

This paper outlines the emergence and transformation of discussions on the degrowth society within the Japanese social sciences and analyzes the debates surrounding several key issues. After the bubble economy collapsed in the early 1990s, Japan entered a prolonged period of low economic growth. Between 1992 and 2021, the country's gross domestic product (GDP) recorded an average annual growth rate of 0.7%, with inflation consistently maintained at a low average rate of 0.25%. Meanwhile, the emergence of challenges such as declining birthrate, aging population, rise of the working poor, precarious labor, and deaths from overwork, exacerbated by neoliberal policies—alongside growing energy and environmental concerns—have exposed the limitations of the capitalist social system centered on the expansion of production and consumption. Consequently, several scholars have begun to critically reflect on this modern socioeconomic model, prioritizing the pursuit of economic profit, and have turned their attention towards envisioning alternative social systems.

Amid this intellectual trend, young economist and Marxist scholar Kohei Saito published his book, *Capital in the Anthropocene*, in 2020. From the standpoint of ecological Marxism, Saito offers a thorough critique of the current growth-prioritized capitalist economic system, and presents a visionary exploration of "degrowth communism." The book not only became a bestseller in Japan, but was also quickly translated into more than 12 languages, including Korean and Chinese, sparking widespread interest across East Asia and around the world. In Japan, Saito's theories have ignited a new wave of heated debates within intellectual and cultural circles on topics such as "degrowth," "Anthropocene," and "commons," with discussions continuing to this day.

However, the resonance of Saito's degrowth theory did not emerge overnight. Discussions about the issue of degrowth have been gradually brewing and evolving in Japan since the collapse of the bubble economy in the 1990s. Specifically, these discussions have unfolded within the context of a global circulation of knowledge, adapted to Japan's contemporary local circumstances, and centered on fundamental questions regarding the future direction of the society. Critical reflections on capitalist social systems have long been a significant component of social theory research. To a large extent, the degrowth theory has inherited key ideas from these discussions and reinterpreted them within the current global social context.

In this paper, I review the background and implications of debates surrounding the issue of degrowth and analyze how these discussions have unfolded within the contemporary Japanese context. Broadly, this discourse on the overarching direction of economic and social

development can be divided into three stages. From the mid-20th century to the early 2010s, the degrowth theory, primarily originating in Southern Europe, began to attract the attention and active engagement of a segment of scholars. By the mid-2010s, the discussion had gained traction in broader social discourse, partly because of media statements by prominent scholars. By 2020, Kohei Saito's Marxist-based argument for transcending capitalism and establishing "degrowth communism" resonated widely with the public, eliciting significant engagement and response.

### The Emergence of the Degrowth Debate: Poison in the Pie

The formation of the degrowth theory was a lengthy and gradual process. Until the 1970s, most countries' economic and international aid policies were profoundly influenced by developmentalism, which regarded progress in economic indicators, such as the GDP, as the exclusive criteria for assessing the extent of social development. In developed countries, including Japan, development studies are often closely linked to their involvement in international aid activities directed towards the Third World, and are frequently based on modernization theories and developmental stage models. This tendency faced criticism with the rise of the world systems theory and structuralism after the 1970s. In this context, reflection on the drawbacks of developmentalist thinking and scrutiny of the sustainability of capitalism, with profit as its primary goal, has attracted growing attention. Philosophy and social science scholars, such as E. F. Schumacher, Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen, Cornelius Castoriadis, and André Gorz, have explored the inherent instability of the modern capitalist system. In 1972, the Club of Rome published *The Limits to Growth*, which issued warnings about the finite nature of resources and the environment, arguing that if Earth's population growth and environmental degradation continues at the current pace, the planet would reach its carrying capacity and become uninhabitable within a century. The ideas and issues raised in these discussions form the theoretical foundation of degrowth theory.

As summarized by Yoshihiro Nakano, the framework of the degrowth theory originated in Southern Europe during the 1990s. A key figure in this development was Majid Rahnema, an Iranian-born United Nations diplomat and development scholar. After his retirement, Rahnema taught at UC Berkeley and then in France, engaging in deep intellectual exchanges with other prominent critical scholars such as Ivan Illich, Arturo Escobar, Wolfgang Sachs, Vandana Shiva, Serge Latouche, and Douglas Lummis. In 1980s, these scholars initiated international dialogues on development issues from the perspectives of civilization theory and intellectual history, which crystallized in the 1990s into works such as *The Development Dictionary* and *The Post-Development Reader*. These publications established a solid

intellectual foundation for the formation of the degrowth theory.

In Japan, the topic of degrowth emerged in the academic and public spheres in the mid-1990s. Reflections on the unitary focus of economic growth has long been present in the Japanese society. Under the slogan "from economic affluence to spiritual richness," heated discussions on prosperous society occurred in Japan during the 1980s. Similarly, during the 1970s and the 1980s, a period marked by major environmental and pollution issues, economists such as Hirofumi Uzawa concentrated on externalities in economic development, generating social impacts beyond the academic world, and bringing the relationship between economic development and ecological environment into greater public awareness. The discussion on degrowth in the 1990s can be seen as an extension of these earlier debates.

In April 1994, the journal *Sekai* published a special issue titled "Degrowth Scenarios," which featured articles by three scholars. Prominent economists Shigeto Tsuru and Toshiro Hashimoto analyzed how sustainable economic models can be realized. Unlike the other two economists, ecologist Hiroyuki Furuzawa was an early Japanese scholar who studied degrowth and sustainable societal models. In the following year, Furuzawa published a monograph titled *Earth Civilization Vision: Degrowth Society spoken by the 'Environment,'* the first book published in Japanese specifically focusing on the topic of degrowth. Furuzawa is recognized as one of the earliest scholars in Japan to use degrowth as a keyword in his research.

However, during this initial phase of discussion, no significant social impact was observed. In the early phase of the post-bubble era, mainstream discussions in the social sciences still focused on reversing stagnation, stagflation, and widespread unemployment to shift the economy back to a growth trajectory. Contrastingly, attempts to reflect on the sustainability crisis of the overall economic and social structures since the modern era and to explore alternative possibilities have remained largely confined to a small group of visionary explorers. It was not until the 2010s that discussions regarding the degrowth theory began to emerge as a significant topic in Japanese social sciences and public discourse. Yoshihiro Nakano, a scholar of economic theory and development studies, led this discourse. Nakano's research commenced with an exploration of modern French philosophy, but he soon began actively working on theories and practices of degrowth and attempted to localize these concepts within the Japanese context. Nakano argued that the pursuit of continuous economic growth severely undermines both the planet's ecological environment and the cohesion of local communities. In terms of ecological impact, the finite nature of Earth's resources and energy cannot sustain the endless expansion inherent in capitalist economic logic. In the sphere of society, the neoliberal emphasis on individual competition has led to the increasing atomization and marginalization of social members, resulting in the erosion of fundamental social networks

necessary for a high quality of life. This has precipitated significant crises in mental and physical health, population reproduction, and social cohesion. In response, the degrowth movement has pursued, both theoretically and practically, alternative economic models that prioritize the sustainability of nature and social ecology over economic growth.

Nakano has undertaken work in three areas dedicated to fostering the grounding of discussions on degrowth in Japan. First, he actively translated the ideas of post-development theorists and related socioeconomic practices, introducing Japanese readers to reflections on the existing global economic model. To date, Nakano's translations have primarily focused on the works of French economist Serge Latouche and Italian political scientist Stefano Bartolini. Second, Nakano investigated degrowth social movements in Europe and North America, presenting Japanese readers with the rise and development of alternative social movements worldwide, including the solidarity economy, renewable energy cooperatives, permaculture, and the Transition Town movement. Third, Nakano re-evaluated the intellectual local thought trend on degrowth theory within the Japanese context, such as regionalism by Yoshirō Yano and the theory on shared sensibility by Yūjirō Nakamura.

However, in the early 2010s, the degrowth perspective advocated by Nakano remained a minority view within Japanese social sciences and public discourse. Having experienced two decades of economic stagnation, the Japanese society faced further challenges from the 2008 global financial crisis and the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake. The predominant concern among scholars and public opinion continued to focus on reversing national economic and social decline, steering it back onto the path of growth and progress.

Among the prominent scholars advocating this traditional developmentalist view is the sociologist Kazuo Seiyama. Seiyama taught in the Department of Sociology at the University of Tokyo, specializing in quantitative research and social stratification, and served as the president of the Japan Sociological Society. In 2011, Seiyama published *Is Economic Growth Impossible? —Conditions for Overcoming Low Birth Rates and Fiscal Challenges*, in which he analyzed the major factors hindering Japan's economic development and proposed potential solutions. Seiyama identified four key factors shaping Japan's economic development since the collapse of the economic bubble: declining birth rates and an aging population, fiscal deficits, maintenance of social welfare, and sustaining employment rates. He argued that these four factors are in a state of mutual contradiction, creating a "quadruple dilemma" where addressing one issue exacerbates the others, thereby rendering economic planning uncertain.

During this period, disagreements on economic development were prominently highlighted in a workshop organized by the Research Institute for Advancement of Living Standards (a research institute under the Japanese Trade Union Confederation) in March 2012. The

workshop, titled “Rethinking ‘New Prosperity’—Should We Pursue ‘Growth’ or ‘Degrowth?’” featured thematic presentations by Yoshihiro Nakano and Kazuo Seiyama, with the former advocating for degrowth and the latter opposing it.

Nakano pointed out that the conventional approach to economic development, which emphasizes "expanding the pie," often overlooks the potential "toxins" hidden within the pie—namely, the harm it may inflict on the natural environment and existing social relationships. Nakano argued that degrowth is less about economic development itself and more about an ethical movement, a concerted effort to restore the relationship between humans and nature and between individuals. Thus, Nakano advocated the reorganization of economic structures based on local communities and small-scale interpersonal relationships.

In stark contrast, Kazuo Seiyama’s remarks emphasized the importance of maintaining expectations for economic growth, as articulated in his earlier works. Seiyama argued that current issues, such as declining birth rates, an aging population, and economic stagnation, are linked to a pessimistic economic outlook among people. To overcome this situation, he advocated increased government investment, even if it resulted in further deterioration of national debt in the short term. Additionally, Seiyama contended that while focusing on economic growth, the government should also allocate more funds to the welfare and caregiving sectors, which do not directly contribute to growth rates. However, Seiyama’s report did not address how to achieve a balance between economic growth and social welfare maintenance.

#### “Equality in Poverty” or Intellectual Arrogance?

By the mid-2010s, within the Japanese intellectual sphere, particularly among the dominant liberal-left factions, the degrowth theory began to win sympathizers and was even endorsed by some prominent scholars. As the "Lost Decade" extended into the "Lost Twenty Years" and even "Lost Thirty Years," the low-growth societal condition became increasingly normalized. In this context, scholars have begun to reconsider the overarching goals of economic and social development to address a social landscape that is markedly different from the past. Among the proponents of the degrowth theory are influential intellectuals such as Chizuko Ueno and Tatsuro Uchida. However, this perspective is also strongly opposed by Scholars such as Akihiro Kitada and Takashi Matsuo.

The prominent public intellectual Tatsuro Uchida, was among the early figures to affirm the urgency of the degrowth theory for the Japanese society. In a 2016 dialogue with political scientist Satoshi Shirai, Uchida argued that globalized capitalism is approaching its limits. Although "Abenomics" at the time pursued strategies to stimulate the economic, growth is

unattainable for a mature society, unless through a form of "military Keynesianism," which involves boosting economic activity through demand for weapons due to war and destruction. Based on this, Uchida asserted, "The government should straightforwardly admit that economic growth is no longer possible. An economic growth strategy therefore does not exist... Researching resources should be focused on examining strategies that can sustain society without growth". Two years later, Uchida along with others, led a collaborative publication titled *Futurology of a Declining Population Society*. In the introduction outlining the purpose of the book, Uchida analyzed the flourishing research on degrowth and steady-state economics abroad and, by comparison, criticized the severe inadequacy of the Japanese government and academic preparations for a society with a declining population.

Another proponent of degrowth society, the prominent sociologist and feminist Chizuko Ueno, is related to the topic for her advocating for "equality in poverty." As a public intellectual who has consistently engaged in social issues for over half a century, Ueno has repeatedly voiced her opposition to the government's unrealistic economic stimulus policies. However, Ueno's viewpoints on degrowth issue also faced opposition. In an interview discussing Japan's future direction, published in a newspaper in February 2017 titled "Turning Poor Together Equally," Ueno argued that Japanese society is at a crossroad, facing a dilemma between maintaining growth targets while accepting the deterioration of public safety due to immigration, and sustaining immigration policies while risking economic decline. According to Ueno, Japan, as a single-ethnic nation not yet readily embracing diversity in the short term, has no other choice but to accept demographic decline. However, the challenge lies in devising a model for peaceful demographic decline.

"In the case of Japan, it is preferable to experience a gradual and equitable decline in prosperity for everyone. That is to say that we need to advancing towards a social-democratic direction, increasing the national burden rate and strengthening redistributive functions."

Based on the practical difficulties that Japan faces regarding family and immigration policies, Ueno criticized the government's policies as unrealistic, and advocated for an alternative approach involving a gradual, collective, societal contraction rather than a growth target. However, the publication of the interview triggered a significant public outcry targeting Ueno's controversial views on immigration. Numerous researchers and practitioners, including the immigrant NPO, feminists, and international political scientists, critiqued Ueno's statements.

Among the voices of opposing, the critique by sociologist of younger generation Akihiro

Kitada specifically targets Ueno's argument on degrowth. In the web article titled "Degrowth Advocates as Gentle-faced Trumpians: Chizuko Ueno's 'Immigration Theory' and the Left's Appropriation of Japanese Exceptionalism," Kitada acknowledges that he has "received immense benefits from Ueno, both academically and personally," yet sharply criticizes the errors and xenophobic tendencies exposed in Ueno's statements. According to Kitada, the influential degrowth and "honorable poverty" arguments among some leftist intellectuals in Japan, exhibit characteristics similar to Trumpian xenophobia. Kitada, who views Ueno's propositions as a "typical example of Japanese degrowth leftism", elaborates on his critique of the degrowth theory in the article.

Kitada primarily identifies three issues. First, the assertion in Ueno's statements that "an increase in immigration will lead to a deterioration in public safety" lacks empirical evidence. Second, Ueno's dismissal of socioeconomic factors in public safety is based on Japanese exceptionalist thought, believing in the maintenance of the moral standards of the Japanese despite the declining economy, and overlooking the positive correlation between economic conditions and social safety. Third, owing to the economic disparity within the same generation and gender, the redistribution policy suggested by Ueno faces significant practical challenges.

Based on this criticism, Kitada highlights the superficial understanding of social poverty crises by degrowth advocates and the potential underlying neoliberal and xenophobic conservative ideologies. In his view, degrowth and "honorable poverty" ideas among the Japanese leftists are "merely arrogance of the intellectuals who have succeeded in life, pastimes for residents of luxury apartments." As an alternative, Kitada proposes that "interventions using fiscal and monetary policies during economic downturns are simply conventional Keynesian ideas and are by no means exclusive to Prime Minister Abe." Drawing on the models of Nordic social democracies such as Sweden, Kitada advocates promoting economic growth in Japan through the establishment of consistent economic growth frameworks, state investment in labor reproduction, and the socialization of care systems.

Kitada's viewpoint represents the critique of the "degrowth theory" from scholars of Japan's "reflationist" school. In the extensive discussions about the causes of Japan's "Lost Decade," a compelling viewpoint suggests that the Bank of Japan's failure to actively intervene and stabilize the situation following the burst of the economic bubble led to a debt burden that plunged the market into a progressively vicious cycle of contraction. Based on this understanding, reflationist scholars advocate Keynesian policies that involve aggressive monetary measures led by the central bank to promote inflation, thereby restoring the economy to its growth trajectory.

In summary, by the mid-2010s, growing skepticism towards the rhetoric of Abenomics led

some scholars to question and rethink the societal goals of growth-oriented economics, with an increasing inclination towards degrowth perspectives. However, the views of these scholars, have been criticized for their xenophobic and neoliberal tendencies. Degrowth proponents have failed to adequately address concerns about potential issues that could arise from prolonged economic stagnation. In sharp contrast to their opponents, degrowth proponents lack a practical plan for realizing the integrated socioeconomic changes they urgently pursue. Kohei Saito's degrowth communism, grounded in eco-Marxist thought, largely addresses this gap.

### Kohei Saito's Degrowth Communism

Kohei Saito received his PhD from Humboldt University with a dissertation on eco-Marxism titled *Natur gegen Kapital: Marx' Ökologie in seiner unvollendeten Kritik des Kapitalismus*. He then published the monologue based on the dissertation, *Karl Marx's Ecosocialism: Capitalism, Nature, and the Unfinished Critique of Political Economy*, in 2018. Saito subsequently published *Capital in the Anthropocene* in 2020, which won the New Book Award the following year, and also received the 2021 Excellence Award from the Asia Book Awards (ABA) in Korea. This section primarily focuses on *Capital in the Anthropocene* to provide a brief outline of Saito's views on degrowth society.

In Saito's view, the existing capitalist system, while seemingly generating immense wealth, is actually a mechanism that artificially creates scarcity through privatization, thereby plunging the majority of the society into poverty. The privatization of all natural and social resources leads to severe environmental degradation and the unsustainability of social reproduction. The only viable option to address this is to establish social infrastructure and cooperatives operated by citizens, which would serve as the foundation for the regensis of common goods. Thus, degrowth is not about advocating "austerity" or "honorable poverty" but rather about pursuing prosperity through the expansion of the spheres of common goods. According to Saito, the goal of "reflation" is not problematic in itself, but its content should not be about increasing the total amount of private property; rather, it should focus on creating a broader scope of common goods that benefits all members of society.

"Only by restoring the 'common goods' to rebuild 'true prosperity' can we counteract the artificial scarcity created by capitalism. This is precisely what degrowth communism seeks to achieve through its 'reflation' approach."

When the stability of livelihoods is secured by such public infrastructure, it becomes possible



to move away from the destructive capitalist system that pursues growth relentlessly and instead achieve genuine prosperity based on common goods.

Saito's analysis resonates with that of many scholars; however, some offer counterarguments. Scholars, such as Shingo Kakino, argue that only steady economic growth can deal with environmental and social sustainability issues. Drawing from historical experience, Kakino notes that communist countries, such as the Soviet Union and China, produced more severe environmental degradation than capitalist countries. Additionally, the ability of degrowth to promote shared prosperity has been questioned. "Since zero-growth society is a zero-sum game where one person's gain is another's loss, a degrowth society will become increasingly harsh as the pie shrinks." Furthermore, Kakino criticized Saito's proposal to expand the commons for free use, suggesting that this would lead to wastage and exacerbate resource depletion. From a market fundamentalist standpoint, Kakino insists that growth-oriented capitalism, not degrowth communism, can more effectively address the resource and environmental challenges of the Anthropocene.

Moreover, critics such as Akinaka Senzaki have accused Saito of lacking self-reflective awareness and presenting his own ideas as unquestionable truths. Senzaki warned that such absolutism carries the risk of extremism. He argues that Saito's apocalyptic framing of the ecological crisis forces people into a stark choice of "communism or extermination." Senzaki believes that Saito uncritically embraces the vision of the world he describes and calls for solidarity and action based on this vision. From a postmodernist perspective, Senzaki critiques Saito's position as fostering a form of dogmatism that could potentially lead to the risk of mass movements, including warfare.

## Epilogue

This paper reviewed several debates within the Japanese social sciences regarding "degrowth" since the 2010s. We can observe differences in the focal points of various scholars. However, consistent viewpoints are exhibited in the perspectives of both proponents and opponents of degrowth, which can be categorized into following three points.

First, a fundamental disagreement exists between the two sides regarding the current capitalist socioeconomic system. Proponents of degrowth emphasize the social and environmental impacts of economic activities, highlighting the damage inflicted by private property on nature and living environments, and envision an alternative, ethical economic model distinct from the current one. In sharp contrast, opponents of degrowth do not reject the continuation of the capitalist economic system per se, but argue that it should be reoriented into a growth trajectory. They view the promotion of economic growth as a means

of counteracting the pessimistic Japanese prospects to promote social demand and population reproduction.

Second, due to these differences, there are opposing views on the relationship between "economic growth" and "social-environmental stability." Degrowth advocates argue that the current crises in ecological and social stability reveal the fundamental unsustainability of capitalism based on economic growth, thereby making the search for alternative models imperative. Contrarily, the opponents perceive unsustainable social conditions as a result of economic stagnation. They argue that reversing economic stagnation and maintaining the quality of life and expectations are essential for improving labor reproduction, and consequently, sustaining environmental and ecological stability.

Finally, regarding the agents of transformation, degrowth advocates place greater emphasis on the significance of the third sector, as opposed to the growth proponents, who stress the roles of the state (Seiyama and Kitada) or market (Kakino). Whether it is Nakano's support for solidarity economies, Ueno's emphasis on the "collaborative sector," or Saito's concept of "citizen management," degrowth proponents argue for expanding the public domain and common goods through non-market and non-state agency. They believe this approach is necessary to establish a stable and sound material and social circumstance that will build a steady foundation for the everyday life for all.

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