Review of Slow Down: The Degrowth Manifesto

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ABSTRACT: Review of Saito, K. (2024). *Slow Down: The Degrowth Manifesto.* Astra House.

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At its most basic level, Kohei Saito's *Slow Down: The Degrowth Manifesto* is about confronting unconformable truths. Current attempts to combat climate change, he writes, cannot be and will not be successful, precisely because "renewable energy isn't being consumed in place of fossil fuels but rather alongside fossil fuels" (p. 43). The creation of greener forms of energy, in short, requires the continued expenditure of nonrenewable resources. I highlight just one example Saito discusses in his book: as citizens of the Global North transition to electric vehicles, fossil fuel usage in the Global South—where most of these vehicles are manufactured via production methods reliant on nonclean energy—will, by necessity, continue to rise. This is not to mention that the batteries used in electric vehicles (and phones and computers) require minerals like coltan and cobalt, which are sourced almost exclusively from impoverished countries in the Global South. As Kwet (2024) notes, "mining in the Congo is among the most brutal forms of modern-day slavery...Sexual violence is prevalent" and...[p]it walls and tunnels often collapse, causing brutal injuries...or death" (p 70). How are we supposed to guarantee that the transition to a green economy doesn't continue to rest on the brutal exploitation of the world's poorest?

For Saito, any form of environmental activism that allows for continued economic growth is thus suspect. He puts it most succinctly in the introduction: "SDGs [Sustainable development goals] are the opiates of the masses" (p. xi). This is to say, they lure individuals into a false sense of security about the challenge we face: not only can we save the planet, but we can save the planet without drastically altering our own quality of life. The only solution to climate change, he insists, involves decoupling national economies from GDP (Gross domestic product) growth. In short, we need to slow down (and in many cases, reverse) growth in every area of the global economy—tourism, consumer spending, and farming included.

Known for his theoretically groundbreaking book, *Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism*, Saito is foremost associated with the "greening" of Marx, a sort of reexamination of the philosopher's thought considering recent ecocriticism. *Slow Down*, while drawing heavily from this tradition, is quite obviously written for a more general audience; readers don't need to brush up on historical materialism, the means of production, or, thankfully, monetary theory. Rather, his focus is on demystifying the ways in which numerous institutions have (intentionally or unintentionally) misled the public, including, as previously mentioned, the United Nations and its SDGs.

Saito's critique isn't limited to governments or corporations—it extends to any institution that perpetuates the myth that growth-based solutions can address climate change. Libraries, as spaces dedicated to the dissemination of knowledge and as stewards of public trust, are no exception. While often viewed as neutral entities, libraries operate within the same economic and ideological systems that Saito challenges. This raises a crucial question: how might libraries and librarianship reckon with their complicity in advancing growth-based narratives, even when pursuing well-intentioned goals like sustainability? In its most lucid moments, *Slow Down* is a heartfelt invitation to reassess the ways in which various professions—including librarianship—have continued to spread the gospel of a growth-based solution to climate change. In recent years, the American Library Association (ALA) has served as a telling example of how sustainability efforts can inadvertently align with growth-oriented "solutions" to the climate crisis. The ALA has strongly endorsed the UN's SDGs, going as far as to convene a task force in

2021 for the express purpose of better aligning the organization (and the profession) with the SDGs' demands for a "better" global economy. They also have a roundtable dedicated to the topic of sustainability and have made various pledges to reach carbon neutrality. These surely constitute a move in the right direction, but, considering Saito's critique, the following becomes clear: the organization is too reliant on neoliberal, growth-oriented "solutions" to global warming.

ALA's approach to climate activism can be summed up as a facade. When attending its two annual conferences, members are urged to choose "more sustainable transportation alternatives once at the conference site (walking/biking/public transit) can help reduce individual impact in a small way" (ALA Council Committee on Sustainability, 2022). This is just one of the many "individualized" measures that the organization endorses. It is important to note, however, that actions like these (using less towels, walking) merely act as a panacea; individuals may feel like they are fighting the good fight, but they've done little to address the underlying causes of climate change (Maniates, 2001).

In addition, the ALA has pledged to offset any further emissions through the purchase of credits on the carbon market. Countries or corporations who want to use more than their "allotted" share of emissions can purchase the "right" to emit even more carbon from participating entities. But because these countries and corporations often ignore their initial allotments anyways, carbon credits have been ruled by some to be largely ineffective (Dhanda & Hartman, 2011; Jones & Lewis, 2023). In some cases, they stimulate more expenditure than what would have otherwise occurred (Calel et al., 2021).

There are clearly some cracks in ALA's green facade. And while I wouldn't go as far as to say that the organization is purposefully misleading its due-paying members, I don't think it's hyperbolic to state that—at the very least— the organization is engaged in some degree of *greenwashing*. Defined as "the act of making false or misleading statements about the environmental benefits of a product or practice" (Lindwall, 2023, para. 4), it's clear that when an organization like the ALA promises to "reduce" carbon emissions through offset purchases—which, as previously stated, don't often work and might worsen the problem over the long run—they may have missed the message spread by *Slow Down* and other works like it: Consuming *better* is no longer enough. We need to start consuming *less*.

Libraries, as historically non-market-based institutions, are uniquely positioned to address this. Much of the work we do is already infused with the ethos of degrowth; the idea that materials are meant to be reused hundreds of times by patrons is evidence of our profession's longstanding commitment to doing more with less. We should continue to highlight this as a profession.

I'm also aware of the work many public libraries across the country are doing to educate their patrons about the climate crisis. For example, storytimes for children are often politically themed and, in many instances, already include information about global warming. There's no reason that they can't introduce age-appropriate discussions of degrowth principles as well. I'm similarly reminded of consumer readiness workshops, which educate library users about major purchases they might make throughout life, like homes and cars. They seem like appropriate venues to address the truth about electric vehicles and their so-called "sustainability." On the

academic side of things, librarians working in two and four-year colleges are responsible for acquiring all manners of materials concerning climate change. Preexisting guides to these materials could be updated to include information about the necessity of degrowth movement and new reading lists should actively include the works of scholars like Saito. These ideas are merely starting points, but they could be avenues for a degrowth movement within librarianship.

As Saito puts it: "the only way to realize happiness for all in a just and sustainable way is through the exercise of voluntary 'self-limitation.' The expansion of the realm of freedom will come not from the reckless pursuit of higher productivity but with the diminishing of the realm of necessity through restraint" (p. 171). Paradoxically, we are talking about self-limitation not as individualized tasks, in the vein of paper straws and carbon offsets, but as collective, societal exercises in consuming less. If we want to save our world, we will have to become *materially uncomfortable*, especially here, in the Global North, where the trend has always tended toward relative plenty. This is the truth society hasn't acknowledged. *Slow Down* finds its bravery in addressing these uncomfortable facts and inspires us to ask, what role will librarianship play in *accurately* describing the lengths humanity will have to go to fight climate change?

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