

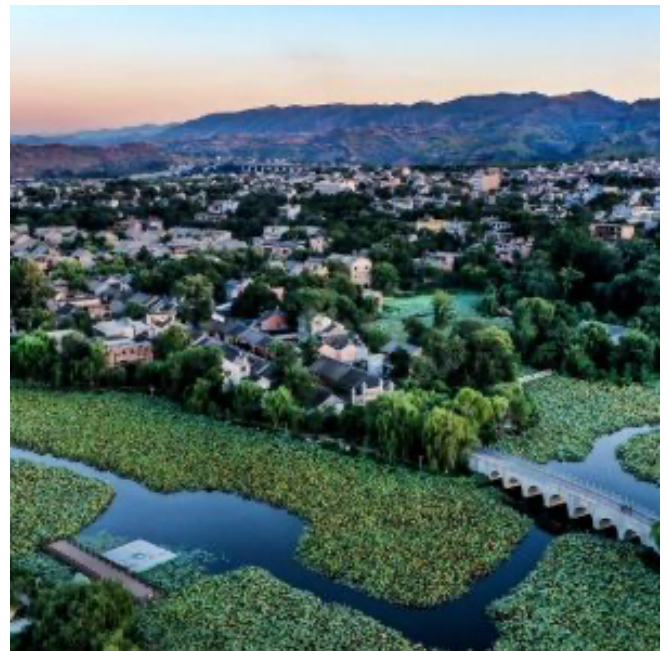
Ecological Civilisation, Ecological Revolution

An Ecological Marxist Perspective

John Bellamy Foster

I would like to speak to you today about the connections between ecological civilisation, ecological Marxism, and ecological revolution, and the ways in which these three concepts, when taken together dialectically, can be seen as pointing to a new revolutionary praxis for the twenty-first century. More concretely, I would like to ask: How are we to understand the origins and historic significance of the concept of ecological civilisation? What is its relation to ecological Marxism? And how is all of this connected to the worldwide revolutionary struggle aimed at transcending our current planetary emergency and protecting what Karl Marx called “the chain of human generations,” together with life in general?¹

In 2018, cultural theorist Jeremy Lent, author of *The Patterning Instinct: A Cultural History of Humanity’s Search for Meaning* (2017), wrote an article for the online site *Ecowatch*, entitled “What Does China’s ‘Ecological Civilisation’ Mean for Humanity’s Future?” This article exhibits a peculiarly Western view, which, while recognising the distinctiveness of the notion of ecological civilisation in China, nevertheless attempts to separate China’s core conception in this regard from ecological Marxism and the critique of capitalism. In opening his article, Lent writes:



Aerial photo taken on Sept. 18, 2020 of Dihua, an ancient town in Danfeng County, Shangluo City of northwest China's Shaanxi Province. Dihua ancient town has attracted many tourists with its well protected ecological environment, rich history and unique folk customs. Source: "[China to adhere to green development, advance ecological civilization: position paper](#)," Xinhua, September 21, 2020.

¹ ↪ Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3 (London: Penguin, 1981), 754.

Imagine a newly elected president of the United States calling in his inaugural speech for an “ecological civilisation” that ensures “harmony between humanity and nature.” Now imagine he goes on to declare that “we, as human beings, must respect nature, follow its ways, and protect it” and that his administration will “encourage simple, moderate, green, and low-carbon ways of life, and oppose extravagance and excessive consumption.” Dream on, you might say. Even in the more progressive Western European nations, it’s hard to find a political leader who would make such a stand.

And yet, the leader of the world’s second largest economy, Xi Jinping of China, made these statements and more in his address to the National Congress of the Communist Party in Beijing last October [2017]. He went on to specify in more detail his plans to “step up efforts to establish a legal and policy framework...that facilitates green, low-carbon, and circular development,” to “promote afforestation,” “strengthen wetland conservation and restoration” and “take tough steps to stop and punish all activities that damage the environment.” Closing his theme with a flourish, he proclaimed that “what we are doing today” is “to build an ecological civilisation that will benefit generations to come.” Transcending parochial boundaries, he declared that his Party’s abiding mission was to “make new and greater contributions to mankind...for both the well-being of the Chinese people and human progress.”²

Why is it that the category of ecological civilisation, which is so central for China today, is largely inconceivable even as a talking point within the imperial core of the capitalist world, lying entirely outside its ideological sphere? Lent argues that such a principle is diametrically opposed to traditional Western culture, from Plato to the present day, with its alienated view of nature, in which the environment is viewed simply as something to be conquered. This stands in sharp contrast, he argues, to the more ecological culture embedded in China’s 5,000-year-old civilisation—though China too has experienced thousands of years of ecological destruction.³ He quotes the early neo-Confucian philosopher Zhang Zai from a thousand years ago who wrote:

Heaven is my father and earth is my mother, and I, a small child, find myself placed intimately between them. What fills the universe I regard as my body; what directs the universe I regard as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters; all things are my companions.⁴

² ↪ Jeremy Lent, “What Does China’s ‘Ecological Civilization’ Mean for Humanity’s Future?”, Ecowatch, February 9, 2018, ecowatch.com; Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China*, vol. 3 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2020), 54–56; Xi Jinping, “Full Text of Xi Jinping’s Report at the 19th CPC National Congress,” *China Daily*, November 4, 2017. An error in Lent’s quotes from Xi, where “human and nature” is used instead of “humanity and nature,” is corrected here.

³ ↪ See Pat Kane, “A New History of Cultural Big Ideas Looks to the East for Solace,” *New Scientist*, May 24, 2017; Mark Elvin, *The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006). Lent’s attempt to trace the divergence between humanity and nature, which characterises the ecological contradiction of the West back to Plato, is not entirely convincing, since Plato himself commented on ecological destruction in his time in his *Critias*, while other ancient thinkers, particularly materialists, such as Epicurus and his Roman follower Lucretius, evidenced deep ecological values. On Epicurus, see John Bellamy Foster, *Marx’s Ecology* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 2–6, 33–39.

⁴ ↪ Jeremy Lent, *The Patterning Instinct* (New York: Prometheus, 2017), 264–65. See also Ira E. Kasoff, *The Thought of Chang Tsai (1020–1077)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). Similar views were, of course, to be found in Daoism. The ecological character of early Chinese thought was strongly emphasised by the great Marxist scientist, ecological thinker, and leading Sinologist Joseph Needham. See John Bellamy Foster, *The Return of Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020), 498–501. The relation of Daoism to ecology is emphasised in P. J. Laska, *The Original Wisdom of Dao De Jing: A New Translation and Commentary* (Green Valley, AZ: ECCS, 2012).

For Lent, China's view of ecological civilisation—though laudable—has nothing really to do with the political economy of present-day China or Marxism.⁵ Rather, he associates it with the “regeneration” of traditional Chinese values. Here, the fact that the Chinese Communist Party has adopted the notion of ecological civilisation, while such a forward-looking view is generally incomprehensible in the West, is simply interpreted in terms of the very different cultural heritages of China and Europe. In this way, the divergence between Asia and the Western world regarding ecological civilisation is largely divorced from material foundations and from such issues as capitalism and socialism. Hence, in Lent's perspective, China's emphasis on ecological civilisation has nothing whatsoever—except in a negative sense—to do with ecological Marxism. Rather, the People's Republic of China is characterised as an authoritarian state that is the very symbol of unfreedom. He points to contemporary China's “hyper-industrial” economy as somehow worse than what prevails in the West, leading it down the road toward the pollution of the entire earth, and opposed to its claim to be building an ecological civilisation.⁶

Lent's argument seems to be that while Europe and North America have superior political and economic foundations,

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their environmental progress is hindered by their more destructive traditional ecological culture. China, in comparison, has a more harmonious ecological culture extending back millennia, but it is hindered by its “hyper-industrial,” authoritarian political-economic regime from bringing this to fruition, thus endangering the entire earth and all humanity—unless, of course,

China's traditional ecological culture triumphs over its present, Marxian-inspired political-economic goals.

This attempt, in the name of traditional Chinese values, to sever the notion of ecological civilisation from ecological Marxism and the question of revolutionary-scale ecological change is ultimately aimed at disconnecting the idea of ecological progress from a socialist praxis of sustainable human development. In contrast, I contend that the concept of ecological civilisation is in fact a historical product of the development of ecological Marxism. Any attempt to separate the two, notwithstanding the importance of traditional Chinese values, is to deny the historical significance of the ecological civilisation concept, and its importance in conceiving the necessary worldwide ecological revolution.

Ecological Marxism and the Origins of the Ecological Civilisation Concept

The 1970s and '80s saw a resurrection of Soviet ecological thought, which had in many ways led the world in development of ecological science in the 1920s and '30s, only to degenerate in the decades that followed due to political and social factors.⁷ However, with its renewal in the 1970s and '80s, Soviet ecology took on a new, distinctive

⁵ ↪ In seeking to demonstrate that Marx was anti-ecological and advanced a Promethean view of the conquest of nature equivalent to that of bourgeois thought, Lent takes Marx's famous statement in *Capital*, volume 3 on the rational regulation of the metabolism between human beings and nature on behalf of the chain of human generations in accord with natural-material conditions and turns it into a flat statement meant to suggest the exact opposite. Thus, using the original English translation, removing the phrase “associated producers” (representing the subject of Marx statement) and replacing it with “socialism,” he writes, “Karl Marx wrote that the goal of socialism was ‘rationally regulating [humanity's] material interchange with nature and bringing it under the common control!’—as if this implied a straightforward degradation of nature. In contrast, Marx's statement, quoting from the Penguin translation: reads as follows: “Freedom, in this sphere, can consist only in this, that socialized man, the associated producers, govern the human metabolism with nature in a rational way, bringing it under their collective control, instead of being dominated by it as a blind power; accomplishing it with the least expenditure of energy and in conditions most worthy and appropriate for their human nature.” The emphasis here is clearly one of sustainable human development. Lent, *The Patterning Instinct*, 280; Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3 (New York: International Publishers, 1967), 820; Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3 (London: Penguin, 1981), 959.

⁶ ↪ Lent, “What Does China's ‘Ecological Civilization’ Mean for Humanity's Future?”; Kane, “A New History of Cultural Big Ideas Looks to the East for Solace.”

⁷ ↪ The analysis in this section draws on John Bellamy Foster, *Capitalism in the Anthropocene* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2022), 433–56.

character, seeing the ecological problem as related to the general question of civilisation.⁸ This was especially evident in an important collection on Philosophy and the Ecological Problems of Civilisation, edited by A. D. Ursul and published in 1983.⁹ This volume included contributions by some of the USSR's leading scientists and philosophers. This led directly to the concept of ecological civilisation, with a number of other works on the topic appearing in 1983–84, and with the same notion entering almost immediately into Chinese Marxism, where it was to become a central category of analysis.¹⁰

Ecological civilisation in the Marxian sense points to the struggle to transcend the logic of all previous, class-based civilisations, particularly capitalism, with its two-fold domination/alienation of nature/humanity.

Ecological civilisation in the Marxian sense points to the struggle to transcend the logic of all previous, class-based civilisations, particularly capitalism, with its two-fold domination/alienation of nature/humanity. Writing in *Philosophy and the Ecological Problems of Civilisation*, P. N. Fedoseev, vice president of the USSR Academy of Sciences, addressed the issue of “rejection of the gains of civilisation” implicit in many Green attempts to confront the ecological problem, often generating historically disembodied utopias, either backward-looking or technocratic.¹¹ Leading environmental philosopher Ivan Frolov, following Marx, emphasised that the human metabolism with nature was mediated by the labor and production process, and by science, and thus depended on the mode of production.¹² Philosopher V. A. Los explored how “culture is becoming an antagonist...to nature” and referred to the need to construct a new “ecological culture” or civilisation, reconstituting on more sustainable grounds the role of science and technology in relation to the environment. As he explained: “It is in the course of shaping an ecological culture that we can expect not only a theoretical solution of the acute contradictions existing in the relations between man and his habitat under contemporary civilisation, but also their practical tackling.”¹³

Marx's celebrated theory of metabolic rift, with which he addressed the ecological crises of his day, has been extended today to address capitalism's destruction of ecosystems and the disruption of nearly every aspect of the planetary environment.

From an ecological Marxist standpoint, the emerging global ecological crisis thus demanded an ecological transformation to create a new ecological civilisation, in line with the long history of ecological analysis within Marxism, and a socialist path of development. Marx and Engels dealt extensively with the ecological contradictions of capitalism, going beyond simply their well-known discussions on the degradation of the soil and the division between town and country, to

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⁸ ↪ John Bellamy Foster, “Late Soviet Ecology and the Planetary Crisis,” *Monthly Review* 67, no. 2 (June 2015): 1–20.

⁹ ↪ A.D. Ursul, *Philosophy and the Ecological Problems of Civilisation* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1983).

¹⁰ ↪ Following the 1983 publication of *Philosophy and the Ecological Problems of Civilization*, it appears that vice president of the USSR Academy of Sciences, P. N. Fedoseev (also Fedoseyev), who had written the introductory essay on ecology and the problem of civilization in the above-edited book, incorporated a treatment of “Ecological Civilization” into the second edition of his *Scientific Communism*. See P. N. Fedoseev (Fedoseyev), *Scientific Communism* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1986); Jiahua Pan, *China's Environmental Governing and Ecological Civilization* (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 2014), 35; Arran Gare, “Barbarity, Civilization and Decadence: Meeting the Challenge of Creating an Ecological Civilization,” *Chromatikon* 5 (2015): 167–89; Qingzhi Huan, “Socialist Eco-Civilization and Social-Ecological Transformation,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 27, no. 2 (2016): 2.

¹¹ ↪ N. Fedoseev (Fedoseyev), “The Social Significance of the Ecological Problem,” in *Philosophy and the Ecological Problems of Civilisation*, ed. Ursul, 31; Wang Hui, “Revolutionary Personality and the Philosophy of Victory: Commemorating Lenin's 150th Birthday,” Reading the China Dream (blog), April 21, 2020.

¹² ↪ Ivan T. Frolov, “The Marxist-Leninist Conception of the Ecological Problem,” in *Philosophy and the Ecological Problems of Civilisation*, ed. Ursul, 35–42.

¹³ ↪ A. Los, “On the Road to an Ecological Culture,” in *Philosophy and the Ecological Problems of Civilisation*, ed. Ursul, 339.

encompass such issues as industrial pollution, the depletion of coal and fossil fuels more generally (in terms of what Frederick Engels called the “squandering” of “past solar heat”), the clearing of forests, the adulteration of food, the spread of viruses due to human causes, etc.¹⁴ Marx’s celebrated theory of metabolic rift, with which he addressed the ecological crises of his day, has been extended today to address capitalism’s destruction of ecosystems and the disruption of nearly every aspect of the planetary environment.¹⁵

In twenty-first century China, ecological Marxism has contributed to the development not only of a powerful critique of contemporary environmental devastation, but also to the promotion of ecological civilisation as an answer. Aware that ecology ultimately constitutes a deeper materialist grounding for society than mere economics, Xi has emphasised, in his conceptions of ecological civilisation and of a “beautiful China,” that ecology is “the most inclusive form of public

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wellbeing.”¹⁶ He has stated: “Man and nature form a community of life; we, as human beings, must respect nature, follow its ways and protect it. Only by observing the laws of nature can humanity avoid costly blunders in its exploitation. Any harm we inflict on nature will eventually return to haunt us. This is a reality we have to face.”¹⁷ These words are closely connected to the classical ecological analysis of Marx and Engels, who forcefully argued that human beings are part of nature, and need to follow nature’s

laws in carrying out production, while referring to the “revenge” of nature on those who disregard its laws.¹⁸

The concept of ecological civilisation being implemented in China today is seen as representing a new, revolutionary, and transformative model of civilisation. Prior civilisations are viewed, in accordance with Marxist analysis, as tied to class society, but historically giving rise to new stages of development. In this view, ecological civilisation is a stage in the development of “a great modern socialist society” that, unlike capitalism, does not sacrifice people and the planet to profits.¹⁹ In contrast to the dominant capitalist notion of sustainable development, ecological civilisation is understood as incorporating the domains of politics and culture, leading to a “five-in-one approach” that goes beyond the standard triad of environmental, economic, and social factors that has come to characterise liberal sustainable development. Ecological civilisation conceived in this way is aimed at sustainable human development, giving more emphasis to the non-economic definition of well-being, and putting politics in charge.²⁰

As Chen Xueming noted in *The Ecological Crisis and the Logic of Capital*, the basic principles underlying the socialist ecological modernisation associated with ecological civilisation are “prevention, innovation, efficiency, non-equivalence, dematerialisation, greenification, ecologisation, democratic participation, pollution fees and win-win

¹⁴ ↪ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), vol. 46, 411, italics in the original; Foster, *Marx’s Ecology*, 141–77.

¹⁵ ↪ Foster, *Capitalism in the Anthropocene*, 73–74.

¹⁶ ↪ Xi, *The Governance of China*, vol. 3, 6, 20, 25, 417–24.

¹⁷ ↪ Xi, *The Governance of China*, vol. 3, 54.

¹⁸ ↪ Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 25, 460–63; see also Cheng Enfu, *China’s Economic Dialectic: The Original Aspiration of Reform* (New York: International Publishers, 2019), 150.

¹⁹ ↪ Xi, *The Governance of China*, vol. 3, 20.

²⁰ ↪ . Arthur Hanson, *Ecological Civilization in the People’s Republic of China: Values, Action, and Future Needs* (Manila: Asian Development Bank, 2019), 3–9. See also John B. Cobb in conversation with Andre Vltchek, *China and Ecological Civilization* (Jakarta: Badak Merah Semesta, 2019); Paul Burkett, “Marx’s Vision of Sustainable Human Development,” *Monthly Review* 57, no. 5 (October 2005): 34–62.

Such revolutionary-scale ecological reforms are being attempted even in a context of rapid economic growth aimed at bringing China up to a level with the West... [and] economic growth will need to be slowed somewhat in relation to earlier decades... China has set definite dates for the implementation of ecological civilisation, including having the main components of its ecological civilisation in place by 2035, establishing a beautiful China by 2050, and reaching net-zero carbon emissions by 2060.

scenarios between economy and environment.”²¹

The eight priorities for the establishment of ecological civilisation are categorised as: (1) spatial planning and development; (2) technological innovation and structural adjustment; (3) sustainable use of land, water, and other natural resources; (4) ecological and environmental protection; (5) regulatory systems for ecological civilisation; (6) monitoring and supervision; (7) public participation; and (8) organisation and implementation of

environmental policy/planning.²²

In the Chinese case, such revolutionary-scale ecological reforms are being attempted even in a context of rapid economic growth aimed at bringing China up to a level with the West. Integrated planning to protect the environment is being incorporated in all economic development plans. The seriousness with which ecological civilisation is being pursued is reflected in the clear acknowledgment that, in the implementation of these ecological plans, economic growth will need to be slowed somewhat in relation to earlier decades.²³ This environmental focus can be seen in the radical transformations that China has been introducing in such areas as pollution reduction; reforestation and afforestation; development of alternative energy sources; imposing restrictions in sensitive river areas; rural revitalisation; food self-sufficiency through collective means; and in many other areas.²⁴ China has made dramatic progress in reducing the degree of its reliance on coal, but due to the pandemic and world crises, it has partly regressed in this respect over the last few years.²⁵ Nonetheless, it has set definite dates for the implementation of ecological civilisation, including having the main components of its ecological civilisation in place by 2035, establishing a beautiful China by 2050, and reaching net-zero carbon emissions by 2060.²⁶

The struggle to create an ecological civilisation in China would mean very little of course if it were simply a top-down

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program, which would almost certainly lose its impetus and succumb to economic and bureaucratic forces. The radical nature of the transformation is safeguarded by the fact that in China’s post-revolutionary society, the ecological metamorphoses are emanating from both above and below, drawing on struggles for rural reconstruction in response to the rural-urban divide. For example, Yin

Yuzhen, a peasant woman living in the desert in Uxin Banner in Inner Mongolia, decided to reclaim the desert, entering into a thirty-seven-year struggle in which she and her family have planted 500,000 trees. She has become a respected expert on the greening of deserts. Peasants in the region joined in the afforestation effort, and nearly 6,700 square kilometres of barren sand were turned green. Yun Jianli, a former high school teacher, successfully organised against

²¹ ↪ Chen Xueming, *The Ecological Crisis and the Logic of Capital* (Boston: Brill, 2017), 573.

²² ↪ Hanson, *Ecological Civilization in the People’s Republic of China*, 6.

²³ ↪ See Stephen S. Roach, “China’s Growth Sacrifice,” *Project Syndicate*, August 23, 2022.

²⁴ ↪ See Joe Scholten, “How China Strengthened Food Security and Fought Poverty with State-Funded Cooperatives,” *Multipolarista*, May 31, 2022.

²⁵ ↪ Xiaoying You, “What Does China’s Coal Push Mean for its Climate Goals?” *Carbon Brief*, March 29, 2022.

²⁶ ↪ Hanson, *Ecological Civilization in the People’s Republic of China*, 6.

water pollution. In 2002, she founded Green Han River, an environmental protection organisation to protect the Han River from pollution, producing countless environmental reports and opposing factory owners/managers. The organisation has more than 30,000 volunteers. By 2018, they had organised over a thousand field trips to investigate pollution sources along the Han River, traveling over 100,000 kilometres altogether. The object is to mobilise the whole society for environmental protection. Wang Pinsong of Shangri-La by the Gold Sand River in southwest China—an area that is the home of fifteen ethnic groups—led in mobilising her village in opposition to a dam-building project in Tiger Leap Grove, which would have displaced 100,000 villagers and engulfed 33,000 acres of fertile land by the riverbanks. Environmental organising at the grassroots level, based on the self-mobilisation of the population, is a powerful force in today's China, pointing to the development of a new ecological communism.²⁷

A major indication of China's approach to environmental issues and threats is its successful response to COVID-19, which has resulted in a mortality rate of four deaths per million people, as compared to the United States' COVID mortality rate of 3,107 per million (as of June 22, 2022). China's achievement in protecting its population, and, in a win-win situation, also protecting its economy, is widely misconceived in the West as simply the result of an authoritarian set of lockdowns imposed from the top of the society. Nevertheless, the secret to China's achievement, especially in the early stages, was adopting the model of people's revolutionary war: enlisting the self-mobilisation of the entire population in the fight against COVID and the resurrection of the mass line, connecting the population to the state and party.²⁸

China and Ecological Revolution

China faces enormous ecological contradictions internal to its society, as does world production as a whole. In terms of annual carbon emissions, China is the world's largest polluter. However, much of this is devoted to producing manufactured products to be consumed in the West, while China's historic carbon emissions are still far exceeded by the United States and Europe, with the United States responsible for seven times as much per capita of the carbon dioxide concentrated in the atmosphere as China. In terms of per capita carbon dioxide emissions, China today produces less than half the U.S. level.²⁹ In *Will China Save the Planet?* (2018), Barbara Finamore, senior strategic director for Asia of

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the Natural Resources Defense Council in the United States, contends that while “China is still the largest GHG (greenhouse gas) emitter, it is arguably doing more than any other country to try to reduce global carbon emissions—though it continues to face enormous challenges.”³⁰ There is no doubt that China's struggles to create an ecological civilisation are revolutionary when placed against the efforts of other countries. This is largely due to its role as a post-revolutionary, socialist-oriented social formation that retains a

large element of economic planning capability, state direction, and collective values, invigorated by continual popular mobilisation in both rural and urban areas.

²⁷ ↪ Sit Tsui and Lau Kin Chi, “Surviving through Community Building in Catastrophic Times,” *Monthly Review* 74, no. 3 (July–August 2022): 54–69.

²⁸ ↪ Coronavirus Updates by Country, Worldometer, as of June 22, 2022; Wang Hui, “Revolutionary Personality and the Philosophy of Victory.”

²⁹ ↪ James Hansen et al., “Young People's Burden: Requirements of Negative CO₂ Emissions,” *Earth System Dynamics* 8 (2017): 578; James Hansen, “China and the Barbarians, Part 1,” Columbia University, November 24, 2010; “Each Country's Share of CO₂ Emissions,” Union of Concerned Scientists, August 12, 2020.

³⁰ ↪ Barbara Finamore, *Will China Save the Planet?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 119.

This brings us back to the question that Lent implicitly asked in the passage quoted at the beginning of this talk. Why is it so impossible that a U.S. or European head of state could have referred, as Xi did, to a present and future goal for society couched not in terms of mere economic growth, but stressing the importance of creating an ecological civilisation? The answer to this is not simply, as Lent would have us believe, that China has regenerated its traditional ecological values, or that the West is wedded to a culture, going back thousands of years, geared to the “conquest of nature.” Rather, the

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fundamental division is between a post-revolutionary society that has adopted Marxism with Chinese characteristics—embracing the ecological critique emanating from classical historical materialism and treating it as central to the entire long revolution of socialism—and an unalloyed capitalist order in which the sole mantra is “Accumulate, accumulate! That is Moses and the

prophets.”³¹

There is no possibility that the ruling-class interests in a core capitalist country like the United States, which has long cultivated an “imperial mode of living” and production, mainly benefiting the very top of society, will somehow turn around and advocate a low-carbon, “simple, moderate, green” way of life or oppose excessive consumption and inequality as advanced in the Chinese notion of ecological civilisation.³² Rather, the main radical proposal in the West to deal with the global ecological threat is that of a state-sponsored Green New Deal, usually articulated in terms of market mechanisms, technological change, and climate jobs, which will allow production to continue, essentially unchanged. Yet the prospect of a Green New Deal, given the extent of opposition to fossil capital that it would require, has gone virtually nowhere in the United States or Europe, since even this is conceived as a dire threat to the ruling interests.³³ The result is that saving the planet as a place for human habitation is, ironically, left in contemporary capitalism almost entirely up to the private sector, which is the historical source of global ecological destruction, while the environmental reform effort has been reduced to creating state-financed green markets for private corporations and new forms of the financialisation of nature.³⁴ Hence, the capitalist juggernaut continues in its forward motion, destroying in its path the very conditions of the human future.

In terms of sheer capacity, the wealthy, developed, technologically advanced countries at the core of the world capitalist

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system could easily lead the way in addressing the ecological problem. Their political inability to do so is linked to the weakness of socialist, collective, and ecological principles in capitalist commodity society; the virtual absence of planning (outside the military); and the ruling class’s fears of the self-mobilisation of populations,

which is necessary if revolutionary-scale transformations in our economic relation to the environment are to be effected.

³¹ ↪ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 742; Xi, *The Governance of China*, vol. 3, 55.

³² ↪ Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen, *The Imperial Mode of Living: Everyday Life and the Ecological Crisis of Capitalism* (London: Verso 2021), 5–10.

³³ ↪ For how far the climate legislation in the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act passed by the U.S. Congress with the backing of the Joe Biden administration falls short of a Green New Deal, see Jim Walsh and Peter Hart, “Will the Manchin Climate Bill Reduce Climate Pollution,” *Food and Water Watch*, August 10, 2022; Anthony Rogers-Wright, “Why the Inflation Reduction Act is Less a ‘Climate Bill’ and More a Poison Pill for Black and Indigenous Communities and Movements,” *Black Agenda Report*, August 24, 2022.

³⁴ ↪ John Bellamy Foster, “[The Defense of Nature: Resisting the Financialization of the Earth](#),” — The Jus Semper Global Alliance, June 2022.

What is needed in order to carry out an ecological revolution directed at human survival is not simply environmental reform, but a much broader ecological and social revolution aimed at transcending the logic of capitalism itself.

Revolutionary Ecosocialism and the Future

So far, I have emphasised the importance of revolutionary ecosocialism or ecological Marxism in the conception of ecological civilisation. It is no accident that the notion of ecological civilisation first appeared in the 1980s in the Soviet Union and that it is being implemented as a guiding principle and central project in China, while it is scarcely discussed elsewhere in the world. This cannot be attributed solely to China's traditional culture, though it has played a part. Nor does it make sense to connect this to the notion of postmodern culture, which has had no real material relevance in this

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regard.³⁵ Rather, the notion of ecological civilisation is inconceivable in any meaningful sense outside of a society engaged in building socialism, and thus actively engaged in combating the primacy of capital accumulation as the supreme measure of human progress. It is exactly here that Marxian

ecology has had a huge role to play.

Ecological Marxism has developed in China in terms of its own “vernacular revolutionary tradition,” where new critical concepts are seen as directly problem-oriented and immediately put in operation.³⁶ This is distinct from its

We have learned in the recent renewal and elaboration of Marxian ecology a number of crucial concepts. Chief amongst these is Marx's triad of concepts of the “universal metabolism of nature,” “social metabolism,” and the “irreparable rift in the interdependent process of social metabolism”—or the metabolic rift brought on by capitalist development.

conceptualisation in the West, where ecosocialist researchers are more removed from praxis and have generally been engaged in wider, and often more abstract, theoretical developments. A principal concern of Marxian ecology in the West (as well in much of the rest of the world) has been the reconstruction of Marx's theory of metabolic rift, and how to enhance the continuing critique of capital in this respect. Bringing this renewed ecological critique emanating from classical historical materialism to bear on the problems of

building ecological civilisation in China therefore ought to be a priority—and, in fact, many scholars in China are currently engaged in this.

In terms of what we have learned in the recent renewal and elaboration of Marxian ecology, a number of concepts are crucial. Chief amongst these is Marx's triad of concepts of the “universal metabolism of nature,” “social metabolism,” and the “irreparable rift in the interdependent process of social metabolism”—or the metabolic rift brought on by capitalist development.³⁷ The concept of the universal metabolism of nature recognises that human beings and human societies are an emergent part of nature. Social metabolism expresses how humanity interacts with and transforms nature through production. And the metabolic rift reflects the fact that an alienated social metabolism, aimed at the expropriation of nature as a means of the exploitation of humanity and the accumulation of capital, necessarily produces

³⁵ ↩ As a cultural determinist, based on what he calls “cognitive history” or the development of worldviews underpinning cultures, Lent seeks to weave together what he sees as non-essentialist cultural worldviews with postmodernism, and uses this to explain why some cultures are more ecologically destructive than others. What this obviates is any materialist worldview, leaving these architectonic worldviews hanging in air without foundations. See Jeremy Lent, “Beyond Modernist and Postmodernist History,” IAI News, January 28, 2022.

³⁶ ↩ Teodor Shanin, “Marxism and the Vernacular Revolutionary Traditions,” in *Late Marx and the Russian Road*, ed. Teodor Shanin (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 243–79.

³⁷ ↩ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, 949; John Bellamy Foster, “Marx and the Rift in the Universal Metabolism of Nature,” *Monthly Review* 65, no. 7 (December 2013): 1–19.

an ecological crisis, driving a wedge between this alienated social metabolism and the universal metabolism of nature of which we are a part.

Marx himself provided a penetrating definition of what we now call sustainable human development. No one—not even all of the people or all of the countries in the world— he argued, owns the earth; rather, we are obligated to hold it in

Our relation to the earth is our most fundamental material relation out of which our production, history, and social relations emerge. Those who are most alienated, exploited, and degraded by the system in their relations to nature and the earth, constitute both the force and means for change in the twenty-first century.

usufruct as good managers of the household, sustaining it for the chain of human generations.³⁸ Genuine progress on this score, overcoming the alienation of nature and humanity associated with the processes of expropriation and exploitation, has to embrace the notion not simply of an economic proletariat (and economic peasantry) as the principal force for change, but, in a more inclusive materialism, of an environmental proletariat (and ecological

peasantry). Indeed, the three categories that we started with—ecological civilisation, ecological revolution, and ecological Marxism—hardly make sense without this fourth term of the environmental proletariat.

Our relation to the earth is our most fundamental material relation out of which our production, history, and social relations emerge. Those who are most alienated, exploited, and degraded by the system in their relations to nature and the earth, constitute both the force and means for change in the twenty-first century.³⁹ In what Marx called the “hierarchy of [human] needs,” our relation to the earth necessarily comes first, since it constitutes the basis of survival, and of the development of life itself.⁴⁰



³⁸ ↩ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, 911, 949.

³⁹ ↩ The above concepts from Marx's ecology and Marxian ecology in general are all central to the analysis in John Bellamy Foster, *Capitalism in the Anthropocene*.

⁴⁰ ↩ Karl Marx, *Texts on Method* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975), 195.

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