liebig's *Agricultural Chemistry*. His purpose in studying this material was to challenge Thomas Malthus's pessimistic 'law of decreasing returns' and the theory of 'absolute surplus population' (Saito 2017). Marx aimed to refute Malthus by demonstrating the possibility of increasing soil productivity through an agricultural revolution.

To make this case, he drew on Liebig's optimistic theory of chemical fertiliser, which claimed that the chemical composition of soils could be analysed scientifically and replenished artificially. With the aid of chemical fertiliser, natural differences between fertile and infertile land could, in principle, be eliminated, enabling farmers to cultivate any crop on any soil without the need for fallow periods. Marx recorded this instrumentalist view in his *London Notebooks* as follows:

> Whether this restoration be effected by means of excrement, ashes, or bones, is in a great measure a matter of indifference. A time will come when fields will be manured with a solution of glass (silicate of potash), with the ashes of burnt straw, and with salts of phosphoric acid, *prepared in chemical manufactories*. (Marx 1991, 210, emphasis in original)

Marx believed he had found, in Liebig's *Agricultural Chemistry*, scientific support for denying the distinction between industry and agriculture. The development of new technologies – chemical fertilisers, tractors and drainage systems – appeared to promise the transcendence of natural limits, and it was on this basis that Marx articulated a productivist vision of human domination over nature. Human dependence on the regenerative capacities of the soil is marginalised; the soil becomes a passive object from which nutrients can be extracted ever more efficiently to meet human needs. As Marx put it, 'The earth is the reservoir, from whose bowels the use-values are to be torn' (Marx 1989, 465).

It is therefore reasonable to conclude that, in the period before *Capital*, Marx's conception of socialism was not yet an ecosocialist one.

Marx's ecology in *Capital* and its ambivalences

This trinity, however, began to waver during the 1860s. The first significant shift occurred in 1864–1865, when Marx reread Justus von Liebig's *Agricultural Chemistry*. While drafting the chapter on ground-rent in volume III of *Capital*, Marx noticed that Liebig had published a seventh edition of the book in 1862, which contained a substantially revised and much expanded introduction. In this new introduction, Liebig radically altered his earlier position regarding the future potential for increasing soil fertility, placing the concept of 'robbery' at the centre of his analysis (Foster 2000). Liebig now emphasised the danger that modern capitalist agriculture overused soil nutrients in order to maximise short-term yields and profit, without returning the nutrients extracted from the soil once crops were transported to the major cities for working-class consumption. Because the natural recovery time of soil fertility was far slower than the capitalist production cycle, this disruption of the nutrient cycle would necessarily lead to soil exhaustion and, Liebig warned, could ultimately result in the collapse of European civilisation.

Marx's enthusiasm for Liebig's revised analysis is evident from the extensive excerpts he produced (Saito 2017) and his immediate incorporation of Liebig's critique of 'robbery' into *Capital*. He praised Liebig's 'immortal merits' and issued the following warning:

> Capitalist production … causes the urban population to achieve an ever-growing preponderance … [As a result, it] disturbs the metabolic interaction between man and the earth, i.e. it prevents the return to the soil of the constituent elements consumed by man in the form of food and clothing; hence it hinders the operation of the eternal natural condition for the lasting fertility of the soil. Thus it destroys at the same time the physical health of the urban worker, and the intellectual life of the rural worker … ; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time is a progress towards ruining the more long-lasting sources of that fertility. … Capitalist production, therefore, only develops the techniques and the degree of combination of the social process of production by simultaneously undermining the original sources of all wealth – the soil and the worker. (Marx 1976, 637)

Today, this disruption of the 'metabolic interaction between man and the earth' is widely understood through the concept of the *metabolic rift* (Foster and Clark 2020). The idea has since become a central category within Marxian ecology (Holleman 2018; Longo, Clausen, and Clark 2015; Sage 2021; Weston 2014).

Marx came to view the metabolic rift as a concrete expression of the structural contradictions of capitalist production. Socialism, therefore, was not simply tasked with overcoming the exploitation of the working class; it also had to abolish the extractivist robbery of the earth that capitalism treats as a mere reservoir of value. For Marx, these two dimensions were inseparable, as he wrote:

> But by destroying the circumstances surrounding that metabolism, which originated in a merely natural and spontaneous fashion, it compels its systematic restoration as a regulative law of social production, and in a form adequate to the full development of the human race. (Marx 1976, 637–638)

This is how his conception of socialism assumed an ecosocialist character in the 1860s: it required regulating the 'human metabolism with nature in a rational way' (Marx 1991a, 959). For Liebig, whose terminology Marx adopted, 'rational' did not signify domination over nature or the maximisation of profit. Rather, it referred to the long-term stewardship

of soil vitality – an idea much closer to what we now call sustainability. Seen from this perspective, increases in productive forces under capitalism are often illusory and temporary, since 'all progress in capitalist agriculture is a progress in the art … of robbing the soil' (Marx 1976, 638). Over time, this robbery inevitably results in widespread soil exhaustion.

This does not mean, however, that the Marxian trinity is fully abandoned in *Capital*. In fact, productivist elements remain visible in Marx's *Capital*. Indeed, immediately after insisting on the 'rational control' of human-nature metabolism, Marx emphasised the need to minimise the 'realm of necessity' as a precondition for expanding the 'realm of freedom' (Marx 1991a, 959). This formulation makes it possible to interpret ecosocialism as a Promethean project that aims to secure a sustainable metabolic interaction between humanity and nature through an even more advanced form of domination over nature. If productivism remains unchallenged, it is difficult to see how the other two components of the trinity could be fully abandoned. It is telling that, in an 1868 letter to Engels, Marx expressed satisfaction that the 'whole shit' – the Russian peasant communal structure – 'is breaking down' (Marx and Engels 1988, 154).

These ambivalences explain the long-standing debates over whether Marx's thought can genuinely be considered ecological.[4] Even John Bellamy Foster's influential defence of Marxist ecology, for instance, reproduces the same ambiguity in his account of how the metabolic rift might be repaired under ecosocialism. He writes:

> The revolution against capitalism required therefore not only the overturning of its specific relations of exploitation of labour, but also the transcendence – through the rational regulation of the metabolic relation between human beings and nature by means of modern science and industry – of the alienation from the earth. (Foster 2000, 176–177)

Foster's formulation of 'the rational regulation … by modern science and industry' risks suggesting that socialist science and technology alone would be sufficient to repair the metabolic rift. Although Foster does not endorse a Promethean vision, his reliance on modern scientific capacities can be read as expressing an optimistic faith in the continual advance of technology in socialism.

If so, ecosocialism appears compatible with the promise of green growth achieved through comprehensive economic planning. Its extreme version is the ecomodernist vision of 'luxury communism' (Bastani 2019), in which socialist modernisation and advanced technologies are expected to deliver material abundance and human freedom beyond natural limits. Ecomodernist socialists explicitly call for a revival of Prometheanism as the only realistic response to the ecological crisis (Huber 2022; Phillips 2015). However, this Promethean vision has been received critically, particularly among non-Marxist environmentalists who are sympathetic to ecosocialist goals yet remain wary of Marx's alleged Promethean tendencies (Latouche 2019).

At the same timel, it is true that Marx's theory of metabolic rift led him to pay far closer attention to the uniqueness of agriculture in comparison with industry. In *Capital*, Marx acknowledged the destructive force of capitalist production, which resulted in the premature death of (especially female) workers and the dissolution of Indigenous communes

[4]Critics such as Boggs (2020) continue to reject the notion of a Marxian ecology even after the publication of the notebooks in the *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe*. What weakens their position is the fact that they do not engage with these notebooks. Instead, they simply assert that Marx's ecological concerns are 'anachronistic' (Humphrey 2002, 142), on the grounds that ecology did not yet exist as a formal discipline during his lifetime. This is unscholarly.

under colonial rule. Yet in these cases he still entertained the hope that the rapid development of large-scale industry would eventually create the conditions for workers' emancipation. With respect to ecological processes, however, the tone in *Capital* is markedly different. Marx warned that capitalism generates an '*irreparable* rift' (Marx 1991a, 949, emphasis added). Today it is widely recognised that ecological breakdown involves irreversible harms once key planetary boundaries are transgressed. When the disruption of the carbon cycle passes critical thresholds, stabilising the climate at Holocene levels becomes impossible. Such damage is literally 'irreparable', and it yields no 'dialectical' reversal that might open the path to an emancipatory future. In this domain, capitalism appears as a pure destructive force.

This ecological insight introduces a fundamental tension within the Marxian trinity. If capitalist development merely refines the 'art of robbery', then the system not only undermines the material conditions necessary for human flourishing but also calls into question the very notion of a unilinear historical progression toward human mastery over nature. It becomes doubtful whether capitalist development in the West can meaningfully be described as 'progress' if its principal achievement is the more efficient depletion of natural resources and the vitality of the soil. If its outcome is the creation of an 'irreparable rift', then the Promethean project loses its rationale.

Like Liebig, this recognition compelled Marx in the late 1860s to reconsider his earlier, optimistic formulation of 'historical materialism', according to which historical development is propelled by the expansion of the productive forces. Although he once identified this scheme as 'the guiding principle' of his inquiry (Marx 1987, 262), after the publication of volume I of *Capital* he came to realise that this assumption required critical rethinking before volumes II and III could be completed.

The late Marx and communism

After the publication of volume I of *Capital* in 1867, Marx began to study a wide range of new topics with great intensity. His renewed engagement with the natural sciences deepened his theory of the metabolic rift beyond the sphere of agriculture, prompting close attention to the concrete ecological consequences of agricultural practices and mining (Vollgraf 2016). The ecological issues he examined expanded rapidly and encompassed deforestation, climate change, species extinction and the maltreatment of animals. This broadening of Marx's theoretical horizons is unsurprising, given the centrality of Liebig's critique of 'robbery agriculture' to Marx's formulation of an ecosocialist critique of capitalism. Yet Marx did not follow Liebig uncritically. He recognised the limitations of Liebig's analysis and therefore read contemporary criticisms of *Agricultural Chemistry* as part of his attempt to refine and expand his own ecological critique (Saito 2017).[5]

As Marx's engagement with the natural sciences began to relativise his earlier productivism, the Marxian trinity started to crumble. Once the supposed economic superiority of

[5]Liebig's theory is, of course, outdated in certain respects. For example, he did not yet understand how ammonia could be fixed in the soil and therefore underestimated its significance for agricultural fertility. But this does not invalidate Marx's theory of the metabolic rift. Marx was fully aware of Liebig's limitations, and what matters more is the methodological framework he developed for analysing the transformation and reorganisation of the human–nature metabolism under capitalist production — what may be understood as capital's 'subsumption' of nature (Boyd, Prudham, and Schurman 2001). The concrete application of this method must continually be updated and revised in light of new scientific knowledge.

Western societies with more advanced productive forces came to be understood as resting on an 'art of robbery', the Western capitalist path of development no longer appeared to represent a higher stage of historical progress compared with non-Western societies. Capitalism, as an extractive system, undermines the regenerative capacities of the soil; it therefore cannot be taken as evidence of the West's economic superiority. Moreover, this destructive power extends 'beyond the bounds of a single country' (Marx 1991a, 949), accompanying the expansion of capitalist relations of domination and subjugation through violent colonialism.

Liebig warned against what is now termed 'ecological imperialism' (Clark and Foster 2009). Guano – the accumulated excrement of seabirds, valued as an exceptionally effective fertiliser due to its high concentrations of nitrogen, phosphate and potassium – was extracted on a massive scale in Latin America to prevent soils in Europe and the United States from being depleted. This strategy provided only a temporary solution, for guano itself was rapidly exhausted. Under ecological imperialism, the metabolic rift was thus not resolved but spatially *shifted* from the Global North to the South (Clark and York 2008).

Inspired by this insight, Marx extended Liebig's critique of robbery agriculture to analyse English colonialism in Ireland. There, the population suffered not only from the exhaustion of the soil's reproductive capacities but also from the degradation of their own reproductive conditions, after centuries of coerced agricultural exports under the colonial rental system (Foster and Clark 2020; Slater and McDonough 2008). In 1867, Marx criticised this process explicitly in ecological terms, writing: 'So result: Gradual expulsion of the natives. Gradual deterioration and exhaustion of the source of national life, the soil' (Marx 2009, 19).

The agricultural revolution in Ireland only intensified the English system of robbery while deepening the misery of the Irish peasants through the destruction of agrarian communes, ultimately producing depopulation as a manifestation of a 'corporeal metabolic rift' (Slater and Flaherty 2023, 626). The robbery of critical nutrients necessary for soil fertility and the erosion of the population's capacity for social reproduction thus produced two interconnected rifts – of the nutrient cycle and of human life itself – each undermining the reproductive capacities of society and nature alike.

This is how the scope of Marx's socio-ecological analysis came to expand beyond Western Europe. Having begun to question the universal model of human historical progress, he returned to the study of non-Western and pre-capitalist societies, paying particular attention to landed property, communal forms of production and agriculture (Shanin 2018). Marx initiated this line of inquiry through his engagement with Georg Ludwig von Maurer, the German legal historian whose work examined communal property and production in the Germanic agrarian communes known as the *Markgenossenschaften* (Tairako 2019). Marx's interest in Maurer was, in turn, shaped by his reading of Carl Fraas, another nineteenth-century agronomist (Saito 2017, 264).

Both Maurer and Fraas highlighted the resilience, sustainability and relative egalitarianism of agrarian communes (Saito 2023, 64). Communal ownership of land prevented the extraction of crops, timber and livestock for external commercial purposes, and it relied on nature's regenerative capacities to maintain soil fertility (Fraas 1866, 210; Maurer 1854, 313). Through his engagement with these analyses, Marx learned to appreciate that modern technology was not the sole means of rationally regulating the human-

nature metabolism. Maurer's account revealed an alternative form of economic superiority that contrasted sharply with capitalist development. For this reason, Marx discerned in both Maurer and Fraas what he termed a shared 'socialist tendency', even regretting his earlier 'blindness' (Marx and Engels 1987, 558–559). In this way, late Marx's intensive engagement with the seemingly disparate fields of natural science and ethnology reveals itself to be deeply interconnected from an ecosocialist perspective.

Towards degrowth communism

It now becomes possible to resolve the puzzle of the late Marx: the dramatic shift in his readings and excerpts between 1868 and 1881, the near-total publishing silence of his final years, and the intellectual affinity he increasingly displayed with the Russian populists. Strikingly, all of these elements share a distinct *peasant* dimension.

Deconstructing the Marxian trinity was an immensely difficult undertaking, one that demanded a thorough rethinking of Marx's earlier assumptions before the subsequent volumes of *Capital* could be completed. Once Marx recognised the coexistence of equality, resilience and sustainability within agrarian Indigenous communes, he was compelled after 1868 to investigate non-Western and pre-capitalist societies in greater depth (Musto 2020). During the 1870s, the works of Lewis H. Morgan, Maksim Kovalevsky and Henry Maine made Marx increasingly aware of the diverse forces resisting capitalism and colonialism – from Russian and Indian villagers to Irish peasants and migrant workers, as well as Algerian peasants and Indigenous and peasant communities across Latin America (Anderson 2025). Of course, this does not imply a romanticisation of non-Western communal forms as untouched survivals of a pre-capitalist past. Rather, Marx was aware that agrarian and Indigenous communes cannot remain unchanged, for they are already situated within relations of subjection imposed by capital, colonialism, and the state. Any emancipatory potential must therefore be understood as historically mediated, contested, and politically fragile.

The first major shift in Marx's perspective had already taken place by 1869, when he acknowledged the shortcomings of his earlier assessment of Ireland's revolutionary potential in his letter to Engels:

> For a long time, I believed it would be possible to overthrow the Irish regime by English working class ascendancy. I always took this viewpoint in the *New York Tribune*. Deeper study has now convinced me of the opposite. The working class will get nowhere before it has got rid of Ireland. *The lever must be applied in Ireland*. This is why the Irish question is so important for the social movement in general. (Marx and Engels 1988, 398, emphasis added)

This constitutes a decisive change of orientation – 'the opposite' – of the earlier expectation that revolution would first erupt in the advanced countries of Europe. In Marx's new conception, a revolution in Ireland, directed against landlordism and colonial domination as the root causes of the underdevelopment of the peasant economy and the degradation of the soil's regenerative capacities, becomes the *forerunner* of revolution in England. This was not merely because the landlords formed one of the two pillars of the British ruling class – indeed, Ireland was 'the grand moyen by which the English aristocracy maintains its domination in England itself' (Marx and Engels 1988, 473) – but also because mass Irish displacement following famine had created a large proletarianised

Irish diaspora in England. Their presence, Marx believed, would transmit the Irish revolutionary struggle into the English working class and subsequently into Europe more broadly. In this way, the land question in Ireland and the peasant struggle for land rights became central to the socialist project. The success of such a revolution, Marx now argued, depended upon forging a durable alliance between the oppressed peasantry and the industrial working class.

In this context, he began to discern the positive qualities of agrarian Indigenous communes: their orientation towards meeting human needs rather than maximising profit; their long-term ecological resilience; and their embedded practices of democracy and gender equality, all of which sharply contrasted with capitalist relations of domination and subjugation (Brown 2012). Marx highlighted the remarkable 'natural vitality' (Shanin 1983, 118) of these agrarian Indigenous communes, even after prolonged and violent incursions by Western capitalism – an economic system he characterised as 'a squandering of the vitality of the soil' (Marx 1991a, 949). Such communes, he acknowledged, preserved 'the only source of liberty and popular life' (Shanin 1983, 108). This appreciation of the regenerative 'forces of reproduction' (Barca 2020) gradually transformed his earlier, dismissive evaluation of 'primitive communism'.

Correspondingly, Marx came to restrict the applicability of the historical trajectory of primitive accumulation to Western Europe alone. In the first edition of volume I of *Capital*, he had treated Western Europe as the universal model of development for less industrialised regions and therefore insisted that small-scale modes of production were destined for extinction. By contrast, in his draft letter to the editor of *Otechestvenniye Zapiski* in 1877, Marx rejected the claim that the account of primitive accumulation in *Capital* constituted

> a historico-philosophical theory of general development, imposed by fate on all peoples, whatever the historical circumstances in which they are placed, in order to eventually attain this economic formation which, with a tremendous leap of the productive forces of social labour, assures the most integral development of every individual producer. (Marx 1989a, 200)

Instead, Marx emphasised that small-scale communal forms could themselves represent 'a condition that has to be in place for social production and the worker's own free individuality to develop' (Marx 1989a, 200).

Marx's enquiry into agrarian and Indigenous communism culminated in February 1881, when Vera Zasulich, a Russian revolutionary, wrote to Marx asking whether the so-called 'law of history' outlined in *Capital* applied to non-Western societies such as Russia. Her letter exposed him to the ongoing debates among Russian revolutionaries concerning the fate of the *obshchina* in Russia (White 2001). One faction represented by the populist group *Emancipation of Labour* maintained that capitalism had to develop in Russia as a necessary precondition for socialism. In contrast, the Narodniks argued that the existing communal structures and collective landownership embedded in the *obshchina* could serve as the foundation for a socialist transformation, thereby circumventing the capitalist stage entirely (Oittinen 2023). This exchange offered Marx a crucial opportunity to articulate his reconsideration of the universal applicability of his earlier historical schema.

In the eventual response, he clarified that the analysis in *Capital* concerning the 'historical inevitability' of capitalist development applied solely to Western Europe (Shanin 1983,

117). He explicitly affirmed that agrarian societies such as Russia could follow a distinct, non-capitalist path towards socialism. Marx even conceded that the Russian peasantry might initiate a revolutionary transformation, provided it was supported by proletarian uprisings in the West – a view reiterated in the Preface to the second Russian edition of the *Communist Manifesto* published in 1882:

> If the Russian revolution becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that the two complement each other, then Russia's peasant communal landownership may serve as the point of departure for a communist development. (Shanin 1983, 139)

Marx's recognition of the historical agency of the Russian agrarian communes marks a decisive break from his earlier Eurocentric conception, in which non-Western societies had been consigned to the periphery of historical progress. As Teodor Shanin puts it, 'The acceptance of unilinear "progress" was emphatically out' (2018, 1178).

In the letter, Marx was influenced by Morgan's conception of 'communism in living', according to which 'a revival, in a higher form, of the liberty, equality and fraternity of the ancient *gens*' becomes an historical task for Western societies (Krader 1974, 139, emphasis in original). There is no reason to restrict this potential' to Russia alone. Marx's extensive engagement with the vitality and persistence of agrarian and Indigenous communes across the world led to his discovery that 'communal property relations guarantee the sustainability of social metabolism' (Guillibert 2025, 58). Yet he also recognised that their regenerative capacities of the soil and the population were under severe threat from the relentless expansion of capitalism. In light of this, it is reasonable to conclude that 'Marx breaks with Eurocentrism' (Lindner 2010, 34). There are three representative elements in this break.

First, Marx even came to recognise the 'economic *superiority*' of certain non-Western agricultural communes over Western capitalist societies (Shanin 1983, 104). Their systems of communal production and collective property ownership, he argued, sustained vital forms of social cohesion, enabled a more balanced metabolic interaction with the environment, and preserved conditions of freedom. Indigenous communism therefore did not appear to him as something to be dissolved. On the contrary, he regarded such communal formations as *prefigurations* of a future socialist society.

Second, on the basis of his revaluation of the long-term resilience and vitality of agrarian communes, Marx came to acknowledge the historical agency of non-Western societies to start a transition to a post-capitalist society. The supposed 'invariability' of Asian social formations was no longer, in his view, a negative trait to be eradicated from without. Marx now saw it as a sign of regenerative capacities that enabled these primitive communities to resist external colonial incursions, which is now unambiguously criticised as 'vandalism' (Shanin 1983, 118) instead of celebrating the 'double mission' of English colonialism.

Third, Marx not only acknowledged the possibility of a distinctive non-Western path to socialism; he also suggested that Western societies themselves would need to 'return' to certain principles embodied in non-Western communal life in order to overcome the crises of capitalism. As he put it, capitalism 'will end through its own elimination, through the return of modern societies to a higher form of an "archaic" type of collective ownership and production' (Shanin 1983, 114). This was not an appeal for a regression to primitive or pre-modern conditions, but rather a dialectical recovery of archaic communalism rearticulated at a higher level of social and technological development.

This revaluation of Indigenous communism shows that Marx not only shifted from a unilinear to a multilinear conception of historical development (Anderson 2010), but also reconsidered the very criteria by which an emancipated society should be defined. If 'communism in living' becomes the basis of future socialist transformation, if non-Western societies such as Russia can initiate this transformation ahead of the Western working class, and if a new society represents a 'revival' of Indigenous communal forms (Shanin 1983, 107), then the content of ecosocialism becomes more precisely delimited than earlier interpretations suggest.

As discussed above, although Marx in *Capital* recognised ecological degradation as intrinsic to capitalism, his vision of ecosocialism still left space for a Promethean, class-reductionist, and Eurocentric variant, an ambiguity that has provided theoretical grounds for contemporary forms of ecomodernist communism. Yet it is difficult to see how ecomodernism could be reconciled with Marx's non-productivist conception of 'communism in living' in non-Western agrarian societies. It is equally implausible that Marx envisaged two parallel forms of communism, for example an ecomodernist version for the West and an Indigenous communal version for the rest of the world. Marx insisted that Western societies themselves would need to 'return' to a higher form of Indigenous communalism in order to overcome the crises of capitalism.

Marx's language of 'return' and 'revival' indicates that the future of Western societies will not arise from an acceleration of modern capitalist development, but from a thorough unlearning of the naïve assumption that the Eurocentric, productivist model represents the only possible path of progress. This future cannot be built by the working class alone. A radical critique of growth-imperatives requires a collaborative project with the 'subsistence perspective' inherent to peasants and Indigenous communities (Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies 1999). Yet rejecting the productivist vision does *not* amount to a plea to revert to 'primitive communism' either.[6] Marx is not advocating a restoration of stone-age communalism, nor is he dismissing the positive achievements of capitalist development.

Marx was aware that agrarian communes cannot remain unchanged, for they are already situated within the relations of subjection imposed by capital, even if they do not accept those terms internally. This why Marx emphasised that the Russian commune requires support from the West, and the two must 'complement each other' (Shanin 1983, 139). However, modernisation is *not* equivalent to Westernisation, i.e. there are non-Western paths of development (Lindner 2022, 29). It is precisely through this coexistence with the West, together with the loosening of traditional collective bonds, that new forms of counter movement agency emerge, creating spaces for the free development of individuals.

This non-productivist, non-class-reductionist and non-Eurocentric model represents the final vision of Marx, a vision grounded in his effort to synthesise anti-capitalist, decolonial and ecological struggles. To draw out these dimensions, it is possible to describe Marx's late formulation of ecosocialism as 'degrowth communism' (Saito 2023; Saito 2024). Its inspiration derives from Morgan's 'communism in living', yet its significance is

[6]Marx was consistent in that he did not idealize primitive communist society. Yet he was much more dismissive of it in the 1850s. It is not arbitrary to say that the change of terminology from '*primitive* communism' to 'communism *in living*' reflects such a change of his view.

not confined to the preservation of these communal forms; it carries profound implications for Western societies as well. Degrowth communism emerges as a synthesis that took shape through Marx's determined attempt to learn from non-Western societies and to unlearn his own earlier prejudices, thereby consciously relinquishing the earlier Marxian trinity.

Degrowth communism in the twenty-first century

Let us recapture the main elements of Marx's 'degrowth communism' by situating them in today's context.

First, it is relatively straightforward why attaching 'degrowth' to communism becomes necessary, if one wishes to avoid both productivism and ecological imperialism in an age of climate breakdown. Marx abandoned the Promethean myth once he recognised that capitalist technologies inevitably deepen the metabolic rift in an irreversible manner. There is no rational justification for pursuing the Western capitalist model of development alone. This critique led Marx to question the Eurocentric vision of progress. Marx began to imagine forms of struggle that drew inspiration from the regenerative power and vitality of Indigenous communes. Once the Western model is no longer absolutised, it becomes clear that these communes have much to offer Western societies, and that decolonial struggle constitutes an indispensable resource for alternative models of development. In this respect, degrowth communism diverges sharply from ecomodernism, another contemporary variant of ecosocialism, which continues to celebrate the Western model of development.

Secondly, non-Promethean 'degrowth communism' is not equivalent to degrowth *per se*. The point is precisely to foreground the Marxist insight that human emancipation presupposes a certain level of productive forces, so that a politics of sufficiency is compatible with, and indeed requires, the selective preservation and reorganisation of modern technological capacities rather than their blanket rejection. Certain strands of degrowth, in contrast, resemble a form of stone-age communism that rejects modern technologies altogether (Nelson 2022).[7] This conservative character is not only mocked by ecomodernists (Huber 2022), but can also take a reactionary turn (Benoist 2007), idealising the purity and naturalness of a supposed traditional Indigenous economy, as evident in anti-vaccine, anti-LGBTQ, and anti-immigration movements. Degrowth can likewise manifest as an idealisation of the peasant economy (Esteva and Prakash 1998). It is true that Marx's formation of degrowth communism through his analysis of the Russian *obshchina*, together with his insistence on 'returning' to it, may create the impression that degrowth communism amounts to stone-age communism. Yet this misreads the purpose of adding communism to degrowth. While he recognised the limitations of peasant economies, he

[7]Of course, not all degrowth is like that (Gerber 2020; Schmelzer et al. 2022). On the other hand, Foster (2024) and Napoletano (2024) claim that degrowth communism is an 'anachronism' because Marx never used the term. Likewise, Marx never used to terms such as 'ecology', 'ecosocialism', and 'sustainability', but Foster determinedly rejected those critics who insisted that Marx was not an ecologist because the discipline did not exist at the time. Now Foster claims something similar to these critics. Considering the fact that John Stuart Mill dealt with the inevitability of the stationary state due to the failing rate of profit, it is not 'anachronistic' to imagine a society beyond continuous capital accumulation in the 19th century.

maintained that the Russian agrarian communes required support from Western societies in order to incorporate the positive achievements of capitalist development.[8]

Third, degrowth communism underscores the vital importance of constructing an alliance between the working class and the peasantry, as is clearly evident in the cases of Ireland and Russia. In both instances, the decisive lever of transformation emerges not from the industrial sector but from the non-industrial one, and its activation creates the very conditions under which the working class can emancipate itself. In this respect, there is no privileging of the working class. Marx cautioned that the Russian communes could not simply persist unchanged in the face of capitalist expansion from Western Europe. Russia could not undertake a transition on its own; rather, the West and the non-West needed to supplement one another in order for such a transformation to be realised.

There are important implications here for contemporary theory and practice, not least because the problem Marx confronted is remarkably similar to the one we face today. Just as Marx maintained an optimistic view in the 1840s, many people continue to believe that capitalist development is the only possible path forward. Within this framework, capitalism both generates serious problems and purports to offer miracle solutions to them. However, it is doubtful whether the very source of these crises can simultaneously provide their remedy.

A truly radical transformation thus requires both a redirection of technological development and a critical re-evaluation of existing technologies. Without such a re-evaluation, Matt Huber (2024) contends that 'labor-intensive, smallholder agriculture is no basis for societal emancipation'. Such an ecomodernist position underestimates the extent to which historically existing large-scale production systems have been shaped by capitalist imperatives of accumulation, giving rise to agribusiness expansion, dispossession, and the progressive erosion of agroecological diversity and locally embedded ecological knowledge. In contrast, the standpoint of degrowth communism is much more relevant to Critical Agrarian Studies. The question is not one of romanticising small-scale farming, but of situating agrarian production within food sovereignty and agroecology – centreing smallholders as active historical agents rather than passive recipients of top-down reform. Furthermore, the reconfiguration of small-scale farming should be understood not as a simple 'return' to pre-capitalist conditions, but as a return at a higher level, in which collective institutions, technological capacities, and planning mechanisms are consciously subordinated to social and ecological needs. Such an approach does not dispense with the need for institutional support, including access to credit, cooperative forms of organisation, and locally rooted processing and distribution, but instead embeds these within a framework that prioritises agrarian justice, food sovereignty, and ecological sustainability over integration into inequitable global value chains.

Now it is possible to understand that one productive point of engagement between ecosocialist degrowth and Critical Agrarian Studies can be found in contemporary debates on food sovereignty and agroecology. Within Critical Agrarian Studies, these frameworks have been advanced as practical and political responses to the social and ecological contradictions of industrial agriculture, emphasising local control over food systems, diversified farming practices, and the reproduction of agrarian livelihoods.

[8]Moreover, such support needed to arrive quickly, for without it their dissolution would be inevitable.

Agroecological practices seek to re-embed labour, knowledge, and nutrient flows within local agroecosystems, while food sovereignty politicises these material relations by foregrounding struggles over land, control, and collective decision-making. At the same time, Critical Agrarian Studies draw attention to the structural constraints confronting these projects under capitalist social relations, particularly their exposure to market pressures, land concentration, and agribusiness capture.

In this vein, ecosocialism – degrowth communism in particular – helps Critical Agrarian Studies exploring anti-capitalist, ecofeminist, and decolonial projects directed against capital's destructive tendencies. The transcendence of the antithesis between town and country or between the working-class and the peasant class no longer implies the hyper-industrialisation of agriculture nor an uncritical return to pre-capitalist or Indigenous communism, but instead requires an international project aimed at constructing solidaristic forms of life. While political alliances between working-class, ecological, agrarian, and decolonial movements remain difficult to forge, particularly where demands appear to diverge, they nonetheless share a common analytical and political ground: capitalism as the systemic driver of the climate crisis and as an imperial mode of production that simultaneously depletes the vitality of workers, soils, and Indigenous communities.

Conclusion

In his later reflections, Teodor Shanin, who had played a vital role in rediscovering the late Marx's writings on Russia as well as in creating peasant studies, entertained the possibility of a degrowth-oriented agricultural economy, one grounded in the democratic re-embedding of economic life at the scale of rural communities and networks of mutual aid (Shanin 2020). By drawing on Shanin's work, it is possible to comprehend Marx's degrowth communism as a perspective that emerges organically within agrarian theory itself – one that converges with struggles for ecological justice, meaningful rural livelihoods, and democratic control over land and resources.

In fact, Marx's engagement with agrarian and Indigenous communes raises a set of fundamental questions that remain vitally important today, including uneven development, dependent development, ecological imperialism, ecological modernisation and ecologically unequal exchange. While Marx did not provide a complete strategic framework, degrowth communism underscores the need to learn from, and unlearn through, other cultural traditions and practices such as *buen vivir*, Via Campesina, the Zapatistas and Rojava. This orientation departs from the typical twentieth-century image of socialist statism, instead presenting a more 'anarchist communist' vision (Ross 2015). In doing so, it opens the possibility for critical alliances with eco-anarchists such as Murray Bookchin (1971) and Brian Morris (2020), as well as eco-feminists including Ariel Salleh (2017) and Stefania Barca (2024).

Marx's project remained unfinished. He worked with the scientific and anthropological knowledge available in the nineteenth century, the limitations of which are now evident. Neither ecology nor sustainability science existed, and much of the ethnographic material he relied upon was deeply Eurocentric and often inaccurate (Stedman-Jones 2016). Yet the key issue is not whether Marx's analyses were factually precise. What matters, despite these constraints, is his sustained effort to develop a new vision unbound by the very assumptions he came to criticise. At the very least, Marx points towards a

clear orientation: a horizon of intersectional alliance and ecological transformation that cannot be realised within the ecomodernist project of emancipation.

Marx's critique of political economy remains a powerful and supple instrument for grasping the contradictions of the capitalist system even today (Saito and Sasaki 2025), and any viable socialist imaginary must be grounded in such a systemic understanding. The current impoverishment of socialist imagination stems, in no small part, from the mistaken belief that Marx's political economy is incompatible with ecological, decolonial and Indigenous analyses. Our urgent task is to expand the scope of Marx's political economy so as to imagine a more intersectional post-capitalist society in an age of planetary ecological breakdown.

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