

Marxism and the Problem of Creating an Environmentally Sustainable Civilization in China

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Preface

This paper is the transcript of an invited talk given to the Center for China Studies in Beijing in July 2007, modified in light of the subsequent discussion and subsequent reflections on this discussion. The context is important. President Hu Jintao is concerned to overcome the destabilizing inequities, corruption and environmental degradation generated by China's explosive economic growth. To achieve this, action has been taken to spread the benefits of economic growth throughout China, especially to the rural population, to implement the rule of law, and to create more democracy within the framework of a one-party state. This change in direction has been defended as putting into practice all aspects of Deng Xiaoping's program of creating a socialist democracy, begun when he engineered the opening up of China to the global market, but suspended in 1989. At the same time, the public sphere has been opened up to new ideas. I was invited to talk on either the problem of creating an ecologically sustainable civilization as such, or to offer a Marxist approach to this problem. I chose the latter.

Preparing this talk involved attempting to provide practical solutions to problems which, given China's significance and place in the world, will have enormous implications for the future. Attempting to see the world from the perspective of Chinese leaders, it was clear that there was no point in praising Kerala as a model of how a high standard of living could be achieved with a minimal environmental impact. The Chinese have to take into account the United States' quest to be in a position where they can militarily destroy any country they choose to at any time and the need for China to be economically powerful to avoid being subjugated. It is also pointless to expect China to take unilateral action to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases when the U.S.—the country responsible for the greatest proportion of the greenhouse gases emitted in the past—still produces five times the amount of greenhouse gases per head of population as the Chinese and is increasing its emissions, despite having exported its most polluting manufacturing industries to semi-peripheral countries such as China. It is also clear that while Mao Zedong is still revered as the leader of the Communist Revolution, the disastrous effects of the Great Leap Forward of 1958 and the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution along with the success of Deng Xiaoping's policies in modernizing China have almost completely undermined the credibility of Mao's political program, although there might be some nostalgia for his vision among older Chinese. To understand all this more fully, it is necessary to appreciate Chinese Communism itself as a continuation of the agenda, which was set in place after the defeat of China in the Opium War with Britain in 1842, to modernize as a condition for national salvation. And as the French sinologist François Jullien, reflecting on the events of 1989, claimed in a 2005 interview with *Le Monde*, “only the students and a minority in the Communist Party were in favor of democracy. The vast majority wanted the maintenance of order, which the CCP was best equipped to provide, so that they could carry on working hard and getting richer” (This view has been rejected by others).

I decided to address the problem of creating an ecologically sustainable civilization from a Marxist perspective, partly because I am an eco-Marxist and believe that eco-Marxism provides the best starting point for analyzing the state of the world and revealing the possibilities open to us. This was not the only reason, however. The Chinese ruling elites still see themselves as communists and Marxists, and along with this, have a great reverence for science. The philosophy department of

Tsinghua University, the foremost university in China, is labeled in English: “Marxism and Cultivation.” Having embraced the global market and having a more inequitable income distribution than the U.S. and Mexico has not altered China’s allegiance to Marxism. While this may appear odd, it is no more odd than the neoliberals and neoconservatives of the U.S., Australia, Britain, Canada and France believing themselves to be on the side of democracy. As with neoliberals and neoconservatives, the proclaimed allegiance to high ideals provides a starting point for investigating what these commitments amount to, making it possible to criticize contradictions and suggest alternatives.

To begin with, the problem was to work out what Marxism and Communism mean to the Chinese. What I found to be the mainstream view is that Communism, seen as the implementation of Marxism, means a one-party state (dictatorship of the proletariat) ruling in the interests of society as a whole, a primary commitment to developing the forces of production, and recognizing the primacy of practice over theory, which means adopting whatever policies achieve results. A distinctive Chinese contribution to this scheme is the recognition of three “civilizations”: economic, political, and spiritual. Of course there are dissenting views, and recently there has been a “return to Marx” within China to reveal what he really meant. However, this return has been criticized for dealing in abstractions. Chinese Marxism is taken by the Chinese to be developing with new historical conditions, with later philosophers superseding earlier thinkers because of the new problems they have had to confront. Deng Xiaoping’s policies, having proved themselves in present historical conditions, thus provide the prime reference point for discussions on Marxism. Having implemented a highly successful policy for developing economic civilization, the task ahead is to develop the appropriate political civilization. Hu Jintao’s promotion of a “harmonious society” is a further development of Marxism and could be regarded also as a major contribution to spiritual civilization.

With all this in mind, the main thrust of my argument was that in grappling with the problem of how to overcome the ecologically destructive dynamics of the global market as these impact China, Marx’s work is still relevant. To be properly understood, I argued, Marx’s work needs to be understood as a development of the Radical Enlightenment. Conceived as such, Marx’s work should be seen as even more radically critical of capitalism than orthodox Marxists appreciate. The disembedding of the market from community (to use Karl Polanyi’s language), which began in seventeenth-century Britain, should be seen as the emergence of a cancerous tumor within human society and nature, enslaving the population to it, dehumanizing them, and killing the body from which it has emerged. And as Polanyi argued, such a disembedded market, reducing freedom to “free enterprise,” is incompatible with democracy and inevitably leads to violence and authoritarianism. Correspondingly, overcoming this slavery and curing humanity and nature from this cancer should be understood as a struggle for liberty, conceived as the achievement of strong, participatory democracy at multiple levels of community. I argued from this starting point that China should align itself with the quest to organize the world into communities of communities as democratically organized as possible (what earlier had been promoted as “democratic federalism”).

The reader should realize, therefore, that this article reflects a kind of discourse chosen to enable an audience of Chinese officials and intellectuals to listen to some rather far-reaching ideas that have major implications for the future organization of China. To get their ear, so to speak, it has been necessary to foreshorten the kind of comprehensive critique that would address the many serious violations inherent to the exercise of power in contemporary China, and instead to point to the inevitable concomitance of neoliberal economics, political and legal corruption, and government violence.

Introduction: Defining the Problem

James O'Connor, the Marxist founder of the journal *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, has characterized the global ecological crisis as the second contradiction of capitalism: “the contradiction between capitalist production relations and productive forces, on the one hand, and the conditions of production, on the other.” O'Connor argues that “the combined power of capitalist production relations and productive forces self-destruct by impairing or destroying rather than reproducing their conditions.” His successor as editor of this journal has followed up this argument in a book entitled: *The Enemy of Nature: The End of Capitalism or the End of the World?* It is not difficult to see from their work the relevance of Marx and Marxism to diagnosing the cause of global ecological destruction. Firstly, there is the uncontrollable dynamism of the “bourgeois mode of production,” or capitalism, that nobody understood better than Marx. Since even the beneficiaries of capitalism are to some extent enslaved by its dynamics, it appears it can only continue to grow until it destroys the conditions of its existence, whatever these conditions might be. The conditions it is now destroying are not only the ecological conditions for capitalism, but for most forms of life on the planet. Secondly, Marx provided the starting point for further developments of social theory which have facilitated both a deeper understanding of these dynamics and of various developments of capitalism which have taken place since his death. The most important of these developments have been associated with the study of the place and role of the State in maintaining and expanding capitalist social relations, the study of imperialism, and the study of ideology.

To begin with, Marx's own writings from his early years are uncannily relevant to the present. The collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellites, and the unraveling of the social democracy in advanced First World countries consequent to the growth of transnational corporations and the globalization of the economy have made Marx's analysis appear astonishingly prescient:

The bourgeoisie ... has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom—Free Trade. In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation. ... Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air ... The need of a constantly expanding market for its markets chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe.

There is nothing more central to this whole process of the expansion of the market than commodification. James White described Marx's characterization of this:

One operation was extensive and the other intensive. In the first case Subsumption extended the sphere of capital's operations, and in this way spread it over a steadily increasing portion of the earth's surface until eventually the world market was created. In the second case capital would Subsume existing society under itself, creating the atomization and division of labor characteristic of civil society. It would encroach increasingly on areas not directly connected with the economy and bring more and more spheres of activity within the ambit of commodity production.

In the expanding vortex of capitalism, we continue to see the process of commodification extending to the far corners of the earth and encroaching on the most intimate facets of life, with not only land, labor and resources commodified, but also public utilities, knowledge, education, friendship, the means to control people's minds, and even people's genes. When the world is seen through the categories of the market, where the significance of everything is defined only through its

exchange value, environmental destruction is only registered when it affects profitability and GNP. However, most environmental destruction increases profits, since it is when there are shortages that prices rise and the greatest profits are made. Central to the quest for increasing profits is destroying, blocking access to, or rendering obsolete or defective the goods of nature or goods produced in the past which compete with those being produced to make profits. The drive for profitability has traditionally been a drive not only to exploit people and nature more fully, it has been a drive for environmental destruction. And this drive is augmented by the unintended byproducts of the expansion of the economy engendered by the drive to increase profits.

Commodification does not just happen. It is imposed, usually involving force or the threat of force, by States. This was clear when capitalism emerged as the dominant mode of production, and subsequently, when capitalism was imposed by one country on another. However, the role of States in promoting the interests of business enterprises in their constant quest to increase profitability has never been more blatant. Pre-eminently these are the State institutions of the U.S., serving and deploying its military-industrial complex, and the nascent Global State being formed by transnational organizations such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization. Under this forced project, many States throughout the world have been transformed into little more than agents for imposing and extending market relations. What we now have with the growth of transnational corporations is a global system of States actively competing with each other to improve the conditions for profitability in order to attract capital. Success means economic growth at the expense of being reduced to instruments of global capital, with States legitimating themselves in the face of this loss of liberty by promising more commodities for consumption. Failure can mean impoverishment and subjugation by other States. This competition between States augments the environmentally destructive trajectory of the market economy.

Marx's analysis of capitalism implied an inexorable tendency to imperialism—to extend the market to other countries until the whole world is dominated by the market. For the most part, Marxists have interpreted this as the quest for new markets. Looking back at history, we can see that Marx and early Marxists failed to appreciate the extent to which the quest for resources was behind the quest for markets—that is, the extent to which resources as conditions of production are necessary to feed the ever-expanding economies of capitalist countries. This, more than the quest for markets as such, fuelled the major wars of the 20th century. Ecological Marxists have shown how global political conflict up to the present can be best understood through the drive to expand markets to facilitate access to cheap resources. The result is a global system of exploitation where the core productive economies grow in power as they develop and use this power to control and exploit peripheral economies. These peripheral economies are turned into “extractive economies” which “develop” by exporting their minerals and wrecking their ecosystems, thereby becoming weaker and more subject to exploitation.

As was the case when Marx wrote, the largely pseudo-science of economics provides the central means for augmenting the illusions of commodification and legitimating this expansion of the market as supposedly bringing “freedom” to the world. This is then backed up by the mechanistic worldview of Darwinism and Social Darwinism. However, the mystifying nature of commodification and its representation in economics has been greatly augmented through the commodification of almost all aspects of culture. As in Marx's time, seeing the world as a world of commodities to be exploited or consumed does not totally blind people to reality, but rather leads them to see the world one-sidedly. They are blinded to their enslavement to the dynamics of the market, to how the growth of their productive powers is associated with their growing economic insecurity, and to how they are being reduced to expendable instruments of profit-making. People's

blindness is now almost complete as their minds have been absorbed into the economy. Advertising and public relations industries grow by selling their capacity to control what people think and thereby how they act. Furthermore, the very notion of truth through which such illusions might have been exposed has been undermined as scientific knowledge has been reduced to a form of capital to be exploited efficiently, and journalism, art, literature, and the humanities have been reduced to components of the entertainment industry. Marxism is still at the forefront of exposing these tendencies.

According to James Lovelock, if the forces at work in the economy continue on their present trajectory, which he expects to be the case, only a few hundred million people living close to the North Pole will survive the century. From a Marxist perspective, it should be clear why we are facing this global ecological crisis and why this problem is not being effectively addressed. Given the nature of the capitalist market, it should be unsurprising that while global warming has been identified as a problem that could destroy civilization, and governments are beginning to recognize this to be the case and are resolving to do something about the problem, almost everywhere the production of greenhouse gases is increasing at an accelerating rate.

However, when it comes to working out what to do about capitalism, traditional Marxism flounders. Those who believed that the future lay with the Soviet Union and its satellites have been disabused by their collapse. This revealed a society that was, if anything, even more environmentally destructive than capitalist countries. China's retreat from Maoism has weakened the hopes of others. The Marxist geographer David Harvey conjured up a vision of the final collapse of capitalism culminating in 2019 when:

The wretched of the earth spontaneously and collectively rose up. They created a massive movement of non-violent resistance, silently occupying more and more spaces of the global economy, while issuing rapid-fire demands for greater equality, the disbanding of military power, and the impeachment of military and religious leaders.

He described their final victory, led by a feminized proletariat who disarm the military theocracies who had seized power. His description of this is so unbelievable that it has served to confirm people's view that Marxism has nothing to offer. Marx's faith in class polarization, generating a proletariat that would be able to seize the State and convert the productive powers of humanity to rational ends, has lost its plausibility. So, we appear to be faced with a situation where Marx and Marxists have identified the forces leading to global environmental destruction, yet it seems that Marxists are no longer offering plausible answers to the problems we face.

Re-Examining Marx

While a number of explanations for the failures of Marxism have been proffered, the view I am proposing is that the potential of Marx's thought has not been properly appreciated. Until fairly recently, the tradition of thought from which Marx emerged was poorly understood, despite the re-examination of the work of Hegel and the Young Hegelians, and very few people have been aware of the most important developments in Marx's later work. The work that has most fully revealed these dimensions of Marx's thought is James White's *Karl Marx and the Intellectual Origins of Dialectical Materialism*, which has both re-examined the intellectual context in which Marx developed his ideas and examined Marx's later work on Russia. The significance of White's work becomes even more apparent in light of further research on European thought that reveals a fundamental difference between the Radical or "true" Enlightenment, which continued the Renaissance quest for liberty, and the Moderate or "fake" Enlightenment, which developed in opposition to Renaissance thought.

The Moderate Enlightenment rejected as an illusion the quest for liberty as it had previously been understood, promoting in its place “possessive individualism” based on a mechanistic view of the world. This was the philosophy of those who defeated the radicals of the English, American and French revolutions and laid the foundations for modern capitalism. The German philosophers who inspired Marx and whose ideas Marx was developing were struggling against the atomistic utilitarianism of the Moderate Enlightenment and reviving the Radical Enlightenment. They were further developing the Renaissance notion of liberty, extending the scope of this quest from cities to countries, to Christendom, and then to the whole of humanity. They also revived and developed the Renaissance notion of nature as active and creative. The difficulty in interpreting Marx is that in confronting the atomistic utilitarianism and mechanistic thinking of the Moderate Enlightenment, particularly as these ideas had been crystallized in political economy, Marx, particularly in his polemical writing, was influenced by their language. Failing to appreciate this difficulty as merely an adoption of language, Marxists have embraced ideas from the Moderate Enlightenment that Marx was fundamentally opposed to and ignored some of Marx’s deeper insights.

So, what are the crucial differences between the Radical and the Moderate Enlightenments? And how does this affect how Marx should be understood? To begin with, the Radical Enlightenment was extending the Renaissance notion of liberty. This notion of liberty was not understood simply in relation to individuals and could not be equated with the notion of freedom promoted by the Moderate Enlightenment as freedom from external constraint. Influenced by Ancient Roman and Greek thought, liberty was always understood in opposition to slavery. The essence of what it is to be a slave, and thereby to lack liberty, is to be “within the power of someone else.” To be such a person, to be at the mercy of others without civil liberties, is to be *obnoxious*. A prerequisite for liberty as understood by the Radical Enlightenment is membership in a self-governing community, a “republic” (or “public thing”), organized and united in the quest for the common good. The Renaissance notion of the State was the condition of being a self-governing community organized for self-governance, as opposed to the Hobbesian notion of the State as something that comes into existence with a sovereign able to coerce conformity to its covenants. It is on the basis of this understanding of liberty that we can understand Marx’s revulsion for “wage-slavery” and his contempt for the freedom promised by the “free market.”

Along with defending liberty, the Radical Enlightenment embraced the Renaissance celebration of human creativity. Where the Moderate Enlightenment promoted an image of humans as mechanical consumers, the Radical Enlightenment saw people as social, productive, and creative. For them, nothing was more central to the common good than the development of people’s creative power to contribute to the common good. Progress was understood as the development of people’s capacity for creativity, always understood in relation to participation in a community that would fully appreciate such creativity and its products. This celebration of creativity is clearly evident in Marx’s *1844 Manuscripts* and is implicit throughout his writings. However, this concern with creativity is not at all clear in Marx’s base/superstructure model of society, in which the telos and driving force of society is development of the forces of production. That characterization echoes the ideas of the Scottish philosophical historians and reflects the influence of mechanistic thinking that Marx was really opposed to. What Marx really meant by this model only becomes apparent through careful exegesis, and later Marx abandoned this conception of society altogether. Most importantly, Marx did not equate progress with the accumulation of machinery for producing an endless increase in the amount of goods for consumption, as though the end of life were nothing but satisfying one’s appetites, augmented by marketing. He celebrated a never-ending augmentation of people’s creative powers, including their power to organize themselves.

While the Moderate Enlightenment, with its conception of the world as a mechanical order of matter in motion, characterized human consciousness and human knowledge as separate from and external to the world that is known and controlled, the Radical Enlightenment conceived humans to be participants in a creative nature. In their actions and thoughts, people were seen as participants in a process of creative becoming. Knowledge was seen as a development of the world, as the world being brought to consciousness of itself, its significance, and its potential, not merely in contemplation but practically, in the way people live. This view is clearly evident in Marx's attack on contemplative materialism and its implications in the *Theses on Feuerbach*. In Theses III he wrote:

The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that it is essential to educate the educator himself. This doctrine must, therefore, divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society. The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*.

Here the idea of a revolutionary as an engineer reducing the world to an instrument for some projected goal is rejected. Revolutionaries are people who appreciate that they are situated within and formed by society and nature; they are the products/producers of history, and changing society and nature is a process of changing themselves and their relationships to other people, to society, and to nature.

Clarifying Marx's Intentions

Marx famously claimed that if there is one thing that he knew, it was that he was not a Marxist. I think we can now see why Marx said this; there was more to his thinking than had been taken up by his followers. If Marx thought of progress pre-eminently in terms of advancing liberty and human creativity, always appreciating that people, including himself, were participants within society and nature, what are the implications of this? What new paths to the future are opened by appreciating these dimensions of his work?

Firstly, it clarifies Marx's horror at the reduction of people's "labor power" into a commodity to be bought and sold for profit. This, as Marx recognized, was a new and insidious form of slavery. Taking this revulsion seriously reveals some overlooked aspects of Marx's writings. The first of these is the subtitle of his major work, *Capital*, a subtitle which was left out of the English translation of this: "*A Critique of Political Economy*." Marx was not writing a book of economics; he was attempting to expose how oppressive are the economic categories that structure social life in capitalism. He had clarified this point in the *Grundrisse* where he noted that the categories of economics: "commodity," "capital," "labor," etc. are the forms of being within the bourgeois mode of production. His critique of capitalism went far deeper than criticizing the expropriation of surplus value from people exploited as proletarians. His work was a massive protest against the dehumanizing and blinding categories through which people in the bourgeois mode of production are forced to define themselves and their relationships—most importantly, to the reduction of people to proletarians. The failure of some of Marx's disciples to understand this is evident in their defense of the labor theory of value, as though this defense is required to justify the claim that the proletariat are exploited, and that this is the real problem. But Marx had attempted to correct this interpretation of his work in his "Critique of the Gotha Program." Here he wrote: "Labor is *not the source* of all wealth. *Nature* is just as much the source of use values (and it is surely of such that material wealth consists!) as labor, which itself is only the manifestation of a force of nature, human labor power." He then went on to point out how the defense of such a view serves to hide the dependence of labor on nature, and thereby to hide the fact that ownership of the means of

production forces the laborer to become “the slave of other men who have made themselves the owners of the material conditions of labor.” Marx’s concern was not to reappropriate surplus labor, but to end such slavery, and this meant overcoming the categories of economics.

While Marx made much of the potential historical role of the proletariat, he also pointed out that the proletariat is produced and reproduced, along with the bourgeoisie, by the capitalist system. Overcoming capitalism must then involve overcoming the proletariat. Marx made this very clear in his *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*. He argued here that the proletariat’s unique historical role derives from its being a sphere whereby it “cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from—and thereby emancipating—all the other spheres of society; a sphere which is, in a word, the total loss of humanity and which can therefore redeem itself only through the total redemption of humanity.” So, while the bourgeoisie claims to be acting for the universal interests of humanity—but are really acting in their particular interests and enslaving the rest of humanity—the proletariat, in striving to overcome its enslavement, must act for the whole of humanity, including the former members of the bourgeoisie. The end must be to achieve liberty for all. Those who think of socialism or communism as serving a particular group, the proletariat, have failed to appreciate that to really achieve this new social form will involve overcoming the proletariat, transforming not only laborers but all people into creative workers in control of their own destiny, as foreshadowed by Renaissance figures such as Leonardo da Vinci.

What kind of society would this be? Marx was reticent about defining what the future would hold. He wrote *against* wage slavery rather than *for* liberty, showing a great distrust of empty slogans. From his description of the Paris Commune in *The Civil War in France*, it is clear that Marx had in mind an extremely democratic social order somewhat reminiscent of Ancient Athens, but far more inclusive. Little more can be said than this. But there is clearly a reason for this reticence. Marx wanted to liberate people so that they themselves could choose what kind of world to create. He did not want to impose some utopian blueprint or engineer a social transformation. Here it is necessary to keep in mind Marx’s internalist perspective; he saw his own activity, including his writings, as participating with others in creating the future, exposing the illusions dominating people in their present to free them to do this.

But which people? The proletariat of one city like Paris? If a particular community, whether a city, a country or a continent overcame the system of wage labor, how would it survive? Marx asked this question of Engels in 1858:

The historic task of bourgeois society is the establishment of the *world market*, at least in its basic outlines ... [I]t appears that this has been accomplished with the colonization of California and Australia and the annexation of China and Japan. For us the difficult question is this: the revolution on the Continent is immanent and its character will be at once socialist; will it not be *necessarily crushed* in this *little corner of the world*, since on a much larger terrain the development of bourgeois society is still *in the ascendant*.

Or is the community in question the proletariat of the entire world? What kind of society could a global proletariat create? This question has been a problem for Marxists ever since. It was a problem for the Soviet Union, and it is a problem for China, Cuba, and the Social Democratic countries of the First World, such as Sweden, Austria and Germany.

The Global and the Local

Marx himself became increasingly aware of this problem. In his early writings, he had enthusiastically embraced the universalizing tendencies of capitalism, praising the market for

rescuing peasants from their rural idiocy. In his early study of India, Marx wrote of the “profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilization” lying “unveiled before our eyes.” He described how the British destroyed “Hindoo civilization” “by breaking up the native communities, by uprooting the native industry, and by leveling all that was great and elevated in the native society.” Nevertheless, Marx maintained his optimism that bourgeois industry was creating the material conditions of a new world. Towards the end of his life, Marx became more skeptical of such “progress” and looked to studies of Ancient India to gain insight into how to oppose absolute power. This change of attitude was associated with his study of Russia and its communal forms of ownership and his recognition of the viability of supposedly archaic communes in a capitalist society. Marx recognized that these forms also had a history of their own, and they had enormous potential for creating a socialist society. In a famous letter to Vera Zasulich, Marx defended this view against his disciples in Russia. At the same time, he pointed out that his analysis of “historical inevitability” in *Capital* is “*expressly* confined to the *countries of Western Europe*.” In a letter composed in 1877 to a St. Petersburg journal, Marx repudiated the whole idea of “a historical-philosophical theory of universal development predetermined by fate for all nations, whatever historical circumstances they might find themselves may be.” Noting how events of striking analogy taking place in different historic milieu could lead to entirely different results, Marx dismissed the quest for “a universal key to a general historical-philosophical theory, whose greatest advantage lies in its being beyond history.”

Such conclusions should not be surprising in view of Marx’s commitment to taking an internalist perspective on history, but these conclusions bring into focus a range of issues. The first pertains to how Marx understood the emancipatory project of overcoming capitalism. The second, closely associated with this, pertains to how local efforts in this regard relate to global efforts. To clarify Marx’s ideas on this, I think it is useful to see them in relation to the work of the Marxist scientist, historian and philosopher of science, and Sinologist, Joseph Needham. In my view Joseph Needham’s work, which should be recognized as one of the greatest achievements of the Radical Enlightenment, is entirely in accord with Marx’s deepest insights and advances these insights. If Marx thought of his socialism as scientific socialism as opposed to utopian socialism, “scientific” should be understood as Needham understood the term. So, how does Needham’s work illuminate Marx’s work?

Progress from an Internalist Perspective

I will begin by giving a preliminary account of how Marx understood the emancipatory project of overcoming capitalism. Marx clearly understood his own work as contributing to this; he did not see himself as a spectator outside what he was investigating. But what would emancipation involve? It would not be a total rejection of the existing order. It would involve an appreciation of all that was best in the existing order as well as what was worst, and then creating a social order that would preserve and augment what was best in existing society while overcoming its deficiencies. For radical scientists and historians of science such as Needham, this is how science develops. The major figures in science, those whose ideas revolutionized science, did not start by abandoning existing science altogether and starting again. While acutely aware of the deficiencies of received scientific knowledge, they strove to overcome these in a way that preserved and augmented its achievements, in the process opening up new vistas of enquiry for future science. For Needham, such development is characteristic of nature generally. As a biologist aligned with process philosophy, he was interested in how, in the development of organisms and evolution, new forms emerge which transform while preserving what these forms have emerged from. From this perspective, the development of humanity and science could be understood as a continuation of such evolution. Developing their

social forms, technology, and science, humans can then be seen as participating in the development of nature. This is a perspective much more sensitive to both natural and human creativity and the possible destructive effects of humans than the prevailing dualist thinking of the scientific materialists of the Moderate Enlightenment. From Needham's perspective, overcoming the reduction of workers to mere instruments of production and thus allowing the recognition of their creative potential would also involve overcoming the reduction of nature to nothing but an instrument for profit-making and recognition of its own dynamics.

Appreciating such general features of development throughout nature does not imply uniformity in evolution. It was this way of understanding the world that led Needham to reject a simple linear notion of historical progress and to recognize that China and the so-called "Asiatic mode of production" had their own dynamism and history which had to be understood on their own terms. This view concurred with Marx's later work in which he recognized the uniqueness of Russia and the potential for building on its unique social forms, although Needham might not have been aware of this, since Engels had excluded this work from Volume II and Volume III of *Capital*. Consistent with Marx's analysis of Russia, Needham argued that the road to emancipation from capitalism would be different in China than elsewhere. It would involve building on traditions of thought and social organizations unique to China. This did not mean that China would not be influenced by ideas developed outside China. Needham believed that modern science, which originated in Western Europe, transcends any particular place and is valid for everyone. But science is not a finished body of knowledge. It contains diverse research programs competing with each other, and continued scientific advance is dependent upon maintaining such diversity. There needs to be diverse ways of thinking competing with each other in the world for science to advance. What interested Needham was how different places in the world both had their own traditions and dynamics and still influenced each other. He recognized the contribution of Chinese thought to overcoming the mechanistic world-view through its influence on Leibniz and Leibniz's contribution to what we can now appreciate as the Radical Enlightenment. Seeing Marx as a continuation of this tradition, Needham saw the appropriation by China of Marxism as the liberation of the radical potential of its own traditions of thought. As he put it, "socialism was the spirit of un-dominating justice imprisoned within the shell of Chinese medieval bureaucratism." It is for this reason that China could emancipate itself from global capitalism in a way that was unique and from which the rest of the world could learn.

What does it mean to have diverse places acknowledging and taking their own unique histories, cultures and institutions as their point of departure for creating a better future, while at the same time learning from each other? What is clearly called for is a world that is neither totally unified nor totally divided into separate societies, but is a multiplicity of partially autonomous communities with multiple levels of community, or as Herman Daly and John Cobb put it, a world of "communities of communities." That is, it should be an organic order as Needham and those who continue his tradition of biological thought characterized it, not a mechanical order. As Mae-Wan Ho wrote of this order:

The stability of an organism depends on all parts of the system being informed, participating, and acting appropriately in order to maintain the whole. Organic stability is therefore delocalized throughout the system.... This is the radical nature of the organic whole (as opposed to the mechanical whole), where global cohesion and local freedom are both maximized, and each part is as much in control as it is sensitive and responsive.

What would this mean in practice for the struggle to overcome the destructive imperatives of the market and to create a sustainable civilization? It would mean striving at all levels of

community for liberty to control their destiny in a way that would augment the quest for liberty by every other community. In the present world, the most important aspect of this struggle for liberty is overcoming enslavement to the global market by subordinating markets to communities.

The Struggle for Liberty in Practice

All this sounds very abstract, vague and idealistic, precisely the kind of empty sloganeering that Marx strove to overcome. But it is the obverse of what Marx condemned, and this positive vision is needed to bring into focus what should be aimed at. And it can be filled out by considering examples. Little can be gained by looking at the Soviet Union or its client states in Eastern Europe. The program of democratic Marxists to create a new culture that would facilitate the overcoming of the opposition between the organizers and the organized was defeated in the 1920s and was never really tried. While the form that the Soviet Union took under Stalin enabled the Russians to mobilize to defeat efforts to conquer them, this was at immense cost, and finally, resulted in the Soviet Union becoming an environmental disaster. The Soviet model of society ceased to be a threat to capitalism long before the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, the industrial democracy developed in Yugoslavia was to a large extent a success, although there were problems with it. It was this success that accounts for the NATO attack on it. As Noam Chomsky revealed, the plight of the Kosovo Albanians was merely a pretext. Another example of great success has been the state of Kerala in India where an elected Marxist government redistributed land, subsidized rice, and developed a public education and health system to create an egalitarian society, and more recently moved from serving the people to giving power to the people, “launching an ambitious program to mobilize households at the village level and involve them in direct control over projects in their villages,” launching “one of the world’s most extensive experiments in direct, popular democracy.” Along with this, they have made a determined effort to grapple with environmental problems. Kerala has shown that a high standard of living can be achieved without environmental destruction. But it is not only avowedly Marxist or Communist states that reveal what can be achieved against the destructive imperatives of the market.

One country that has achieved considerable liberty from the market through its socialist policies (even though they are at present threatened) is Sweden. Social democrats gained power in Sweden after the Great Depression—essentially the collapse of capitalism predicted by Marx. Its chief architect was Ernst Wigforss, a revisionist Marxist who steered the party to achieve almost total democratic control over the market, creating a social structure very similar to what Marx argued for in his *Critique of Hegel’s Doctrine of the State*. Planning of the economy, the development of social welfare, and providing free education, health services, and social security against unemployment effectively created a new commons which freed its citizens from their enslavement to employers. This provided the basis for genuine democracy and encouraged the involvement of the entire population in political decision-making. One of Wigforss’s last initiatives involved an ambitious program of using union pension funds to buy up Swedish industry, a project which, if it had been carried through, would have completed the socialization of the means of production. Despite the retreat from Wigforss’s vision, it is evident what a huge difference such liberty makes to the ability of a society to move towards environmental sustainability. Sweden is at the forefront of the drive to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the First World, having reduced these to less than a third per head of population of countries such as the U.S. and Australia, which are dominated by managerialist market fundamentalism. What we see there is a concerted effort by communities—that is, a mobilization of people’s creative powers—to work out ways of eliminating the use of fossil fuels altogether without the use of nuclear power. Sweden has also provided an environment in

which more radical thinking about the economy and the environment has been supported within universities and which can be applied elsewhere.

Another country that has recently achieved major victories over its enslavement to the market is Venezuela. Of course Venezuela's success has been partly due to its advantageous position within the market as a country with huge oil reserves; but such resources by themselves could not guarantee liberty. Invoking the notion of the Bolivarian revolution, President Hugo Chavez has used this wealth to empower and educate the general population, promoting local democracy to overcome the corruption of Venezuela's institutions. He has been so successful that without the use of force, he has inspired much of South America to follow his lead. The "Bolivarian Revolution" he is calling for would unite South America to free it from external domination in such a way that would augment the liberty of South American countries. Chavez has also called for reform of the United Nations to make it work for the common good of humanity as it was meant to, at the same time pointing out the challenge we face in dealing with threats to the global ecosystem. The liberty achieved in Venezuela is augmenting the struggle for liberty everywhere. It is this liberty that is enabling people to confront and deal with environmental issues.

Charting a Path for China

What I have presented here is very schematic, and working out the implication of these ideas for China is beyond me. However, as an outsider, it appears that China has been engaged in a temporary retreat from socialism to utilize the dynamics of the market to develop China's productive powers, receiving the First World's polluting industries while supplying capital with cheap labor. As I understand it, this direction has been taken as a form of market socialism, with central industries being state-owned and foreign investors being required to enter into partnership with Chinese businessmen. In taking this path, China has clearly increased its power in the world to defend itself militarily and pursue an autonomous path, and of course, overcome impoverishment, which itself is enslaving. This is the path laid out by Deng Xiaoping, who also called for the development of the rule of law and democracy to ensure the maintenance of stability and unity. Under President Jiang Zemin, following these economic policies without political reform led to increasing disparities of income and wealth, particularly between rural areas and cities, increasing pollution and environmental destruction, and less control over social and economic dynamics. In fact, it seems that expropriation of the commons from rural communities along with making peasants pay for health services and education forced great numbers of them off the land and created a huge reserve of unemployed ready to serve in the new industries. This was very similar to what took place in Britain in the 17th and 18th centuries, which, as Marx showed, gave birth to capitalism and wage-slavery. And as people in China's think tanks are reported to have noted: "China has no comparative advantages in either resources or technology in today's world, and cannot advance either to a real socialism or a real capitalism, its competitive edge can only come from its unique system of dependent labor." All this indicates the immediate relevance of Marx's work for China. Furthermore, China's economic development, based on the outsourcing by transnational corporations of manufacturing to Chinese companies, which are now dependent on these corporations for distribution and marketing, puts China as a whole in a dependent position, making it vulnerable to these companies opening up even cheaper centers of manufacturing elsewhere in the world (such as Vietnam or Bangladesh). Not only are workers being enslaved, the whole of China is in danger of being enslaved to the global market. As I understand it, it is these problems that President Hu Jintao is concerned to address through his notion of the "harmonious society." How can a harmonious society be achieved? Providing free education and health services to rural populations, implementing the rule of law, and moving towards greater democracy to

empower communities to combat corruption are clearly major advances towards these ends. What else is required?

My view is that China, seeing itself as at an earlier stage of modernization than Europe or America, has been too enamored of the U.S. in looking for models to emulate, and that in general, Europe, where Marxism has had a stronger influence, provides better models than anything offered by the U.S. However, there is one principle underlying the U.S. republic that has been important for maintaining some protection against tyranny: the importance accorded to the separation of powers. This principle, which reflected the influence on the U.S. of Montesquieu, was initially formulated within Renaissance Florence as a bulwark against corruption. Though it is a component of the Radical Enlightenment, it seems to have been insufficiently appreciated by Marx. In the U.S., this principle is manifest in the division between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government, in the powers granted to states, and access to information provided to the general public. However, the U.S. failed to uphold this separation in the relationship between the political and the economic realms, and this has virtually destroyed its democracy. China's commitment to maintaining a one-party state and developing democracy within this framework could be defended as a means to separate government from economic power, thereby ensuring that government is for the common good rather than for the interests of those with wealth and enabling China to carry through the radical programs of Europeans, such as Wigforss. To maintain this separation of powers, those engaged in commerce should not be permitted to join the Communist Party or hold any government office, and all relations between government and business should be open to public scrutiny. Since it is essential for democracy that people have access to an undistorted media, it is important that media institutions, along with education institutions, be public institutions with autonomy to pursue and disseminate the truth. Al Jazeera has shown how powerful a public supported media institution committed to the truth can be in opposing the cultural hegemony of global capitalism. Media institutions should never be run as businesses and should never be privately owned. The development of a new commons through public institutions of education and media is a basic condition for empowering people. To prevent the corruption of the media, there should be strict controls on spending by businesses on advertising, and a total proscription on spending on public relations.

Beyond upholding the separation of powers, the most important principle of government is that it is necessary to empower people in the workplace and in their local communities so that citizens are not reduced to wage-slaves and consumers. Both workers and members of local communities should have representatives on the boards of management of all business organizations. It can also be required of businesses that they only pursue profits insofar as this pursuit contributes to the common good of their workforce and the community, and that management decisions be made public. That is, contrary to the U.S. system, companies should be required to put stakeholders before shareholders, this being enforced through stakeholder participation in management by allowing the public access to and the ability to influence management decisions. Beyond this, governments should promote worker cooperatives. Guidance on what is required for industrial democracy is provided by the work of Alec Nove, the foremost proponent of market socialism in the West.

While markets can serve to decentralize decision-making about what consumer goods to produce, the limits of the market should always be recognized. The market should never be allowed to determine prices for "factors of production." Such "prices," whether for different occupations or resources, should be based on principles of justice and decided politically, not through the working of the market. The quest for health, education, and the development of culture should never be

subject to market forces or defined through the market (for instance, promoting local cultures to foster the tourist industry). For health, education, research, and other cultural institutions to function properly, it is necessary to see them not as instruments of the economy, but the institutions which the economy must be made to serve. The superiority of the Swedish health system to the commercialized health system of the U.S. should be enough to eliminate any illusions about the supposed efficacy of the market to promote efficiency. And as far as educational and research institutions are concerned, it should be noted that the top universities and research institutions of the U.S., which enabled it to achieve scientific and technological supremacy, were not run as mere business enterprises. However, the efforts of successive governments since the late 1970s to force these institutions into increasing alliances with the private sector has resulted in subordinating them to industry and coincided with the relative decline of U.S. technological supremacy. The amount of research spent into ways of reducing greenhouse emissions, for instance, cannot be determined by market criteria. This is a matter of the survival of humanity, and the amount of research spending has to be a political decision. Success cannot be measured by the growth of GDP or GNP, which are essentially measures of growth in exchange value. As suggested, this is often inversely related to individual, social, and ecological well-being. And in place of the homogenizing effect of markets, cultural and social diversity should be fostered. In the long term, China is far more likely to achieve world eminence by fostering within China the kind of cultural and social diversity of Europe, with each ethnic group and each province free to develop and harmonize with the common good of China in its own unique way, rather than emulating the dreary market-imposed homogeneity of the U.S.

Governing should involve putting in place regulations to ensure that competition, particularly competition between regions, is never at the expense of social justice and the common good, but instead serves to further these. Uniform regulations throughout China on crucial issues are required to ensure that healthy markets drive out bad markets rather than the reverse, as is now occurring in the global economy. Again, this should be seen as a matter of political decision-making prevailing over the market economy, since it is only from a perspective outside the market that one can determine which markets are working for the common good and which are working against it. In accordance with Renaissance economics, there should be broad planning for the long term, within companies, within local communities, within regions and provinces, and within China as a whole. Such measures should all involve controlling how the market works, with the goal being to develop communities, beginning with the workplace and local communities, and then broader communities of cities and provinces, to control their own destinies. This would liberate and cultivate people's creative powers and their capacity to organize so that they can gain and maintain control over the functioning of the market. That is, China should pursue the opposite path to that being pursued under "neoliberalism" where Taylorist managerialist practices involve deskilling workers and fragmenting communities in order to disempower employees and citizens. Given the weak position of Chinese companies relative to transnational corporations, these measures will not be enough, however. What is also needed is the development of a national economy that is both insulated to some degree from the global economy and under the control of the Chinese people. Such an economy would foster the full range of industries and be able to function without being dependent on global transnational corporations. This will require government planning, but planning which operates by empowering people to participate in governing.

Liberating and cultivating people's creative powers within China should be conjoined with efforts to promote efforts by people throughout the world to reduce the market to instruments of communities. This could be promoted as a defense of socialism. However, since undemocratic forms of socialism have proved a failure, at least in the long term, and since it has become evident

from the subversion of democracy in countries like the U.S. and Australia that, given the power of corporations, some form of socialism is the condition for democracy, combating the global market can be undertaken under the banner of the quest for democracy, with the commitment to socialism following logically from this. At a global level, I believe China should support the principles that John Maynard Keynes attempted to put in place in the Bretton Woods negotiations after the Second World War, a system designed to foster autonomy of countries from the global market with strict controls on the movement of capital between countries as the condition for allowing countries to control their own destinies. While some trade is necessary—and China might have benefited from the free flow of capital and access to overseas resources in the short term—in order to achieve and maintain democracies and avoid exploitation, communities—from continental communities such as the European Union or South America to local municipal communities—should still aim to be as self-sufficient as possible. Given the importance of China, its commitment to controlling and overcoming market imperatives in this way will be necessary for the world to achieve environmental sustainability.