

On the Concept of Ecological Civilization in China and Joel Kovel's Ecosocialism

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In 2012, the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China placed Ecological Civilization for the first time as part of official policy. Ecological civilization is closely associated with the concept of “Beautiful China.” This refers to a combination of improving both physical and social environments, living standards, and social peace. Ecological Civilization is a means to arrive at what has been officially termed a “Beautiful China.” General Secretary Xi Jin-Ping has been a main promoter of building Ecological Civilization, formulating this as part of realizing what he has called the “Chinese Dream” and emphasizing environmental health as a central pillar in the improvement of people’s livelihoods and prospects for greater prosperity. The overarching objective, to balance economic development with environmental protection, is not at first sight much different from concepts such as ecological modernization and sustainable development. What departs from these policy concepts is that environmental protection is being equated with protecting economic output. In other words, improvements in environmental protection are viewed as essential to economic development.

To such ends, in 2013, the third plenary session of the 18th Communist Party of China Central Committee passed the *Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Some Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Continuing the Reform*. This decision proposed that “We must deepen ecological environment management reform by centering on building a beautiful China. We should accelerate system building to promote ecological progress, improve institutions and mechanisms for developing geographical space, conserving resources and protecting the environment and promoting modernization featuring harmonious development between People and Nature.” (the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China 2013, 5). These ideas have been given greater weight in 2014 with the decision taken at the fourth plenary session of the 18th Communist Party of China Central Committee. This is the *Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Some Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Advancing Rule of Law*. The decision involves the introduction of much more stringent environmental legislation and the empowering of environmental agencies to unprecedented levels. For example, the new laws obligate firms to undergo environmental impact assessments and to obtain permits from environmental protection agencies for industrial and extractive activities. For the first time, an institutional framework is being introduced for the promotion of wide-ranging environmental protection measures, prioritizing the development and diffusion of, for example, low-carbon technologies and low-waste systems.

To make sense of how these government decisions relate to the concept and building of ecological civilization, it is important to distinguish the meaning of ecological civilization in China from that used in other places, like the United States (Da JianZhu 2008, 7). In the latter context, the meaning is akin to environmental protection and conservation

particular to so-called post-industrial countries. In such countries, advances have already been made for decades to such ends but in a context where industrialization has already been achieved. The other meaning is one that pertains to the particular Chinese socialist state context. In this case, standards of living comparable to those in industrialized countries ('modernization') are yet to be reached and building ecological civilization means arriving at greater economic development without compromising the environment. Relatedly, President Xi Jinping has begun to discuss this in terms of favoring moderate economic growth and the prevention of problems represented by and encountered in Soviet versions of state-socialism. In turn, Chinese state-socialist ecological civilization is quite different from the principles and practices associated with the construction of ecosocialism. Ecosocialism is premised on the overcoming of the capitalism, rather than the attainment of levels of well-being existing in industrialized countries without incurring the problems associated with Soviet state-socialism. What ecosocialism has in common with the ecological civilization being promoted by the Chinese socialist state is the emphasis on solving the ecological crisis under current global conditions and the pursuit of harmony between society and environment. We therefore find it of vital importance to draw from ecosocialist thought so as to find ways to improve upon the conceptualization of Chinese socialist-state ecological civilization, which may be better referred to as ecological progress. We recognize that there are many ecosocialist perspectives and it is not feasible to discuss them here. Due to our greater familiarity with Joel Kovel's ideas, we will concentrate on Kovel's ecosocialist thought and explore how they could be integrated into ecological civilization discourse.

Kovel's Ecosocialist Approach and Marxism in China

American scholar Joel Kovel is an important proponent of ecosocialism who builds on and improves upon Marx's insights and the works of Marxist scholars like O'Connor (2003). With Michael Löwy, he has authored influential documents such as the *Ecosocialist Manifesto* and the *Belem Ecosocialist Declaration*, where it is pointed out that "the crises of ecology and those of societal breakdown are profoundly interrelated and should be seen as different manifestations of the same structural forces" of "the world capitalist system" (Kovel and Löwy 2001). This analysis is carried further and in greater detail in *The Enemy of Nature* (Kovel 2007) book, where he delineates how capital is the efficient cause of the current ecological crisis. These arguments in some ways overlap with those of other perspectives, such as those offered by Beck (2003), Bookchin (2008), and Eigliad (2011). However, Kovel and other ecosocialists depart from such views by demonstrating the systematic nature of the problem not in a vague modernization or in the formation of hierarchies or a homogeneous and homogenizing process, but in the very fabric of capitalist relations in their multifarious evolution.

From a Chinese perspective, Kovel's work represents an important development not only in American Marxist thought, but also in furthering recent critical understandings of capitalist relations in China. As Bao Cheng (2008, 54) points out, capital presents a double

movement of value:

Firstly, it includes value as property; secondly, it includes nature as non-value, natural capital. The former is based on the private ownership of the means of production and the dominance of the capitalist class. The latter is related to capital's self-expansion and the essence behind it, that is, the power of capital over others' surplus-value and the ability to boost the development of productive force.

Capital, in other words, must be seen not just as object, but as sets of relations implying power. For Gang (2009, 8), "the historical mission confronting Marxist dialectics is this: the overturning of traditional metaphysics by way of exposing capital's logic, with the aim of realizing human emancipation in both thought and concrete reality."

These understandings are also fully elaborated in Kovel (2007). However, by pointing to the Bhopal disaster as concrete manifestation of the intrinsically destructive drive of capital towards both people and environments, Kovel shows how such an analysis of capital is insufficient to explain and overcome the capitalist system. He sees this in terms of four characteristics of the capitalist system: (1) Capital tends to degrade the conditions of its own production (*viz.* O'Connor 2003); (2) Capital must expand without end in order to exist; (3) Capital leads to a chaotic world-system increasingly polarized between rich and poor, which undermines any attempt to resolve the ecological crisis (Kovel 2007, 38). What is more, as a fourth characteristic, the capitalist system pervades the human spirit, making it difficult for people even to imagine life outside of capital (*ibid.*, 52). The ultimately deadly, devastating contradictions of capitalism will not be resolved "without a social transformation of world-historical importance that will redirect society toward ecological integrity ... in order to secure a habitable future for humanity and millions of other species" (Kovel 2007, 199).

There is much more to Kovel's contribution than a novel analysis of the capitalist system. Unlike most Marxists, including ecosocialists, Kovel goes even further by developing strategies and ideas helpful not only towards imagining, but also building a specifically ecosocialist post-capitalist society. In this, the concepts of horizons and prefiguration play central roles and Kovel provides many examples of how existing social processes could be turned into the foundations necessary to overcome capitalist relations (*ibid.*, 7). He also discusses the main objectives that can be helpful in determining whether existing relations can be transformed into ecosocialist counterparts. One is the restoration of intrinsic values (not only use-value predominance). As Kovel puts it, "In a liberated and ecologically sane world, use-values would take on a character independent of exchange-value, not to rule but to serve the needs of human nature and nature" so that "Ecosocialism now reveals itself as a struggle for use-value-and through a realized use-value, for intrinsic value" (215). Another, related aim is the development of ecocentric production, entailing the construction of the integrity of natural ecological systems. By this he means the following: He summarizes the contents of ecocentric production as the following:

(1) The process of ecocentric production is aligned with the product; thus, the making of a thing becomes part of the thing made. (2) For this to happen, labor has to be freely chosen and developed, in other words, with a fully realized use-value as against its reduction to labor-power. (3) Mutual recognition is required for the process as well as the product, such being the condition of ecosystemic integrity. (4) Production stays within the entropic relations of natural evolution, in which the inputs of ambient solar radiation are able to subserve the creation of order. (5) "Limits to growth" are to be predicated on a reorientation of human need made possible by enhanced receptivity. (6) Such considerations apply to the question of technology, once it is no longer seen as a "technical" problem, subjugated to considerations of profit and efficiency. (7) If we take the notion of human ecosystems seriously, we are led to fully incorporate consciousness into them. (238)

Finally, the struggle must achieve a socialist system within a democratic system on the basis of a sustainable and proper development of the economy. Proper development means abiding to certain basic principles, including respect for ecosystem integrity, the restoration of use-value, guaranteeing the free association of producers, and a redistribution of productive activities, among other ends (275).

Implications of Kovel's Ecosocialism for Ecological Civilization in China

Importantly from our perspective, these ideas may be useful towards both the establishment and superseding of ecological civilization in China. Socialism and ecological civilization need to become compatible and even coextensive. There should be no fundamental conflict between the socialist system and the construction of ecological civilization. However, in the current situation, it should be noted that a divergence exists and that needs to be noted and worked on. Striving to solve such a divergence is in our view best realized by considering the specificity of the Chinese context. Specifically, there needs to be a full utilization of capital so as to re-orient it towards ecologically progressive ends. Technological innovations, in this light, should be encouraged insofar as it contributes to achieving ecological civilization goals, stimulating the sort of consumption that leads to progressively less destructive outcomes. Only by analyzing and resolving conflicts internal to the Chinese context, among social forces and between economic and ecological processes, can there be prospects for the realization of socialist ecological civilization with Chinese characteristics.

In this, the Chinese context offers some advantages in that a form of socialism remains in place, in spite of the many recent changes. The struggle is to make the construction of an ecologically sound society a priority under the specific political conditions prevailing in China, promoting ecological civilization in all aspects of life. This is, at least in part, the latest form of planning in China's socialist modernization process. Reforms in how environments are experienced, used, and understood must be

comprehensive and profound, reaching simultaneously material economic, political, cultural, and spiritual levels. The ideas, principles, and goals of ecological civilization must be integrated into all aspects of struggle for the sort of socialism that is mindful of the specificity of the Chinese context.

Glimpses of these trends are arguably present in President Xi Jinping's pronouncements and actions, as well as in the latest Five-Year Plan. The latter includes an innovation-driven development strategy to promote green, low-carbon technologies, cleaner production process, and efficient resource utilization with minimal adverse environmental impacts. At the same time, the plan calls for speeding up the development of resource-saving and environmentally friendly industries, placing greater effort on energy conservation, the setting of strict barriers to entry for energy and materials consuming industries, the spread of energy-saving technologies, and the popularization of energy conservation. Cleaner production is also being promoted alongside greater rigor in pollution control and gradual, incentivized reduction of pollutant emissions for key industries, inclusive of emissions trading schemes. Additionally, the plan envisions a vigorously expanding recycling and re-manufacturing program that establishes an extensive producer responsibility system, with improved combinations of incentive mechanisms coupled with greater law enforcement.

Secondly, in terms of politics, improvements are being considered for achieving greater community-level democracy. If such plans develop fully and lead to such diffuse democracy, there could be an interesting convergence with basic ecosocialist principles in terms of decision-making processes and other political processes. This would draw ecological civilization closer to ecosocialist goals. However, the present situation makes it necessary that Party leadership unity be ensured and that the Party be revitalized so as to make for effective social change and law-based governance, so as eventually to have a country under the guidance of the people that compose it. An important way for people to exercise their democratic rights directly is for conditions to be developed that are conducive for them to conduct self-management, self-education, and self-oversight in managing community-level affairs and in running public service programs. This can be achieved effectively under the leadership of community-level Party organizations, who can enable the expansion of participation, promotion of transparency, improvements in deliberation and consultation over public affairs, and strengthening of oversight in the exercise of power. Such efforts would ensure that the people have greater and more tangible democratic rights. This is one unique advantage that the Chinese context offers, though there is no guarantee for an ecosocialist outcome.

Thirdly, it is just as important to insist on developing ecological sensibility in wider society. Education systems need to be enhanced so as to foster principles of ecological civilization, as encapsulated, for example, in the new Five-Year Plan, alongside greater critical grasp of the capitalist system by way of Marxist understandings. Kovel's ideas can be helpful in the further development and spread of a simultaneously socialist and ecologically based critique of capitalist relations. His thoughts have significant implications

and contribute to helping us infuse a cultural reconstruction with aspects of eco-socialist notions. Given the current context and specific history, efforts should be directed towards maintaining the socialist sensibilities already developed in China, with an overarching goal of advancing socialist culture. To this end, all social forces must be mobilized to raise awareness and level of education about the necessity for ecological progress (in other words, ecological civilization), such as the importance of resource conservation, environmental protection, nature appreciation, and moderated consumption, all aspects called for in the new policies under Xi Jinping. The goals of the construction of ecological civilization are that we should reverse the trend of ecological deterioration from the very beginning to create a livable environment and lay the foundations for an ecologically sustainable development of China, which will contribute as well to global ecological enhancement. In essence, promoting the ecological civilization or progress aims to improve people's quality of life and meet their needs for healthy environments. Ultimately, this requires worldwide efforts for all this to be achieved in durable ways within China, but China, by way of realizing ecological civilization, can make for a global contribution by example. Though a far cry from ecosocialist aims in their present form, such policies on science and technology can nevertheless become, with proper guidance and redirection, useful towards the realization of eco-socialism.

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