

BOOK REVIEWS



***No Politics but Class Politics,*
Walter Benn Michaels
and Adolph Reed Jr.
Eris 2022.**

Sinéad Kennedy

Queen Cleopatra (2023), a recent Netflix drama-documentary, arrived on the streaming platform amid a blaze of hype and controversy. Since news emerged that the series would cast the black British actress, Adele James, as the fabled queen, academics, scholars of antiquity, the Greek and Arab media, not to mention, her online “fans”, have been debating whether the series wilfully distorts history or recovers the story of a black woman and “feminist” who “ruled with unparalleled power” and “bowed to no man”. Whatever one’s own view on the controversy, it reveals much about the nature of current debates around identity and race.

Casting a black actress some argued was historically inaccurate, others labelled the choice an “appropriation”, while some Egyptians complained the drama “erased Egyptian identity”.¹ While the historical consensus is that Cleopatra’s ancestors were most probably Greek Macedonian, who by the time of her birth had spent eight generations in Egypt, this has never prevented a slew of white, fair-skinned actresses from playing her on stage and in film without any controversy. It is also worth noting that the idea that Cleopatra

was black has a long history in African-American thought, especially within the black nationalist and Afrocentrist movements. In an Op Ed for the *New York Times*, academics Gwen Nally and Mary Hamil Gilbert write, “When we say... that Cleopatra was Black, we claim [her] as part of a culture and history that has known oppression and triumph, exploitation, and survival.”² That’s all very well, but it does ignore two key facts; Cleopatra was an absolute monarch who was also a major slave owner.

There is nothing wrong with a black actress playing Cleopatra, but it does not make her a transgressive or revolutionary figure. What this argument does reveal, however, is how “race”, “culture” and subjective identification have all become conflated in current debates. “Black” as conceived here, is both a racial signifier and a marker for all those who have known “oppression and triumph” which, includes a significant majority of the world’s people, except, of course, absolute monarchs. Reflecting on the debate around *Queen Cleopatra*, the British writer and broadcaster, Kenan Malik argues that the controversy is really about imposing “contemporary notions of race and identity, of whiteness and blackness, on an ancient world that thought very differently about such issues.”³

It is precisely the nature of this debate that is the focus of *No Politics but Class Politics*, a collection of essays written by the

prominent US academics, and socialist activists, Adolph Reed Jr. and Walter Benn Michaels. At its core, their book explores the political tension between class and identity through a variety of prisms, ranging from workers struggles to aesthetic production. Collectively, the essays offer a powerful antidote to what has become the key foundation of contemporary progressive politics, the denouncement of racism and the celebration of diversity. For Reed and Michaels, this current emphasis on the equitable distribution of wealth, power and esteem among racial groups is tragically misplaced, not only distracting from the pervasive influence of class, but actually serving to reinforce class based inequality.

134

Within the US left today this is a highly controversial, indeed, incendiary argument. Reed and Michaels are accused by their many critics of insufficiently recognising and prioritising the legacies of racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination, leading them to be dismissed as “class reductionist”. These criticisms are not confined to liberals and left progressives; their arguments are also deeply divisive among US socialists. In May 2020 for example, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter protests, Reed was invited to speak to the Democratic Socialists of America’s (DSA) New York City chapter – the same chapter that gave rise to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and a new generation of leftist activists in

the US. Reed had been a frequent speaker at DSA events over many years but this particular invite at that particular conjuncture, provoked a bitter debate within the DSA. Reed’s talk was certainly provocative. He planned to argue that the left’s intense focus on the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on Black people undermined multiracial organizing, which he saw as key to health and economic justice.

For DSA’s Afrosocialists and Socialists of Color Caucus, his arguments were “reactionary, class reductionist and at best, tone deaf ... We cannot be afraid to discuss race and racism because it could get mishandled by racists,” the caucus stated. They went on to suggest that, “That’s cowardly and cedes power to the racial capitalists.”⁴ Eventually DSA leaders and Reed agreed to cancel the talk, striking a moment, the *New York Times* noted, when “perhaps the nation’s most powerful Socialist organization rejected a Black Marxist professor’s talk because of his views on race.”⁵

In the US, race is increasingly understood as America’s original sin and given the history of slavery and the deeply divisive nature of US society today, race, not class holds powerful explanatory power for many. Yet, neither Reed, nor Michaels, are arguing that race, and indeed gender, are unimportant categories; instead, they contend that by focusing solely on

questions of disparity and inequality we miss seeing the wood for the trees. Instead, what they argue is that the existence of racism (and sexism) plays a role in selecting those who experience inequality, but that race itself does not, and cannot, explain the nature of that inequality.

Michaels writes: “[i]t’s importantly true that racism and sexism have played the central role in selecting the victims of American inequality, but it’s also true and just as important that they have not played the same role in creating the inequality itself. Paying workers less than the value of what they produce does that.”⁶ Certainly research shows there is a vast wealth disparity between black and white Americans.⁷ If we break down the data in more detail, however, we find that poor and working-class white people are remarkably similar to poor and working-class black people, when it comes to income and economic assets; both groups possessing very little wealth. Focusing on the question of race while avoiding issues of wealth redistribution achieves very little by way of material transformation in the lives of poor working class people, black or white.

If your aim is simply to diversify inequality, there is no problem with this approach; you can swap out workers to create a demographic profile that more closely matches the US census and avoids ‘discrimination’. However, if your goal is

ending inequality in its entirety, focusing on questions of representation presents few solutions. Whatever one’s views on the class and race debate, it is difficult not to agree with Michaels when he writes: “You definitely know you’re in a world that loves neoliberalism when the fact that some people of colour are rich and powerful is regarded as a victory for all the people of colour who aren’t (and when this, indeed, is regarded as a victory for justice itself).”⁸

Reed and Michaels advocate a different strategy, arguing that the US left needs to reorientate itself towards building a broad-based universal movement that focuses on what unites Americans not what divides them. They point towards movements like the struggle for mass jobs programs during the New Deal or the current struggles for a higher minimum wage, transformed police forces and single-payer health care. There are few issues in the US today that are not shaped by class, which is why their provocatively titled book, *No Politics but Class Politics*, resonates so urgently with the current moment. We have a world to win; we want and deserve better than diversified inequality.

- ¹ David Gritten. 2023. "Egyptians complain over Netflix depiction of Cleopatra as black". BBC News, 19 April 2023: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-65322821>
- ² Gwen Nally and Mary Hamil Gilbert. 2023. "Fear of the Black Cleopatra" New York Times, 10 May 2023: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/10/opinion/black-cleopatra-netflix.html?smid=url-share>
- ³ Kenan Malik. 2023. "When Cleopatra was alive, she wasn't categorised by the colour of her skin" The Guardian 23 April 2023: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/apr/23/when-cleopatra-was-alive-she-wasnt-categorised-by-colour-of-her-skin>
- ⁴ Michael Powell. 2020. "A Black Marxist Scholar Wanted to Talk About Race. It Ignited a Fury". 14 August 2020: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/14/us/adolph-reed-controversy.html>
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Walter Benn Michaels and Adolph Reed, Jr. Edited and with a foreword by Anton Jäger & Daniel Zamora. 2023 No Politics but Class Politics. London. Eris Press p.113.
- ⁷ Matt Bruenig 2020. "The racial wealth gap is about the upper classes". People's Policy Project. 20 June 2020: <https://www.peoplespolicyproject.org/2020/06/29/the-racial-wealth-gap-is-about-the-upper-classes>
- ⁸ Ibid. p.156.

***My Fourth Time We Drowned:
Seeking Refuge on the World's
Deadliest Migration Route.***

**Sally Hayden
Harper Collins.¹**

Goretti Horgan

Most people who go to sea die, or return to Libya, and few arrive to dreamland. After the rubber boat moves in the sea, if the Coast Guard catches the boat they return people to refugee centres in Libya, and these centres are like hell. Or hell is better than these centres.

Do you want to know the answers to questions about migrants that arrive in Ireland - questions like: Why are they mainly younger men? Why do so many of them destroy their passports before they present themselves to claim international protection? What, if anything, is the EU doing to help people fleeing war and persecution? Then read Sally Hayden's: *My Fourth Time We Drowned: Seeking Refuge on the World's Deadliest Migration Route*.

This book details the experiences, often horrific, of refugees seeking sanctuary in Europe. And it exposes the EU's bankrolling of the most inhumane and corrupt system which sees migrants locked up in dreadful conditions, tortured, sold as slaves and allowed to drown to prevent them from getting into Fortress Europe.

Hayden, a journalist who is the Africa correspondent for the Irish Times, had been reporting on the conflicts in Eritrea and Sudan since 2015. In 2018, she began receiving messages online from refugees held in detention centres in Libya. She soon discovered that the people messaging her were trapped in an endless cycle of detention in unspeakable conditions, paying to escape, but being intercepted at sea and returned to detention.

From her reporting in Eritrea, Ethiopia and Sudan, Hayden knew about the migrant trail through the Sahara Desert to Libya taken in the hope of making it to Europe. The number of people who die in the desert before even reaching the coast, or who die in captivity after being driven back by EU-funded militias, is unknown, since no government or organisation is keeping track. The International Organisation for Migration, an agency of the United Nations, has estimated that deaths in the Sahara Desert are "at least double" those in the Mediterranean, but no one actually knows.

The EU know that Libya is the largest human market in the world, and they're still paying the Libyan coastguard to bring back migrants... Libyan coastguards just work for money. Let's say the EU stops funding the coastguards, then the coastguards would work for the smugglers...There

are some boats that make it to Italy. Do you think the coastguards don't see the boats? The smugglers and the Libyan coastguard were co-workers before. Sometimes the smugglers give them a higher percentage of money, then they let them pass through. This is business, Sally. Money. The coastguards are working with Italy now because they are giving more and more money.

138

"I wanted to document the consequences of European migration policies beginning from the point at which Europe becomes ethically culpable: when refugees are forcibly turned away," Hayden writes. In 2012, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that refugees could not be returned to Libya by European boats because of the huge risk to their lives there. The EU found a way around that by equipping, training, and supporting the Libyan "Coast Guard" to do interceptions themselves. There is no real Libyan government so, of course there is no real Libyan Coast Guard, rather there are militias who take EU money to violate the basic human rights of those trying to escape to Europe.

In 2017, the EU signed a deal with Libya to close down the route from Libya to Italy and pledged two hundred million euro towards this goal. It signed the deal, despite knowing from its own reports that "conditions in detention centres are

generally inhumane: severely overcrowded, without adequate access to toilets or washing facilities, food, or clean water. In several detention centres, migrants are held in large numbers in a single room without sufficient space to lie down."

Hayden's book is a meticulously researched, disturbing piece of investigative journalism. It is based on the conversations she had via social media with people trapped in the detention centres, as well as interviews with refugees who escaped, UN and EU officials, human rights lawyers, and others. The stories in the book keep you turning the page to see what happens next, but they are horrendous stories, so hard to read that at times you have to force yourself to read on. It's so hard to read, you have to wonder how the thousands of migrants subjected to conditions of such unspeakable terror and abuse manage to survive. It will also make you question how the EU – which speaks so much about human rights, about freedom of movement, and which opened its arms to literally millions of Ukrainian refugees – came to be so viciously racist that it would prefer African people to die than to come here to seek sanctuary.

Fortress Europe

Since 2017, the Libyan “coast guard” has been an important part of the EU’s plan to deter migrants from trying to enter Fortress Europe. Often operating on aerial surveillance intelligence provided by Frontex, the Libyan coast guard intercepts, or “rescues,” migrants and returns them to Libya. Those who are not immediately handed over to smugglers or disappeared into the country’s network of secret prisons and slave markets are sent to one of dozens of official detention centres run by the EU-funded Directorate for Combating Illegal Migration, an agency of the UN-backed Government of National Accord that, like the coast guard, is controlled by militias and is notorious for torturing, raping, and killing migrants.

Frontex, which is the EU’s border protection agency is playing an active role in the interceptions conducted by the Libyans. *Der Spiegel* reported that Frontex flew over migrant boats on at least 20 occasions between January and April 2020, before the Libyan coast guard forced the migrant boats back. At times, the Libyans drove deep into the Maltese Search and Rescue Zone, an area over which the EU has jurisdiction.

"Frontex officials know that the Libyan coast guard is hauling refugees back to Libya and that people there face torture

and inhumane treatment,” Nora Markard, professor for international public law and international human rights at the University of Münster, told German news magazine *Der Spiegel*. In fact, it appears that Frontex employees are going one step further and sending the coordinates of the refugee boats directly to Libyan officers via WhatsApp. That claim has been made independently by three different members of the Libyan coast guard. *Der Spiegel* is in possession of screenshots indicating that the coast guard is regularly informed – and directly. One captain was sent a photo of a refugee boat taken by a Frontex plane.

"This form of direct contact is a clear violation of European law," says legal expert Markard. According to an internal EU document seen by *Der Spiegel*, in 2019 some 11,891 migrants were intercepted and taken back to Libya to be met with EU funded torture.

Much of Hayden’s book is devoted to documenting the corruption, waste, negligence, and often condescending attitudes of the major UN agencies and non-governmental aid organisations operating in Libya (with the notable exception of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), which Hayden describes as “often the only big organisation willing to speak out in a meaningful way.” Many of the migrants she spoke to – the very people the agency is set up to assist – accused the

UNHCR of complicity in human rights abuses in Libyan detention centres.

Hayden writes from a position of solidarity with the people about whom she is writing. She quotes them directly and at length, centres their viewpoint, their care for each other and the bravery they show. And she is not shy about joining them in laying the blame on the governments and organisations that deserve it.

Despite television news showing footage of auctions in Libya at which migrants are being sold as slaves and despite the many reports detailing the torture and abuse of detainees whose only crime is fleeing war and persecution, many official detention centres still operate in Libya. And the EU continues to collaborate with the coast guard to force people back into the hands of militias and smugglers.

*There are pains on their body, but
there are even pains on their heart,
like seeing your wife raped in front of
your eyes and seeing your little sister
raped by a Libyan; a wife watching
her husband killed in front of her. I
have seen 29 people die in front of
me.*

In April 2019, the then-EU commissioner responsible for migration, Avramopoulos, in an interview for Channel 4 News called conditions in Libya ‘a disgrace for the whole world’. He agreed that it was a

‘contradiction’ to oppose the detention centres while the EU funded the Libyan ‘coast guard’ to transport people there. A month before, Andrew Gilmour, the UN Assistant General Secretary for Human Rights told the UN Human Rights Council about interviews he had carried out with former detainees. “Every one of them – men, women, boys and girls – had been raped, many repeatedly, and tortured by electrocution. All testified about the widespread extortion technique whereby the torturers force the victims to call their families, who are then subjected to the screams of their loved ones which, they are told, will continue until they pay a ransom. I can honestly tell the members of this council that in 30 years in this line of work those were the most harrowing accounts I have ever heard.”

In October 2019 the European Parliament voted on a motion calling on the EU to end cooperation with the Libyan Coastguard if it carried out serious fundamental rights violations, to step up rescues in the Mediterranean and for more to be done to evacuate people from Libyan detention centres and move them to safe countries. The Parliament rejected the motion by 290 votes to 288. The 290 included the four Fine Gael MEP’s making the difference in a vote that will forever shame them and their party.

Exactly a year after Hayden's book was published, in March 2023, the UN Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Libya in its final report expressed deep concern over the country's deteriorating human rights situation. The report documented numerous cases of arbitrary detention, murder, rape, enslavement, extrajudicial killing and enforced disappearance, and said that nearly all survivors interviewed had refrained from lodging official complaints out of fear of reprisals, arrest, extortion, and a lack of confidence in the justice system. It said migrants, in particular, have been targeted and there is overwhelming evidence that they have been systematically tortured. The report said there were reasonable grounds to believe that sexual slavery, a crime against humanity, was committed against migrants.

so the men go ahead and hope to be able to fly their wives and children to safety once they have achieved refugee status. Passports and other papers are stolen by the militias and those seeking asylum don't want to endanger their application by presenting the false papers they are forced to travel under. And what, if anything, is the EU doing to help those fleeing war and persecution? If they are white and victims of the correct dictator, they open the borders and give access to jobs, benefits, and accommodation. If they are black, they let them drown in the Mediterranean or send them to the hell of the Libyan detention centres – while asking EU citizens to look the other way.

141

When the report was published, two Green-Left MEPs submitted a priority written question asking if the EU Commission would now end its funding for the Libyan 'coast guard'. The answer would best be described as 'Blah, Blah, Blah' since it simply repeated all the blather we've had since 2017.

The answers to the questions posed at the start of this should now be clear: few women will set out on a journey where they know in advance they will be raped,

1 All the quotes in italics in this review are from people who were stuck in Libya and communicating with Hayden.

Mussolini's Grandchildren – Fascism in Contemporary Italy

David Broder

Pluto Press 2023

Conor Reddy

"I dream of a country where people who have had to keep their heads down for years, pretending to think one way so they aren't driven out, can say what they really think."

These were the impassioned words of Georgia Meloni as she campaigned to become Prime Minister of Italy, almost 100 years on from the insurrectionary March on Rome that brought her Grandfather, Benito Mussolini and his National Fascist Party to power. Today, as Prime Minister and head of Italy's most right wing government since Mussolini, Meloni and her Fratelli d'Italia (Fd'I; Brothers of Italy) party are forcing socialists and antifascists to contend with questions that would have been unthinkable just a decade ago.

These questions are the basis of an important new book from historian and Jacobin's Europe Editor, David Broder. *Mussolini's Grandchildren* charts the lesser-known history of post-war Italian fascism, tracing the lineage of Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia right back to the Fascist Ideologues who founded the Fd'I's forerunner, the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI) in the immediate aftermath of Italy's liberation by antifascist partisans. In this political genealogy, Broder casts light on those who have laid claim to Mussolini's legacy –

revealing a network of organisations that have displayed strategic adaptability and resilience over many decades, leading to Meloni who began her political life proudly proclaiming her admiration for Il Duce. Although Meloni now eschews the fascist label, Broder argues that her election marks the return of the "bearers of the Tricolour flame" to the stage of history. Regardless of Meloni's success as Prime Minister, this return, in a State founded on anti-fascist principles, is cause for serious concern – a phenomenon we all must understand and learn from. In this regard, Broder provides a valuable starting point.

Keeping the flame burning

The modern Italian Republic was declared by Partisans in 1946, one year after their victory over Mussolini and the hold-out Italian Saló Republic in the north of the country. Constitutionally, the new Republic announced itself as a democracy "founded in labour", resolutely opposing fascism and all it represented. The reality of this early period, however, was not so clear, as Broder lays out.

Just months after the foundation of the state, Palmiro Togliatti, General Secretary of the Communist Party and Minister for Justice in the CLN multi-party government, presided over a sweeping general amnesty for wartime prisoners which included those sentenced for collaboration, torture, murder and other acts of political violence.

Initially applied to partisan and fascist prisoners in an attempt to bring about “social peace”, the amnesty as applied by the Judiciary, disproportionately benefited fascists, including some of those who had served in the Saló regime (p.51). Outside prison, the atmosphere created by the amnesty allowed silent hold-outs of the old order to raise their heads. By December 1946, Giorgio Almirante, Minister for Popular Culture at the time of Saló’s defeat, and others who had been imprisoned after Italy’s liberation had regrouped, launching the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), a self-consciously fascist party operating within the renewed democratic state.

While other fascists organised themselves in clandestine armed cells, like Romualdi’s *Fasci di Azione Rivoluzionaria*, the MSI adopted a “double line” strategy to win an institutional footing (p.52). One side of this line was participation in electoral politics, as an anti-communist force, willing to work with the right of Christian Democracy. The other side was organisation as a “third force” in the streets and the maintenance of a more classically fascist programme. One year after the MSI was established, three newly elected party councillors in Rome cast decisive votes in support of Christian Democrat mayoral candidate, Salvatore Rebecchini, helping him see off a Communist rival. In the fervent atmosphere of the new Italian state, where Communists enjoyed immense support after leading the Partisan movement, the

MSI had found political space to “keep the flame burning”.

Inserimento

The MSI’s strategic orientation towards anti-communism in electoral politics would soon go beyond alliances with Christian Democrats in key votes towards a new strategy of *inserimento* (insertion, Ch.2). In 1951, Almirante’s successor, De Marsanich gave full endorsement to a fledgling NATO, led by the US, which he and many others in the party had fought just six years previously. Broder points out that this strategy was not without its difficulties; several key members, keen to preserve fascism’s “revolutionary function”, voiced opposition. Giorgio Fini, a junior minister in the Saló government, left the MSI for a smaller clandestine organisation of “left fascists”, while “anti-bourgeois” fascist ideologue, Pino Rauti, founded an internal (and later, external) faction, the *Centro Studi Ordine Nuovo*, which would exert a strong influence on the future of the party in years to come (p58.)

Despite these internal tensions, the MSI would increase its electoral presence significantly through the 1950s, becoming the fourth largest party in the Chamber of Deputies in the 1958 General Election. Against the backdrop of the Cold War, the ruling Christian Democrats were increasingly pulled towards the MSI at local and national levels. A pivotal moment came in March 1960, when Fernando Tambroni required MSI votes to

form a Christian Democrat minority government to keep the Communists and the Socialist party from power. Although MSI deputies were not integrated into Tambroni's cabinet, MSI support meant even deeper influence over a state notionally founded on anti-fascist principles.

Christian Democracy was plunged into crisis as a result. Some ministers resigned, while elements of the Catholic church and other parts of the Christian Democratic coalition urged the party to do anything to keep the Communists out. The crisis would reach its apex in the Summer of 1960, when the MSI announced it would hold its party Congress in the resolutely antifascist city of Genoa. Antifascist mobilisation across the city quickly spilled into a general strike led by the Communist controlled CGIL union and insurrection in cities across Italy against deadly police repression and fascist influence over the state. On July 19, after pressure from catholic intellectuals, Tambroni resigned, and the Christian Democrats resolved to look elsewhere for political support.

Broder argues that this episode marked the end of the MSI's strategy of insertion, as the Christian Democrats and the ruling class more generally recoiled from fascists as a viable buttress for their project, eventually erecting a cordon sanitaire around the MSI (p63). As Aldo Moro took the reigns of the Christian Democrats, a new alliance with the reformist Socialist

Party was established, casting the MSI back to the margins.

Lean years to the Years of Lead - 1960-90

While fascists were able to reorganise and recalibrate to the new democratic reality from 1946-60, the period that followed was marked by a return to more violent traditions. Not only had they been cast aside by the Christian Democrats, the "Economic Miracle" of the 1950s and 1960s, supported by Marshall Aid had unleashed a wave of modernisation that further marginalised the traditionalist, insular MSI. In this harsher climate, the MSI condemned social reforms like divorce as a "trojan horse for communism" and resolved to fight the left in a more direct, violent sense. In 1969 following the death of party leader, Michellini, Giorgio Almirante returned to the MSI and immediately convened an "Anti-Communist Front" to bring old comrades back into the fray. Reacting to the militant shop floor movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s, others on the right also coalesced around the more militant MSI as a fighting force against the radical left.

Broder argues that the militant anti-communism of the MSI at this time "combined two kinds of radicalism". One grounded in the violent fascist mythology of "revolutionary war" against the left, and the other, a more bureaucratic radicalism

that projected the party (and its networks) as a “military auxiliary to state actors” (p.67). This second face of fascist organised anti-communism became manifest in the “strategy of tension”, where groups like Ordine Nuovo (again aligned to the MSI) committed terrorist attacks in the name of the left (sometimes in collusion with state actors) to fuel polarisation and demand repression for militant workers, especially those in the new autonomist groups, Potere Operaio and Lotta Continua.

The Strategy of Tension drew inspiration from the OAS, a clandestine group of French Army officers who had carried out terrorist black operations to prevent a French withdrawal from Algeria in 1961-62 and can be seen as part of a trend across the reactionary right of the period that blurred the line between state (especially police and military) and political reaction. Perhaps the darkest example of violence in this era, was the Piazza Fontana bombing of 1969, where an Ordine Nuovo bomb killed 16 people in Milan – the state immediately blaming anarchists and communists in the city.

The “Years of Lead”, the long decade that followed the Milan bombing saw more political violence from the right and although the MSI officially condemned this terrorism, it served as a political nucleus for it and though the MSI would not grow significantly in this period, it did cohere organisationally, keeping the fascist

tradition alive after the failure of *inserimento*.

The revival of the MSI/AN.

The next big moment did not come until the early 1990s, when a combination of factors threw the field open for the MSI once more. First, the dissolution of the once massive Communist Party in 1991 after the fall of the Soviet Union and then the Tangentopoli (“kickbacks”) scandal in 1992, which revealed decades of corruption at the centre of Italian politics. At the peak of the scandal, half of the members of the Italian Chamber of Deputies were under formal investigation, destroying the credibility of the parties that had governed since the formation of the 1946 Republic. In turn, the Christian Democrats, Socialists, Liberals and the Social Democrats dissolved their organisations, leaving only the MSI (now rebranded as *Allianza Nazionale*, AN), the post-communist, Democratic Left Party (later, Democratic Party) and the centrist, Republican Party, standing at the national level. There was now a considerable political vacuum at the heart of Italian democracy – a vacuum that the right was quick to jump into.

Adjusting to this new reality, Gianfranco Fini, leader of the MSI/AN declared a new “fascism for the 21st Century” which would again move towards the centre, forming alliances with others on the right and placing a renewed emphasis on electoral politics. Having been on the margins since

1960, MSI-AN had not been sullied by the corruption scandal and they, and others on the right, were poised to benefit from popular outrage and the absence of a genuine left. Led by the conservative media baron, Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia Party, the AN joined the xenophobic Lega Nord and others in a right wing coalition government in 1994, having fought the election on a populist, anti-communist platform. Charting this return to the electoral fold, Broder contends that "the MSI had long sought a place for itself within the "area of government" and used this moment to emphasis its credentials as part of a broader right. Yet it also benefitted from the fact that other forces within this camp, and Berlusconi in particular, were willing to normalise the old neo-fascist party. Speaking of this government in 2019, Berlusconi said: 'In 1994 we decided to enter the field with the Right, that is, with the Lega and with the fascists ...We brought them in: it was us who legitimised them, who "constitutionalised them".

The mainstreaming of the MSI was thus not a one-sided process of it choosing to abandon its identity or change its positions; rather, it was able to find a different place for itself, in a context marked by the collapse of the previous party system" (p.86). To facilitate their return to mainstream politics, the AN had fudged their position on the wartime fascist regime, stating that the question of fascism and antifascism was "buried in the past",

refusing to condemn or commend Mussolini's party, while drawing an equivalence between the violence of antifascists and that of the fascist state.

This is the era in which Georgia Meloni made her entrance. Once a proud fascist youth leader with the MSI, Meloni was elected to Rome's City Council in 1998, quickly learning to deal with the difficult questions of the past, but not going quite as far as Fini, who by 1995 had declared himself "post-fascist". The old adage of "do not restore, do not reject" guided layers of new AN/MSI politicians who made it their mission to recast their party's history and to relativise fascism's crimes by referring to the great evil of international communism. At a national level, they were assisted in this through the 1990s and into the 2000s as Lega and others on the Italian right sought to rehabilitate the memory of "Italian patriots" on both sides of a civil war they saw as a national tragedy, driven by the external influence of Stalin and Tito.

More recently the fascists have been aided by attempts to recast Italians as the victims of history, most notably, the victims of the so-called "*Foibe Massacres*", in Yugoslav occupied Istria, after the Second World War. From the 1990s on, the far right spread a mythology of anti-Italian pogroms led by Yugoslav partisans, with the support of their Italian comrades. Here, they allege that thousands of Italians were murdered in a frenzy of ethnic cleansing, their bodies thrown into Foibe (limestone caverns that

mark the Istrian landscape). History indicates that no such massacres actually took place and that killings in the region were largely reprisals and popular prosecutions of fascist functionaries and their collaborators. Despite this, the leader of Lega, Matteo Salvini crudely stated that “there are no Serie A and Serie B victims”, comparing the fascists killed in the Foibe to the victims of the Holocaust (p.27).

These attempts to reshape what Broder refers to as “historical memory culture” around fascism and antifascism have been an important factor in the creation of a political climate that has allowed Meloni to come to power. This reshaping is present throughout the history of the MSI, but has been most acute since 1994, corresponding with the time spent by AN in and out of government through the 1990s and 2000s.

The rise of Fratelli

The vicious austerity that followed the 2008 crisis reshaped politics across Europe. With the second largest public debt burden in all of Europe, ailing traditional industries and deep regional inequalities, Italy was particularly badly hit. In the 2008 general election Berlusconi’s right coalition re-entered government after several years of Democratic Party rule. Without totally rejecting austerity, Berlusconi retained power by playing a populist strategy, refusing to implement programmes imposed by Europe and Italy’s creditors.

This allowed the coalition to retain some of the populist support it had built over the previous two decades, but it also deeply angered those loyal to neoliberalism and the EU. In 2011, Berlusconi was cast aside by a parliamentary no confidence motion, replaced by a “technocratic” government led by former banker, Mario Monti and supported by parties of the centre-left and centre-right. The austerity that followed was deeply unpopular, sullyng the Democratic Party particularly badly.

Meanwhile, on the far-right, internal tensions were beginning to emerge. As Fini moved the AN closer to the centre, recognising Italian fascism’s role in the Holocaust and placing greater distance between the AN and its past, the party began to splinter. First, the exit of Alessandra Mussolini in 2003, next the exit of the neofascist La Destra- Fiamma Tricolore in the run up to the 2008 General Election, and finally, the foundation of Fratelli d’Italia by Meloni and others in 2012, when Fini proposed a total merger with Berlusconi’s Il Popolo Della Libertà (People of Freedom, PDI) (pp. 101-112). Unlike Lega and others on the far right, FdI refused to support Monti’s technocratic government – giving it credibility as an anti-systemic force in Italian electoral politics that has been amplified by the absence of an effective left party.

FdI differentiated itself from AN in other ways too. Rejecting Fini’s strategy of moderation the FdI adopted the old

tricolour flame logo of the MSI, the emblem emblazoned on Mussolini's tomb and began to emphasise pride in a "70 year long history" carrying "the hopes of a people who found themselves without a party". In her memoirs, Meloni recalls the day Fd'I took up residence in the historic offices of the MSI: *"It's as if those millions of people are still here, all those fighting with me today and those who are no longer here. As if they were looking at me, silently asking, 'are you up to the task'"* (p.48).

Outside the tent of official party politics, Meloni steadily built her new party, relying on a mix of personal charm and conspiratorial, hard right populism. As Italy shambled from one failed government to the next from 2012 to 2019, Fd'I played on popular anger, joining Lega and others on the right in creating a narrative of national decline, driven by "globalisation" and uncontrolled immigration. Anti-migrant protests and violence have skyrocketed in recent years with Fd'I and closely aligned fascist organisations like Casapound at their heart, changing the terrain of national politics and making it more favourable to their growth. This has allowed Meloni and her followers to introduce fascist-derived conspiracies like the "Great Replacement Theory", which posits that undifferentiated "elites" are working together to "replace" Italians with migrants who will undercut them in the labour market, destabilise society and dilute national identity.

Since 2012, Meloni has positioned Fd'I as defenders of a Christian Italy centred on the heteronormative nuclear family. She has found allies internationally in the US and in the New European Right. Speaking at the Vox Party conference in Spain in 2021 for example, she outlined a shared vision of their mutual defence of "civilisation" against the "LGBT lobby", abortion and "international finance" – echoing 20th century fascism in both countries (pp. 157-159).

Terrifyingly, it appears Meloni has been able to win the ascent of the Italian ruling class and respect from their European counterparts too. Without compromising the neofascist core of her worldview, she has embraced NATO, just as her MSI predecessors did in 1951. She has also largely accepted the European Union, shaping rather than abandoning it, by working closely with new demagogues in Hungary, Poland and elsewhere – as recent immigration reforms have shown.¹ Broder suggests this new embrace of Europe is perhaps best seen as a successful return to the MSI's strategy of insertion at the international level as it *"combines reactionary civilisational politics with an effort to transform the EU from within"* (p.16).

Although Meloni sits for now, at the top of a democratically elected government, Broder cogently argues that with Fratelli's ascent to power, we find ourselves in dangerous new territory. An unashamed

political grandchild of the fascist past is now head of state of a Republic founded in opposition to fascism and using her influence to aid a resurgent European right. The old certainties and societal buttresses against the rise of the far right can no longer be relied upon in the 21st Century, as multiple, intertwined crises rock the system and the capitalist democratic order. If we are to emerge from this new time of “monsters”, the left must understand and confront Meloni and the new right she inhabits, soberly assessing our own forces but confidently projecting our own revolutionary vision to remake society in the years ahead. Broder’s book is critical reading for all those committed to that task.

1 Laura Dubois. 2023. EU ministers clinch deal on migration reform – Financial Times June 8th, 2023. Accessible: <https://www.ft.com/content/89ddf6d4-1c50-4538-8da5-7d957c172edc>

***Marx in the Anthropocene:
Towards the Idea of Degrowth
Communism***

Kohei Saito

Cambridge University Press 2023.

Dave O'Farrell

The Japanese Marxist Kohei Saito's latest book, *Marx in the Anthropocene*, is an important contribution to the ongoing debate around degrowth in ecosocialist politics. Saito's work follows Marxist writers such as John Bellamy Foster, Paul Burkett, Brett Clark, Ian Angus, and others, who, over the last few decades have revived interest in Marx's ecological critique of capitalism and, in particular, his concept of a metabolic rift between capitalist society and the natural world.

Unusually for a book dealing heavily in Marxist philosophy, *Marx in the Anthropocene* has received significant attention outside the usual socialist and academic circles. His previous book, *Capital in the Anthropocene* was also a bestseller in his native Japan, being particularly popular with a younger generation. Indeed, it was so popular that even the normally conservative public broadcaster offered him four 25 minute slots on national television to expound his ideas. This popularity has transferred into

the latest publication which was being discussed in many major newspapers, including the Guardian and Financial Times, even prior to being translated into English.

The coverage and popularity of *Marx in the Anthropocene* is all the more surprising given Saito himself has described it as a more academic version of *Capital in the Anthropocene*. The book does offer useful outlines of various strands of ecosocialist thought, but it is certainly not an introductory text. It presupposes a significant knowledge of Marx's economic and philosophical ideas, drawing heavily on *Capital*, the Grundrisse and many of Marx's unpublished notebooks and manuscripts from the *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA).

Saito's book is extremely broad in its scope. Split into three sections, it begins with a reassessment of the concept of a metabolic rift in Marx and outlines the extent of Marx's ecosocialist thought. Drawing on the unpublished notebooks and Marx's study of natural science and pre-capitalist societies, Saito then discusses changes in Marx's thought, particularly post-1868, on the productive forces of capitalism and the role of technology in their development. He then offers an explanation as to why this ecosocialist thread was largely absent from

much socialist thought in the years following Marx's death, up until very recently. This explanation is perhaps the weakest part of his argument and relies heavily on a supposed methodological break between Marx and Engels. We will return to this problematic argument later.

The second part of the book offers brief synopses and critiques of many strands of ecosocialist thought, beginning with an illuminating critique of monist approaches, such as Jason W. Moore's *World Ecology* which rejects the idea that one can analytically separate capitalist social relations from the natural world (hence the monism).¹ Challenging this, Saito defends Marx's dialectical approach, which views society as something separate from and irreducible to nature - with its own internal logic and structures - whilst remaining fundamentally a part of nature and thus influenced by it. There is also a useful discussion of the "elasticity of capital" and its ability to continue even in the face of ecological breakdown, an extremely compelling argument for an ecosocialist future beyond capitalism.

Saito then moves on to discuss the "new utopians" and "left accelerationists", thinkers (often of a left-reformist type) whose enthusiasm for the potential benefits of technology often leads them to ignore

the hard limits on consumption imposed by a finite Earth. In a fair assessment, Saito acknowledges the potential benefits of technology for automation and the challenges to capitalist markets of the zero marginal cost of many digital products, while criticising the narrow productive force determinism of thinkers like Jeremy Rifkin and Paul Mason and highlighting the incompatibility of much of this project with an ecosocialist approach – particularly in terms of the natural limits imposed by a finite world.

In many ways this is the strongest section of the book. It provides an excellent overview of the many, varied, sometimes intersecting, strands of ecosocialist thought and the discussion will benefit anyone seeking to navigate these current debates.

The final section returns to an assessment of Marx as a degrowth communist, again emphasising with reference to many of his unpublished writings, Marx's changing approach to understanding capitalism and the possibilities of a post-capitalist society. Saito here revisits *Capital*, "in order to truly go beyond it, explicating why Marx's vision of degrowth communism can increase the chances of establishing a more equal and sustainable society beyond capital's regime of infinite economic growth at the cost of our invaluable planet." His broad

prescriptions in this part offer much food for thought and serve as a timely call to action for the ecosocialist left while clearly acknowledging the difficulties posed, including the major hurdle of the “current political unpopularity of ‘degrowth communism’”.

Although it is in keeping with the general approach of the book to tackle the deeper philosophical underpinnings of ecosocialist thought it is slightly disappointing that his conclusions are somewhat lacking in concrete actions, not least in relation to the aforementioned “political unpopularity of degrowth communism”.

152 Issues of concern

While there is much to recommend in the book, there are some issues worth flagging. In particular there are two lines of argument I feel are unconvincing. In broad terms, these arguments rest on a rather strict textual analysis of Marx’s writings and here Saito’s knowledge of unpublished manuscripts from the MEGA project, which so enrich his analysis in many places, somewhat work against his arguments. The two key areas are the previously mentioned insistence on a methodological break between Marx and Engels and a repeated assertion that the late Marx breaks with, or

abandons, the concepts of historical materialism.

Taking the second criticism first, Saito builds a convincing argument that Marx changed his views of how capitalism operates over time, with particular emphasis on his research in the natural sciences and pre-capitalist society. As part of his argument, Saito refers on multiple occasions to Marx breaking with his “earlier” concept of historical materialism, particularly in relation to his reassessment of the prospects for revolution in Russia, the role of peasant communes and groups like the Narodnik’s as sites of opposition to capitalism.

One problem is that Saito never defines what either he or Marx actually means by historical materialism in this context, beyond identifying it with tendencies toward “Prometheanism”, in this case a tendency to view an increase in the productive forces of capitalism in an exclusively positive light as laying the preconditions for post-capitalist abundance, and as a tendency towards “eurocentrism”. These tendencies can certainly be identified in some of Marx’s earlier writings. The *Communist Manifesto* is certainly a eurocentric document, for example, and its sketch-like outline of historical development could be read as

crudely deterministic. However, it was written in specific circumstances with a specific aim in mind, namely as an intervention in the upsurge of revolutionary working class activity in the period of the 1848 revolutions which occurred across Europe. The social context matters, and an overly textual analysis loses something by missing this context.

Leaning on the fact that Marx's analysis of historical materialism (HM) was relatively incomplete, Saito then argues that, as Marx moved beyond his conception of how capitalism operates after the publication of *Capital* Vol One, he also moves away from his earlier conception of HM. But it is surely wrong to assume that Marx's changing understanding of the forces in a specifically capitalist economy can be used to demonstrate a break with his understanding of how societies in general develop. As a broad framework for understanding socio-historical transformations the concepts of historical materialism, such as base and superstructure, forces, and relations of production etc, surely remained central to Marx's whole project, regardless of the fact that he never gave a definitive account of HM beyond various sketches and outlines. Indeed, Saito's argument for a break with historical materialism are actually more convincing as an argument that Marx

continued to utilise the basic framework already present in his early work while building sturdier foundations through his later studies that used an increasing subtlety of argument to allow for greater contingency and variation according to local conditions in any given society and its environment – as befits a dialectical approach to understanding society.

A rift with Engels?

The most important critique that needs to be made of Saito's work is the supposed methodological break between Marx and Engels. This is by far the most problematic, and least convincing, section of the book. The argument presented, again based on

153

“Saito’s whole supposed proof of a methodological break between Marx and Engels depends on the absence of a single term, the word “natural” preceding “metabolism,” in a single passage, constituting a small change of highly debatable significance, [and] points to the total absence of any substantive evidence of such a break. To rend asunder Marx and Engels on metabolism and ecology on such a basis is unwarrantable. The truth is, while

*Engels did not directly employ Marx's notion of "social metabolism," except in his 1868 Synopsis of Capital, nor develop Marx's analysis in this regard, there is no indication that his outlook contradicted that of Marx in this area."*²

Rather than blaming Engels for side-lining this important concept, the lack of a strong ecosocialist tendency in much Marxist thought in the decades following Marx's death is much better explained by the fact that the destruction of the natural world was merely one damaging aspect among many of the capitalist system they sought to overthrow – and, at that time not the most pressing or important one. While both men should be credited with having the foresight to recognise the damage caused to the natural world, its scale was not on the level it is today, the scientific understanding of many of the processes was in its infancy and the climate crisis had not entered the public consciousness in the way it has today. To put it bluntly, ecosocialist ideas, whilst important to both, were simply not their core project. That remained the overthrow of the entire capitalist system, something which would allow for the reversal of the damaging environmental policies then being pursued.

That core project of Marx and Engels remains core to revolutionary socialists today but given the fact that we face multiple intersecting climate crises with an ever vanishing window to prevent catastrophe, ecosocialist ideas must be central to all our actions today. Criticisms aside, Saito's book is an extremely welcome addition to these debates. His call to action is both timely and necessary and those of use interested in applying, and advocating, Marx's theories today will benefit from reading it, along with the inevitable further debate it will generate.

¹For an overview of the problematic nature of Moore's World Ecology see John Bellamy Foster 2016. "In Defense of Ecological Marxism: John Bellamy Foster responds to a critic". *Climate and Capitalism*. Available @ climateandcapitalism.com/2016/06/06/in-defense-of-ecological-marxism-john-bellamy-foster-responds-to-a-critic/

² John Bellamy Foster. 2023. "Engels and the Second Foundation of Marxism". *Monthly Review*, Jun 01, 2023 Available at: <https://monthlyreview.org/2023/06/01/engels-and-the-second-foundation-of-marxism/>