

# Degrowth in the Semi-Periphery: Ecology and Class in Central and Eastern Europe

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ABSTRACT	<p>The aim of this extended review essay is to discuss the potential relevance of degrowth-aligned social-ecological transformation for the specific context of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). We frame this discussion around three recent books which we consider especially useful for this debate: <i>The Future is Degrowth</i> by Schmelzer et al. (2022, in Czech 2023) for an up-to-date and comprehensive overview of the concept of degrowth; <i>Marx in the Anthropocene</i> by Saito (2023) for an ecologically grounded debate on anticapitalist strategies stemming from writings of late Marx; and <i>The Political Economy of Middle Class Politics and the Global Crisis in Eastern Europe</i> by Gagyi (2021) that empirically analyses the specific position of the CEE semiperiphery and its implications for a radical social-ecological transformation. We introduce and interlink the main ideas of these books and discuss their implications for the degrowth movement in the CEE context. We argue that to deeply transform our socio-metabolic relation with nature, it is crucial to cultivate and expand spaces of reproductive autonomy, and link them to struggles of labour and social movements. We conclude by emphasising the role of internationalism from below.</p>
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Schmelzer, Matthias – Vetter, Andrea – Vansintjan, Aaron (2022): *The Future Is Degrowth: A Guide to a World Beyond Capitalism*. London–New York: Verso.

Saito, Kohei (2023): *Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism*. New edition. Cambridge–New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Gagyi, Agnes (2021): *The Political Economy of Middle Class Politics and the Global Crisis in Eastern Europe: The Case of Hungary and Romania*. Cham: Springer International Publishing.

## INTRODUCTION

The word degrowth was famously coined in 1972 by the socialist philosopher and political ecologist André Gorz in a debate on “limits to growth,” in the form of a question: *“Is the earth’s balance, for which no-growth [non-croissance] – or even degrowth [décroissance] – of material production is a necessary condition, compatible with the survival of the capitalist system?”* (PARRIQUE 2019: 173). The contemporary degrowth movement has taken up the idea seriously, and since its formation about fifteen years ago, it has been developing degrowth explicitly as *“a planned reduction of aggregate resource and energy use in high-income nations designed to bring the economy back into balance with the living world in a safe, just and equitable way”* (HICKEL – HALLEGATE 2022: 4).

Degrowth ideas have been simultaneously developing within a social movement and also within academia, but nevertheless with significant overlap and communication between these two streams. Recently, one of the most topical issues discussed within both academia and the movement has been the strategies for pursuing degrowth in practice, not only at the individual and local level, but – especially – at the national and international level. At the bottom-up level, the degrowth movement supports positive examples of what have been termed “nowtopias” (CARLSSON 2008), i.e. at least partial applications of degrowth principles in living practices, such as the solidarity economy, commons, food sovereignty, free software or trade union movements (TREU ET AL. 2020). However, one of the most important questions is that of the formation of alliances which could produce the social power necessary for their macroeconomic scaling, and for social-ecological transformation on the national and international level.

In the context of this debate, the aim of this review essay is to explore and discuss suitable degrowth strategies in the context of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) with a specific focus on class and international dependencies. For this purpose, the following three books are introduced and discussed: *The Future Is Degrowth* (SCHMELZER ET AL. 2022), *Marx in the Anthropocene* (SAITO 2023) and *The Political Economy of Middle Class Politics and the Global Crisis in Eastern Europe* (GAGYI 2021). We believe these books offer both a strong theoretical base for interpreting our current socio-ecological crises, and the possibilities for social-ecological transformation in a wide and multidisciplinary perspective. The following text is thus structured

around these three books (sections II–IV) and their conjunctions (section V). Within the discussion and conclusions (section VI), we suggest labour organising and economic alternatives as the key components of strategies for building social power in order to transform the current social metabolism so that it would be more in line with degrowth proposals – in the CEE context more broadly, and in the Czech Republic in particular.

## DEGROWTH FOR THE FUTURE: AN UP-TO-DATE OVERVIEW OF THE CONCEPT

In 2022, Matthias Schmelzer, Andrea Vetter, and Aaron Vansintjan's book *The Future Is Degrowth* was published, expanding on Schmelzer and Vetter's original German book *Degrowth/Postwachstum zur Einführung* from 2019. This paperback (published in Czech in 2023) successfully serves as a dense, up-to-date overview of degrowth theory, comprising both a descriptive summary of the relevant literature and concepts, and a normative statement of what degrowth is proposing.

The authors start by discussing definitions of growth: this multi-layered term consists in their perspective of a self-reinforcing idea – coupled with social and material processes – structuring current socio-economic development, which also implies a never-ending quantitative expansion (SCHMELZER ET AL. 2022: 36–74). Similarly to other degrowth literatures, the authors consequently present two main integral parts: a critique of growth and an advocacy of degrowth. Regarding the former, *The Future Is Degrowth* summarises seven points of growth critique, covering a broad range of ecological (PP. 79–93), socioeconomic and cultural (PP. 94–116), anti-capitalist (PP. 117–132), feminist (PP. 133–143), techno-sceptic (PP. 143–157) and post-developmental (PP. 157–169) sets of arguments.

For the purposes of this text, the most relevant is the ecological critique (the basic notion of the unsustainability of the current growth-addicted economic system driven by the capitalist imperative of capital accumulation). Here, surplus value is appropriated by the property-owning class, who are driven by competition to reinvest again in more accumulation and expansion. This process happens within globally unequal economic relations “based on (neo-)colonial appropriation, extractivist exploitation of nature, and the externalisation of social and ecological costs” (IBID.: 157). This

critique is closely discussed later in this text, with further contextualisation within world-systems analysis.

Degrowth is then offered as a holistic but ‘pluriversal’ set of ideas, principles and political proposals to overcome the problems of a growth-dependent economy. However, the authors stress that it is an umbrella term for diverse approaches. What brings these together is that degrowth “*stands for a society with a lower social metabolism<sup>1</sup> but, more importantly, a social metabolism with a different structure and [sic] that fulfills new tasks*” (IBID.: 193). Such a social metabolism should enable global ecological justice with “right-sized” global and national economies with more equality, social justice and self-determination for their societies’ members. This restructuring would necessitate a redesign of institutions and infrastructures to enable this goal, as opposed to capitalist social metabolism, which relies “*mainly on non-circular flows of energy and materials that constantly run through ‘the economy’ and build up as rising stocks or are released as waste*” (IBID.: 62, 178–211).

To navigate towards a degrowth future, several pathways are proposed by the authors. These include democratisation of the economy, especially modes of ownership, while strengthening the role of the commons as an alternative to the dichotomy of private and state forms of ownership. The redistribution of wealth and higher social security also play a pivotal role in ensuring a dignified life for everyone, regardless of existing economic disadvantages, accompanied by a purposeful decommodification of social life. A democratisation of technological development is also proposed, along with a revaluation of labour and collective self-determination in the workplace, which would lead to the elimination of useless or harmful jobs and stress care work as central to the reproduction of society. Finally, international solidarity is considered by the authors to be central to establishing a truly sustainable and just global community. The specific tools, institutions and policies proposed here include the following, among others: the promotion of the commons, cooperatives and the democratisation of workplaces; universal basic services; working time reduction; tax reforms or moratoria on fossil fuel-intensive sectors such as airports or mega-highways; restructuring of the international monetary system; and designing various forms of participatory economic planning to coordinate the transition to a post-growth model (IBID.: 212–250).

These proposals should materialise, according to the authors, through the convergence of several strategic approaches in the spheres of both state-based politics and civil society. Echoing the discussion of various ‘modes’ of anti-capitalist politics in the work of Erik Olin Wright (2019), the authors propose four strategic approaches: first, the creation and expansion of “nowtopias” – autonomous spaces where degrowth values are already practised, such as cooperatives, commons or other forms of economic alternatives and self-managed social infrastructures; second, to facilitate the expansion of these alternatives, institutional and political changes in the vein of non-reformist reforms (André Gorz’s concept) or revolutionary realpolitik (Rosa Luxemburg’s concept): i.e. changes that can be introduced within the current system but which create capacities to radically change it and direct its development towards a post-capitalist or post-growth trajectory; third, the building of a counter-hegemonic movement (taking up Antonio Gramsci’s theory) of institutions and practices opposed to the structures of capitalist growth-dependence, which is seen as crucial to enabling the first two approaches; and finally, beyond the simplistic dichotomy of degrowth “by design and disaster”, a large-scale disruption of current societal norms in the face of the escalating ecological crisis, which is now seen as inevitable. To succeed, the movement needs to foster a “shock doctrine” of its own, as it should be able to utilise crises to scale-up its capacities, seize institutional power and reorient society towards transformative ends (SCHMELZER ET AL. 2022: 251–284); on the ‘shock doctrine’ see also Klein (2007), Jones (2018).

The increasing emphasis on strategy in the degrowth discourse (SEE ALSO BARLOW ET AL. 2022) suggests that degrowth now has to face up to the traditional questions of agency and the realities of power, which were historically faced by all proposals for transformative societal change, whether reformist or revolutionary. In other words, who is the subject of the prospective degrowth transformation? What sectors and forces in society could be organised into – in Gramscian terms – the “historical bloc” of degrowth (GRAMSCI 1971)? And what opportunities and barriers will such forces likely face in the international political economy of the prevailing system? How do the concrete manifestations – rather than abstract principles – of the system’s operation translate into local economic and political realities? How are new political discourses – including degrowth – received in them?

A certain analytical weakness of degrowth theory in tackling these topics is admitted even internally by many authors on the topic. Schmelzer et al., when summarising the current main challenges and blind spots of degrowth, name precisely its relation to questions of “class and race”, and “geopolitics and imperialism” (together with the role of information technology and the problem of economic planning). Tackling these challenges is crucial for the “future of degrowth” on its road from critique and utopia to political practice. On the first issue (class and race), they propose that a certain preoccupation of degrowth discourses with *“ecological issues [...] from a class-blind and consumer-focused perspective”* serves to *“downplay social issues and fundamentally depoliticize degrowth”*. This then (seemingly) *“stands in the way of [...] the development of majorities who would support degrowth positions”* if they recognised its potential to bring broadly enjoyed gains in the quality of life (SCHMELZER ET AL. 2022: 289).

Similarly, on the second question (geopolitics and imperialism), they contend that *“many parts of the degrowth spectrum focus primarily on cultural critiques of or normative discussions about consumer society and the prospects of bottom-up alternatives, side-lining world-systemic relations or a materialist perspective on global power dynamics”*. This leads to the degrowth critique being unclear about under *“which conditions and based on what balance of social forces elites would give up their privileges”*, and thus it risks being perceived as *“naive and unrealistic, [and] constricted to a vision of cultural change”* (IBID.: 291–292). This sentiment is echoed by Parrique, who admits somewhat self-critically in his extensive synthesis of up-to-date degrowth scholarship that the literature is abundant with *“policies for degrowth (what types of policies should be implemented) without paying too much attention to the politics of degrowth (the conditions of their political and cultural feasibility within the current system)”* (PARRIQUE 2019: 710).

These questions are not new. For example, the Marxian tradition criticised the ‘utopian socialists’ of the 19<sup>th</sup> century precisely for preferring normative arguments and experimental schemes to concrete inquiries into the structures of social forces shaping real-world prospects for alternatives to capitalist developments (MARX – ENGELS 1969; ENGELS 1970). Later – as the class antagonisms of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were partially translated into the international struggle between, on the one hand, hegemonic capitalist states, and challenger socialist and decolonial state-based projects on the other

– this analysis was expanded into analyses of capitalism as a single ‘world system’. Here, accumulation of capital is mediated not only through the antagonism between classes in the sphere of production, but also through structures of unequal exchange organised by the international state system. This project has drawn not only on Marx and his followers (such as Rosa Luxemburg [1951] with her early explorations of global dynamics of the accumulation of capital, or Trotsky [1980] with his theses on “uneven and combined development”), but also synthesised these authors’ thinking with dependency theory and the French *Annales* school of ‘total history’, among other sources (WALLERSTEIN 2004).

This also means that degrowth scholarship does not have to try to fill its gaps on its own accord. Instead, it can use these and other existing traditions, and adapt them to the context of our current ecological emergency by linking them to research on social metabolism, ecological justice, political ecology and other approaches which degrowth scholarship has been so powerful in foregrounding. In the rest of this review essay, we take up these questions with the aid of two more recent books which can help us fill these gaps in degrowth scholarship within the CEE context.

The first is Kohei Saito’s *Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism*, which aims to formulate an unorthodox “ecological Marxism” which is able to articulate the realities of ecology and class while revising many blindspots and misconceptions of traditional “world-view Marxism” (HEINRICH 2012). This enables the expansion of class analysis towards issues of social and ecological reproduction beyond the realm of capitalist valuation and wage-labour. The second is Agnes Gagyí’s *The Political Economy of Middle Class Politics and the Global Crisis in Eastern Europe: The Case of Hungary and Romania*, which takes up the tradition of world-systems analyses and applies them to the realities of CEE. In this book, Gagyí also tackles the ways in which new, predominantly Western-originating discourses – including degrowth – can be received in and adapted for a region characterised by a semi-peripheral position in global value chains and dependent development in the sphere of politics. This also sets the stage for concrete thinking about the ways in which degrowth ideas, practices, and political projects can be operationalised in our context – a theme we take up in the final part.

## ECOLOGY AND CLASS: KOHEI SAITO'S

### *MARX IN THE ANTHROPOCENE*

The work of the Japanese theorist Kohei Saito can be seen as one of the most recent iterations of the decades-old tradition of ecological Marxism. This label broadly refers to projects aiming to combine the analytical apparatus and research programme of historical materialism with insights into ecological change. The idea is that such a synthesis leads to a better understanding of the societal dynamics driving the ecological crisis, as well as the implications of changes in the human relationship to nature for dynamics traditionally understood as exclusively social.

A crucial advance in Saito's approach is that he not only synthesises the insights of various schools and authors in the field of Marxian ecological thought (E.G. O'CONNOR 1991; GÖRG 1999; FOSTER ET AL. 2010; BURKETT 2014, ETC.) and brings together works from greatly varied geographical contexts, including the US, German and Japanese Marxist traditions, but also combines these with observations drawn from lesser-known aspects of Marx's own writings. These are included in Marx's notebooks on the questions of natural sciences and indigenous and non-European cultures, topics to which he apparently devoted much of his studies after the publication of the first volume of *Capital* in 1867. These notebooks were recently published as part of the complete edition of the works of Marx and Engels in Germany. On the basis of their systematic review, Saito is able to make a plausible case that towards the end of his life, preoccupation with issues of ecological sustainability and humanity's relationship to its environment came to be a central concern for Marx. Consequently, this interest led him to positions at odds with Prometheanism, techno-optimism and Euro-centrism, which have traditionally characterised much of the "world-view Marxism" later codified by Engels as the quasi-scientific ideology of the workers' movement.

Saito's conclusions have been published in several books, including not only *Marx in the Anthropocene*, but also *Karl Marx's Ecosocialism* and *Slow Down: A Degrowth Manifesto* (SAITO 2017, 2023, 2024), the last of which has been a surprise best-seller in Saito's homeland (Japan). Compared to this more popular book, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, is a dense theoretical work, grounding what amounts to a major revision of many 'received truths' of 19th and 20th century Marxist orthodoxy in a critical engagement with



a lineage of Marxian thinkers which begins with the old man himself, and continues through second and third international-era thinkers such as Lukács and Luxemburg all the way up to contemporary authors.

In the first two chapters of the book, Saito's analysis unfolds from the centrality of the notion of metabolism – which was already important for Marx's own thought – for the understanding of the capitalist mode of production. In this view, elaborated more recently by Mészáros (1995) and Foster and his colleagues (FOSTER ET AL. 2010), capitalism (just as any other economic system) cannot be seen only as a historically specific set of relations of production between people – such as the domination of workers by capitalists. It also signifies a reordering of human relations to the environment, with specific configurations and patterns of social metabolism.

In the famous formulation of Marx, later expanded on by Foster, this reordering – by being geared to the growth compulsion resulting from the imperatives of capitalist accumulation – produces an “irreparable rift” in the fabric of natural metabolic cycles and the “web of life” (SEE MOORE 2000, 2015). This happens – to use an observation made by Marx in *Capital* – for example, when the fertility of the soil is being undermined by the export of nutrients to cities, where they pollute the waterways instead of being returned to replenish the land. Faced with crises of its own making and propelled onwards by the imperatives of growth, capital responds by shifting the rift either in space, in time, or by means of technological fixes. In this way, the crisis in early modern European agriculture was ‘solved’ first by the import of guano and nitrates from Latin America, and then by the invention of the Haber-Bosch synthesis, which enabled mass production of artificial fertilisers, in consequence adding to the problems of both climate change and nitrogen overload.

Thus, metabolic rifts under capitalist growth are never solved, but only shifted and expanded on a progressively larger scale. This leads to the expansive dynamic of disruptive ecological change spanning from local soil exhaustion to the contemporary overshoot of “planetary boundaries” (ROCKSTRÖM ET AL. 2009; STEFFEN ET AL. 2015). This disconnection is also the starting point of the uneven development polarising the capitalist system geographically into its cores and peripheries – a pattern recognised by world system scholars, and later conceptualised as “ecologically unequal

exchange” by Hornborg and Martínez-Alier, among others (HORNBERG 2001; HORNBERG – MARTINEZ-ALIER 2016). “*Capitalist production,*” as Marx points out, “*therefore only develops [...] by simultaneously undermining the original sources of all wealth – the soil and the worker*” (MARX 1976: 638). These considerations are developed by Saito in the next two chapters through an ontological-epistemological debate on their implications for the nature of human relationships to the non-human world. More interesting for our purposes here are the last three chapters, where two crucial arguments detailing the practical implications of Saito’s brand of eco-Marxism are developed.

In the first argument, the late Marx’s scepticism towards the “historically progressive” character of capitalist development is extended by Saito to the critique of capitalist development of productive forces, i.e. technological ‘progress’ and the associated, more contemporary visions of human emancipation based on further development of technology and the replacement of human work by automation. Such socialist visions, Saito contends, are naively utopian, not only because they disregard ecological reality and its limits for such prospects, but also because they are over-optimistic about the liberating potential of technology itself. Here, Saito builds upon Marx’s notion of the distinction between formal and real subsumption of labour by capital – where capital in its development increasingly not only appropriates the product of labour (formal subsumption), but also reorganises the labour process itself to maximise value extraction (real subsumption). Technological development, Marx contends, frequently serves as a tool not to liberate, but to better control workers. This reality has been most recently illustrated by developments in various digital, data-based, and algorithmic methods of surveillance and control in what has been termed “platform capitalism” (SRNICEK 2016; WOODCOCK 2021).

The increasing disconnection between “conception and execution” (BRAVERMAN 1998) at work turns workers into mere appendages of machines, who lose their freedom as soon as they enter the workplace. Thus, and this is Saito’s second argument, the struggles of workers are not – and should not be – aimed only at appropriating more of the surplus value, or even the forces of production as they stand (as in the orthodox Marxian vision of social change ensured simply by a change in the ownership of the means of production). In Saito’s view, a material reorganisation of the labour process is necessary to give people more autonomy both at work,

and, even more importantly, *from* work in the form of free time. This echoes debates in degrowth scholarship on convivial technologies (VETTER 2018) or post-work (GEROLD ET AL. 2023). Rather than further technological development and acceleration along the vectors determined by the imperatives of accumulation, Saito argues, emancipation demands a re-appropriation of the productive forces, and their transformation in a way which would make them amenable to democratic control.

This point is then developed by Saito into a vision of societal transformation towards a post-capitalist mode of production (a “degrowth communism”) where the metabolic rift is overcome by reintegrating social metabolism with the reproductive cycles of non-human life. This occurs through largely localised circuits of social reproduction based on radically democratic forms of common ownership, which erode the drive for accumulation. Here, post-capitalist “radical abundance” (HICKEL 2019) and well-being within ecological limits are not secured by the further development of productive forces, the growth of commodity production, and individualised consumption, but rather by decommodifying the meeting of basic needs (such as food, housing, health, education and transport) through accessible public services and various forms of commons (DE ANGELIS 2017).

Both ‘ancient’ forms of communal ownership and production, which are reminiscent of pre-modern and non-European rural communes, and modern forms of commons, such as universally accessible basic services, would thus combine to form a sphere of “communal luxury” (ROSS 2016). The resulting radical revaluation of work and redistribution of access to resources would create a virtuous cycle undermining the compulsion to compete on the labour market, shrinking the sphere of wage labour and commodity production (‘the realm of necessity’), and liberating human needs and wants in an expanded sphere of leisure, creativity and free activity (the ‘realm of freedom’). Obviously, where exactly this boundary would be positioned and how it would be structured depends on both cultural factors and bio-physical constraints.<sup>2</sup>

This vision is largely aligned with what we find in the degrowth literature, and we could reasonably ask if we needed to go back to Marx’s long-forgotten notebooks to arrive at such conclusions. Saito’s approach also resonates with earlier eco-feminist literature, which has expanded the Marxian

analysis from the sphere of capitalist production – and the associated image of the industrial worker as the privileged agent of change – towards more holistic analyses of social and ecological reproduction. For example, this perspective was developed already by the 1970s by Marxist feminist authors – who are unfortunately not engaged with by Saito – such as Maria Mies and Veronica Bennholdt-Thomsen, whose pioneering work showed how the ‘tip of the iceberg’ in the form of industrial commodity production rests on the unpaid and subsistence labour of women, peasants and ecosystems (MIES – BENNHOLDT-THOMSEN 1999).

Notably, Saito’s notion of communism is rooted in localised forms of radical political and economic democracy both in the workplaces and within communities, underscoring the substantial difference of the degrowth programme from the authoritarian statism of the ‘actually existing’ socialisms of the previous century. Coming closer in this way to positions of libertarian or democratic socialism, it obviously opens crucial practical political questions about the role of the state and political sovereignty in its programme – questions that Saito also leaves more or less unanswered. Similarly, it is regrettable that Saito does not engage with the issue of how to tackle the growth imperative inherent in the structure of capitalist monetary systems and financial markets, and what it would take to replace their role as a mechanism of economic coordination (apart from his cursory remarks about planning).

Thus, we could claim that perhaps the greatest strategic-political advantage and novelty of Saito’s perspective lies in its creating an analytical framework which allows us to articulate the struggles of workers within the sphere of wage-labour and capitalist production with attempts to defend and expand subsistence, commons and cooperative-based economic alternatives. In terms of practical political implications, this is a sea change from the former “world-view Marxism”, where pre-capitalist social forms are taken for backward remnants that are to be swept away by the rise of capitalism. Here, on the contrary, they are understood as crucial sites of struggle and potential seeds of communism conceptualised as a “higher form of the archaic type”. Marx’s own entertainment of this possibility is well illustrated by his letter to the Russian revolutionary Vera Zasulich. Here, against her “Marxist” compatriots with a more Promethean and stagist conception of history, he defends the possibility

of the traditional Russian agrarian commune, the *mir*, becoming the starting point for a non-capitalist future. As such, this would skip – today we might say ‘leapfrog’ – the capitalist stage of development and the full privatisation and marketisation of agriculture.

Saito’s vision of degrowth communism is in this respect not very different from other visions of reproductive autonomy, which are described in various ways under the labels of the commons movement (DE ANGELIS 2017), new cooperativism (SCHOLZ – SCHNEIDER 2017; SCHNEIDER 2018), solidarity economy (MILLER 2010; KAWANO – MATTHAEI 2020), new municipalism (KISHIMOTO ET AL. 2020), diverse economies (GIBSON-GRAHAM – DOMBROSKI 2021), community wealth building (HANNA – KELLY 2021), or economic localisation (DOUTHWAITE 1998; FRAŇKOVÁ 2015) – what degrowth would term as ‘nowtopias’. However, it can provide a useful perspective on the limits to their scaling, and the strategies for overcoming such barriers.

As De Angelis reminds us, these alternative economic ideas are too often overly focused on the ‘endogenous’ characteristics of non-capitalist alternatives, such as their institutional design or the motivations of their participants. Nevertheless, the fate of non-capitalist value circuits is often determined even more by the ‘exogenous’ factors derived from the dominant socio-economic system, where capitalist and state actors either destroy them through enclosure, or co-opt them by using the non-paid labour of their participants to cheapen the costs of social reproduction and press down wages (DE ANGELIS 2017). To survive, they need to link together to create broader, more diverse and resilient ecosystems, or create political alliances with social movements, adding to their social and political power in the face of capitalist competition.

In this perspective, non-capitalist alternatives are inherently worthy as potential starting points for the expansion of communal forms of ownership and cooperative modes of production. However, their defence and construction should, in Saito’s view, be articulated alongside the struggles of workers from within capitalist production. Turning the obsession of liberal environmentalism with individual consumption on its head, Saito thus reclaims our agency within production to challenge the forces driving capitalist growth and ecological collapse. Here, Saito’s approach opens the way towards a synthesis of the alternative economic ideas mentioned

earlier with approaches trying to realise this potential of workers as actors in the ecological transformation, such as environmental labour studies (RÄTHZEL – UZZELL 2011; UZZELL – RÄTHZEL 2012), working-class ecology (BARCA 2012; BARCA – LEONARDI 2018; HUBER 2022), ecological syndicalism (GUTIÉRREZ – DIETRICH 2023), or practical climate mitigation strategies aiming to leverage trade union support for public ownership to drive decarbonisation (SWEENEY 2014, 2023; SWEENEY – TREAT 2017A, 2017B; CHAVEZ 2023).

Saito's analysis thus gives us a useful lens for looking for the potential sources of agency which could serve to develop the basics for a 'politics of degrowth'. Clearly, to be useful for further research and experimentation in practical political projects, such a lens has to be applied to concrete situations and dynamics.

### **WORLD-SYSTEM INTEGRATION IN CEE: AGNES GAGYI'S POLITICAL ECONOMY OF CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE**

In what follows, we will try to situate such an analysis within the specificities of our region, drawing on the work of Agnes Gagyí, a Hungarian sociologist. Her book *The Political Economy of Middle Class Politics and the Global Crisis in Eastern Europe* synthesises the insights of her long-standing research on how the region is integrated into global capitalism and impacted by the dynamics of the latter's global crisis since the 1970s (SEE ALSO ARRIGHI 2010). The aim here is to show how these forms of integration translate into the political developments of CEE societies. While not referencing degrowth explicitly as a central concern, Gagyí's book can serve as a useful handbook for thinking about its prospects as a political project in the CEE region.

Gagyí works in the tradition of world-systems analysis, a research programme which has, since the 1970s, brought together insights from multiple social science perspectives to try to understand capitalism as an integrated "world system" (WALLERSTEIN 2004; ARRIGHI 2010). From this perspective, locally observable phenomena can only be understood in the context of the whole system as a single unit of analysis – defined by its overarching goal of endless accumulation of capital. This results in dynamics of unequal development, polarising the world into core and periphery regions.

This process is organised politically through the interstate system of nominally sovereign states, whose fates, however, are largely defined by their position in the system as a whole.

Precisely these concerns – resonant with the questions of the sources and limits of agency we posed earlier – occupy the first of the four chapters of Gagyí's book. She especially criticises the tendency of dominant social movement theory to universalise the conditions of its origin in Western welfare-capitalist countries (what the world-systems tradition would call the core of the system, as opposed to its peripheries) of the post-war era. In her view, this produces a time-space bias in which social movements are often conceptualised as institutions of self-correction in an essentially functional framework of 'liberal democracy'. Apart from obfuscating more long-term historical processes, where social movements are rather actors of conflicts of interest between social groups, this makes Western-oriented narratives poor conceptual tools for understanding the dynamics of movements on the system's (semi-)peripheries.

Even though this understanding has been partially corrected by the post-2008 eruption of movements which question the logic of the system as a whole in the wake of the financial crisis, this bias, Gagyí claims, persists in both their self-understanding and theoretical conceptualisations. In what she calls the narrative of the "crisis of democratic capitalism", the post-war Western economic model of class compromise and sustained growth in wages and consumption, is imagined as a historical norm. The resulting idea is that the core could return to this norm, and that peripheries could catch up with it if only social movements struggled enough. The historical exceptionality of the Western experience – its dependence on (post-)colonial exploitation of the majority of humanity on the system's peripheries, overconsumption leading to ecological crisis, and gendered hierarchies between productive and reproductive labour – is thus hidden from view, and so are the limits of social-movement agency.

On the contrary, if – as Gagyí insists – we understand the long crisis of the system as a logical consequence of previous expansion and overaccumulation, the inevitable conclusion is that defending privileged positions in the system can only come at the expense of the majority of people and ecosystems. Moreover, it allows the dominant classes to conveniently play

various fractions of the working-class majority against each other. Western, core-country movements, typically led by downwardly-mobile middle class elements, are thus somewhat conflicted between such a defence of privileged positions – even if voiced in a seemingly progressive language of nostalgia for the lost paradise of social democracy – and more transformative proposals aiming at post-capitalist forms of “reproductive autonomy”, such as solidarity economy or degrowth. In the same vein, movements in the peripheries and semi-peripheries have often been – and still are – portrayed in terms of ‘catching-up’ with the Western norm. We have seen this in our context in post-socialist discourses of the ‘building of civil society’, which were later re-actualised using the narrative of ‘democratic backsliding’. In this way, local specificities are portrayed as cultural deficiencies, not as structural effects of world-historical processes. According to Gagyi, movements need a better understanding of their situation to coordinate across different positions and scales, and thus to better tackle the double crisis of capital overaccumulation and ecological disruption.

Gagyi turns to the CEE region and its specific conditions in the next two chapters. The politics of the region, she claims, are to a great extent determined by its position in the world-system, which can be historically described as “semi-peripheral”. The region’s economies are not based on the leading technological sectors occupying the ‘top positions’ of global value-chains in the core, but they are not just providers of raw materials either – rather, they typically find themselves somewhere in the middle. Composed of a patchwork of territories inhabited by small nations and squeezed between major imperial projects, the countries of the CEE region have for centuries experienced the dynamics that are typical of dependent development, namely that they were led by a hegemonic core state and capital actors, which then acted as an internal force shaping their societies.

Dependent development in semi-peripheral regions is characterised by several typical features. First, there is the structural heterogeneity of their economies, which leads to high levels of internal polarisation of their societies and politics, where core and periphery processes co-inhabit the same territories. The pressures resulting from the need to maintain the conditions for external integration while dealing with their internal consequences then typically lead to the creation of political coalitions around the developmental projects of trying to escape from the dependent position



by ‘catching up’ with the core countries. This involves attempts to outrun the growth dynamics of the system in order to get to the top of the value chains. A typical characteristic of these coalitions is an ideological identification with the hegemonic actors, while the given country’s society is seen as ‘lagging behind’ them. Unfortunately, as the dependent position is for the most part a structural effect of integration and is not conditional on the ‘efforts’ of the particular country, any success of such projects is historically an exception to the rule. On an ideological level, such projects and their associated ideologies therefore deserve Giovanni Arrighi’s label of “developmentalist illusion” (ARRIGHI – MARTIN 1990). The decades-long cycles of the formation, failure and renewal of such projects thus create the characteristic dynamic of semi-peripheral politics.

Another typical feature of these cycles is the contradictory position of the middle class: during the failures of previous projects of catch-up development, the middle classes typically identified with the demands of the working class and strove to bring them under their political leadership, adopting ideologies which obscure differences of interests. In consolidating the next hegemonic order, however, they typically preferred developments that would safe-guard their privileged positions and white-collar jobs. This dynamic played out repeatedly in the revolutionary developments and transitions in the region of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, as detailed over the course of the second and third chapters of Gagyi’s book.

Gagyi claims this model also largely applies to the semi-peripheral CEE varieties of socialism (SZALAI 2005) of the communist era. While ideologically committed to presenting an alternative to the capitalist world-system, they were at the same time structurally dependent on it through trade relations, not to mention the conception of socialism as essentially a form of development set to ‘catch up with and overtake’ the capitalist adversary.

As Gagyi describes, the post-socialist transition has brought about a reintegration into Western, democratic and capitalist structures, which was once again presented as a project of ‘catching up’ with Western living standards. When this project started to run into trouble after the 2008 financial crisis, the liberal, post-1989 ‘politics of backwardness’ was increasingly challenged by new social coalitions, which typically framed their demands in nationalist terms. This led to the successes of political forces

such as Orbán's Fidesz in Hungary, or Kaczyński's Law and Justice party in Poland. These have typically been able to mobilise parts of the working classes that were 'left behind' by previous neoliberal developments. Crucially, however, they then tended to stabilise the conditions of external dependency and export economies based on cheap labour in the interests of capital, both domestic and international. In the absence of explicitly class-based identifications and movements able to challenge dependency and exploitation directly, the politics of the CEE region polarises around the symbolic relation to the hegemon. This leads to a mutually reinforcing opposition between what Gagyí has already earlier called "antidemocratic populism" and "democratic antipopulism" (GAGYI 2016).

Gagyí's analysis can be useful for contextualising degrowth in the CEE region for various reasons. Examples of the trajectories of middle class politicisation in different contexts provide reference points for how we can imagine changing experiences – linked to the uneven dynamics of capitalist development and crisis – being articulated politically in multiple ways. This is shown, for example, in the aforementioned internal ambiguity in post-2008 Western middle class politics between the defence of social-democratic gains premised on global inequality and ecological unsustainability, and more transformative projects that are often aligned with the degrowth perspective.

In the context of the repeated failures of catch-up development, as described by Gagyí, we could perhaps expect that the degrowth proposition could be all-the-more successful in the CEE semi-peripheral conditions, since it could serve as an antidote to the illusions of developmentalism and as a framework for thinking of more realistic strategies for achieving a good life (SEE SCHOENING 2018). However, this seems highly unlikely in the face of the dominant forms of politicisation in the wake of the 2008 crisis. The "anti-populist democrats", who explicitly defend the region's integration into Western hegemonic structures, often perceive degrowth as a heresy questioning the basic assumptions of development. The "antidemocratic populist" counter-movement, on the other hand, does not frame its goals in any substantive alternative to development as such, but rather as a new strategy for development, this time relying on a more benign, 'national' form of capitalism. This is often framed as a new project of catching-up and occupying the top positions in value chains – in leftist versions of the

narrative this is seen as key to more redistribution <sup>(E.G. FASSMANN ET AL. 2019)</sup> – which hides and preserves the subordination of labour, the devastation of nature, and the superiority towards the Global South in the name of growth.

This new edition of the developmentalist illusion in nationalist garb is aided by ideological structures. Namely, the resentment of Western hegemony and the inability to catch-up with the levels of Western consumption – the “imperial mode of living” <sup>(BRAND – WISSEN 2018)</sup> – is not framed in terms of identification and solidarity with the majority world, but rather coupled to racist narratives, which are reinforced by political mobilisations against migration. This resentment is also deployed against the Western push for ecological modernisation and ‘green capitalism’. This is led by an alliance of dirty industries and segments of the middle and working classes impacted by the unequal effects of such modernisation on their livelihoods and on semi-peripheral parts of industrial value chains. In this context, it is easy to imagine how swiftly degrowth can be dismissed as another top-down agenda using environmentalist rhetoric to legitimise austerity and dependent forms of economic integration.

To escape such a fate, it makes sense to follow Gagyí’s emphasis on practices producing new forms of alliances through concrete projects of self-organisation. This seems important for at least three reasons: first, her framework makes it clear how the prospects for a practical politics of degrowth in the CEE region are dependent neither on being recognised as such by the West, nor simply on transplanting practices recognised in the West into the region. Rather, concrete forms of social practices that are already in place – often not framed in the language of degrowth at all – should be looked for as starting points for further developments. As we will see, two examples of such starting points can be the non-capitalist forms of subsistence food production that are common in CEE countries, and the labour struggles arising from the changes in the CEE economies.

Secondly, instead of a fixation on Western hegemony – either in trying to catch up with it or in affirming ourselves by negating it – we would do well to learn from the emancipatory politics of social movements in other semi-peripheries and peripheries of the Global South. We have much more in common with them than our societies usually want to admit. And thirdly, it seems that the success of any kind of truly transformative politics in our

ecologically constrained conditions hinges on the willingness of middle class actors to at least partially overcome the structural constraints of their relatively privileged position by willingly accepting lower consumption standards, which would also be conducive to the overcoming of class hierarchies (a perspective largely aligned with the degrowth ethos). Crucially, this cannot happen purely on an ideological level, but it has to happen through practices in which a sense of meaning and community substitutes for the meeting of needs through material consumption – practices which will not arise spontaneously and have to be organised through institutions such as movements, community organisations and economic alternatives. In the final discussion, which follows, we will turn to ideas and questions which could guide such practices in the Czech context.

## **DISCUSSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CZECH REPUBLIC IN THE BROADER CEE CONTEXT**

Drawing on Saito, we framed the hypothesis for the political operationalisation of the degrowth agenda as the need to couple working-class struggles for redistribution to the creation of autonomous circuits of reproductive economies. With Gagyí, we can consider how to situate practices leading in this direction in the concrete realities determined by our position in the capitalist world-system. In what follows, we try to summarise several hypotheses and questions which could guide this process and further related research.

As empirical studies show, the level of dependence of the Czech economy, especially on Germany, is “extreme” even in international comparison (ŠVIHLÍKOVÁ 2015; MYANT – DRAHOKOUPIL 2016; KRPEC – HODULÁK 2018). This is accompanied by well-known features such as high levels of foreign private-sector ownership, which allows for exceptional outflows of profits abroad, comparatively low wages and significant regional inequalities. It of course does not help that – in contrast to other CEE countries, such as Poland, Slovenia or Croatia – a significant, openly left-wing party-political alternative has failed to emerge in the wake of the worsening social situation and the obvious crisis of the post-1989 liberal model. On the contrary, the opening presented by this crisis has been filled by the increasingly nationalist oligarchic formation of Andrej Babiš and his ANO party. The party-political landscape is thus occupied largely by two openly pro-capitalist blocs,

which significantly reduces the prominence of anti-systemic narratives in public discourse (SLAČÁLEK – ŠITERA 2021).

We can nevertheless claim (following Gagyí) that the political-economic integration of the Czech Republic severely limits the possibilities for achieving change in it through any conventionally conceived, state-based institutional channels, which would be the case even if there was a strong left-wing presence in its parliamentary politics. Even if changing the structures of the Czech dependent capitalism became the priority of the government through a democratic mandate for such a programme, most historically tested tools of trying to alter the terms of integration would be impossible to use due to EU rules under which *“almost all standard instruments of industrial policy and support of domestic capital formation are illegal”* (KRPEC – HODULÁK 2018: 85). Even the emergence of a successful electoral force wielding state power for transformative ends is hard to imagine without significant social power supporting it from the sphere of civil society.

Krpec and Hodulák (2018), in line with thinking that we could label as post-Keynesian, suggest at least trying to foster a higher share of workers' wages from surplus value through a combination of raising wages in both the public sector (leading to competition with the private sector for workers) and industrial sectors focused on high-end consumer articles (where huge sunk costs of investments make relocation unlikely). Even such a reformist course of reversing some of the worst impacts of the Czech dependent integration is hard to imagine without a determined strategic action by a revived and combative labour movement. It is notable that Czech unions have walked some way in this direction (MYANT – DRAHOKOUPIL 2017). However, while their public campaigns have been successful in raising the issue of 'cheap labour' in the public debate, stagnant membership numbers and an inability to successfully organise new sectors remain. Thus, Czech unions have failed to achieve the leverage that would be necessary to substantially challenge the entrenched economic model, condemning themselves to largely defensive struggles in the current inflationary crisis.

The rebuilding of working-class power seems equally important to any degrowth agenda, even if it would aim for more than trying to safeguard and raise the workers' share of surplus value amidst heightening international competition. It is hard to imagine an even more radical redistributive

agenda – such as that detailed by Schmelzer et al. (2022) – succeeding without significant gains in the balance of power in society for labour over capital. For example, the agency of workers seems essential for defending and expanding universal basic services, which is crucial for achieving a high quality of life with relatively low consumption (VOGEL ET AL. 2021). It is also crucial for socialising and transforming production in much of the current private sector, which would be necessary for “democratising the social metabolism” and equitably reducing throughput. While on an abstract level, post-Keynesian and degrowth proposals might seem contradictory to each other, we can claim that in practice there is a substantial overlap between them in their mutual strategic orientation towards challenging the neoliberal model of capitalism, and their common need to bolster the capacities of organised labour. At least initially, the differences may manifest in practice, mainly in emphases on which parts of the working classes to organise. Whereas the post-Keynesian pro-growth strategies would tend to focus on more narrowly conceived struggles around wages in profitable industrial sectors, a more degrowth-informed syndicalism might highlight the importance of public services, care-work, and other more reproductive sectors – and seek to link them to other social and ecological movements and reproductive economic initiatives (SEE ALSO BARCA 2019).

It is also certain that this shared field of practice on the uneven terrain of changing capitalist labour relations will be impacted by the same trends in the coming years, to which any project aiming at rebuilding working-class power will have to respond. For example, the incipient reorganisation of global value chains in the automotive industry is now poised to significantly restructure a sector comprising a large proportion of the Czech industrial workforce – as the Czech automotive industry accounts for around 9% of Czech GDP (SAP 2024). The transition towards electro-mobility is potentially threatening for much of the Czech automotive industry workforce because electric cars require significantly fewer components to assemble – precisely the components that many Czech and other CEE subcontractors, positioned in the mid-levels of value-chains, are producing. Thus, while workers and the industrial trade unions representing them are at least initially likely to challenge the transition as such, it is precisely their dependent position that gives them very little ground to do so, as most of the relevant decisions are made elsewhere (GAŽO ET AL. 2022; GALGÓCZI 2023). A different potential strategy could be to proactively support

the transition to electro-mobility to competitively bolster the position of the CEE countries in its value chains – a strategy that is already visible, for example, in the contemporary Hungarian battery boom (CZIRFUSZ 2023). But even if new work-places were successfully created in this way, it would still present a significant challenge for the labour movement to organise the workers in them.

A degrowth or post-growth framework can be useful for imagining strategies for both workers and ecological movements beyond the simplistic binary of either opposing or promoting a ‘green transition from above’ made on capital’s terms. These could serve as a basis for a politics of a ‘green transition from below’, where the essentially defensive struggles of workers would be approached as starting points for empowering them to act as protagonists in the restructuring of production in the direction of social and ecological needs. The Italian GKN factory – where, upon the notice of the factory’s closure and layoffs, workers have occupied the plant, which formerly produced car axles, and are now planning to convert it to produce cargo-bikes and solar panels – is a case in point (FELTRIN – LEONARDI N.D.).

Consequently, if the aim of the degrowth movement is not only to redistribute a larger part of the capitalist surplus, but also to produce non-capitalist forms of social reproduction and scale up already-existing forms of subsistence and cooperative economies into a post-capitalist economic system, the logical question to ask is which forms of social practices would today form such ‘already existing degrowths’ in Czech society. It is not a coincidence that much of the Czech degrowth scholarship has been focused in this direction, with a long-standing tradition of research on economic alternatives such as local producer and consumer cooperatives, alternative food networks, or municipal enterprises oriented towards locally determined social and ecological needs (JOHANISOVÁ ET AL. 2012; FRAŇKOVÁ 2015; JOHANISOVÁ 2013; JOHANISOVÁ 2016). A significant feature of the CEE region in this regard that was also highlighted in degrowth scholarship and connected to the historically semi-peripheral character of its economies, has been the continued presence of many non-market subsistence strategies of social reproduction. Termed as “quiet sustainability” (SEE, E.G., SMITH – JEHLIČKA 2013 AND SOVOVÁ – VEEN 2020), practices such as food self-provisioning in allotment gardens, or DIY repair and tinkering, often continue to provide a significant contribution to CEE households’

efforts to make do with lower incomes. However, while Western community gardens and fab-labs are described as “degrowth nowtopias”, such practices in CEE are often written off as “relics” testifying to the region’s backwardness

(PUNGAS 2019; GEBAUER ET AL. 2023).

The challenge here, we would claim, is less to reframe such practices as positive and achieve a symbolic recognition of them than to think of practicable strategies for their networking and scaling up into resilient ecosystems of value circulation based on material interests. Among other things, this means asking how they can become meaningful, conscious strategies of subsistence and social reproduction rather than simply lifestyle alternatives for middle-class consumers or locally embedded “islands of positive deviation”, and how they can become viable for workers still predominantly dependent on wage-labour. To this end, such alternatives would need to respond to the needs of such target groups, for example, their basic needs which are endangered by the contemporary cost-of-living crisis affecting spheres such as food, housing and energy. Promising (even if small) examples of such strategies of bottom-up decommodification already exist in the form of alternative food networks, housing cooperatives such as the Czech “Shared Houses” network, and incipient forms of energy cooperativism emerging in the wake of EU support for “community energy” (AMPI 2024; SDÍLENÉ DOMY 2024; HNUTÍ DUHA 2024).

To this end, it would make sense to look for inspiration less in the core capitalist regions of the West and more to the Global South – for example, the union-co-op collaborations in the Indian state of Kerala (KURUVILLA 2019) or the social movements in Bolivia (ZIBECCHI 2010). Alternatively, in the absence of institutional power on the state level, municipalities can serve as possible actors for such local networking and scaling-up of cooperative networks, a model labelled community wealth building. Interestingly, this has been pioneered in areas impacted by de-industrialisation – such as, famously, the British city of Preston (BROWN – JONES 2021). We can imagine an adaptation of this model for Czech and other CEE areas meeting a similar fate. Already existing models of local bottom-up activity led by municipalities, for example, the so-called ‘local action groups’, could be reframed as segments of the solidarity economy, and encouraged to go beyond the neoliberal paradigm. Also interesting here are direct, defensive forms of organising around the crisis of social reproduction, such as the Czech Tenants



Initiative – a local outcrop of the general surge in tenant struggles in the face of the housing crisis (INICIATIVA NÁJEMNÍKŮ A NÁJEMNIC 2024).

## CONCLUSIONS

Coming full circle, the central questions to ask would then be the following: What are the features of our situation on both sides of the equation outlined above? What are the specific, already-existing forms of alternative reproductive strategies which should be consolidated and expanded? What are the changing forms of working class self-activity contingent on the pressures resulting from our external integration, and how can they be oriented towards a common horizon? And on that basis, how can social power be built along such chains of exploitation in various spheres of social reproduction from the ecosystem, the household and the community up to the office, the factory and, finally, international systems of politics, finance and trade? To this end, in what we have outlined above, we attempted to think through ways to implement the strategy for degrowth as presented by Schmelzer et al. (2022) in our own local context. Crucially here, as per Gagyí's argument, forms of organising people and bringing them together around shared interests would be necessary for overcoming the narrow bounds of optimising one's own relatively privileged position within the system, and thus enabling the creation of counter-hegemonic forms of common-sense.

Recovering working-class agency from within the capitalist metabolism, and connecting alternative practices to its struggles within and through institutions could enable the building of materially rooted social power. This could scale up to the higher institutional levels – including the state – which is necessary for challenging the terms of external integration within the EU and beyond. This might lead us to the conclusion that only on such a basis will it make sense to think through the questions properly pertaining to what is usually approached as the subject matter of the study of international relations – for example, the forms of geopolitical alliances which might allow for the democratisation of international trade relations. Nevertheless, as Gagyí reminds us, the ability of social movements to effectively challenge the drivers of the current crisis is contingent on their abilities to communicate, mediate conflicts and strategise together across various scales and positions in the system – such as the various 'links' in

the chains of exploitation across both international borders and boundaries between production and reproduction.

From this perspective, international networks of communication, cross-fertilisation and strategising ‘from below’ with partners in the CEE semi-periphery, actors in the Global South, and allies in countries of the core, seem crucial. This is pragmatically important for resisting the tendency to split social-movement alliances along the geopolitical fault-lines produced by conflicts among elites. Such projects of internationalism from below seem crucial for building pathways towards systemic changes that would challenge and transform structures of growth-dependency, which today are – by their very nature – also international.

Detailing an ambitious societal transformation to face the converging crises of capital overaccumulation and ecological degradation in the 21st century, degrowth scholarship and political thought often lack a concrete analysis of the social forces they aim to mobilise, and the political-economic challenges they are facing. In this piece, we have aimed to fill these conceptual gaps for the purposes of both a Czech and a broader CEE context. This has been undertaken with the help of the delineation of degrowth put forward by Mathias Schmelzer et al., Kohei Saito’s synthesis of class and ecological analysis and Agnes Gagyi’s work interpreting the politics of our region through the lens of world-systems analysis. In the final discussion, we proposed some hypotheses for the operationalisation of the politics of degrowth in this context. Conceptualised as an articulation of labour organising with economic alternatives, and aiming at reproductive autonomy and the building of social power to transform our socio-metabolic relation with nature, this strategic sketch can serve to orient further research in this direction.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Social metabolism is a concept and methodological approach used in ecological economics, political ecology and related fields (see, e.g., Martínez-Alier 2009; de Molina 2023). The term also denotes the actual specific set of biophysical flows and requirements (especially in terms of energy and materials, but also space, time, etc.) that are exchanged between nature and society, and within and between societies. These human-controlled biophysical flows are a basic feature of all societies but their magnitude, structure and diversity largely depend on specific cultures, or so-called socio-metabolic regimes (Haberl et al. 2023).
- 2 There are ongoing debates, for example, about how much 'free time' in a modern sense we could afford in a more subsistence-based economy with a lower energy and material throughput – but Saito does not engage with these debates.

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