

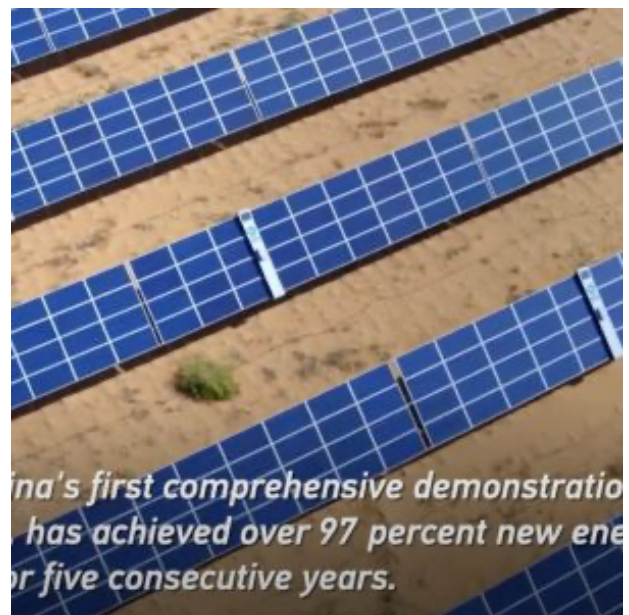
Some Preliminary Theses on the Concept of Eco-Civilisation

John Bellamy Foster

In the nineteenth-century Industrial Revolution in England, Newcastle was at the center of the coal industry. The idiom “taking coal to Newcastle” thus arose to indicate uselessly taking something to a place where it was already present in abundance. For a Western thinker to speak to an audience in China on ecological civilisation (or eco-civilisation) is like taking coal to Newcastle, since it is in China where the concept is most highly developed. Nevertheless, I will argue that the notion of eco-civilisation is intrinsically related to Marxism. This talk will therefore be directed at examining the concept of eco-civilisation from a broad ecological Marxist perspective. In this regard, I have ten preliminary theses on eco-civilisation.

(1) The concept of ecological civilisation has Marxist origins and is inherently socialist. It first arose as a systematic outlook in the late 1970s and '80s in the Soviet Union, inspired by considerations of Karl Marx's ecological thought, and was immediately taken up by Chinese thinkers. It has virtually no presence to this day in the West, as it is radically removed from the notion of capitalist civilisation as well as Eurocentric views of modernity.¹

(2) The fundamental philosophical outlook of eco-civilisation has deep roots in early civilisational notions of modernity, or of the active human relation to the organic-material world, as depicted by Marxist thinkers Joseph Needham and Samir Amin in their critiques of Eurocentrism. This organic-materialist philosophical outlook emerged in what is



Screen capture from "[A glimpse into Ningxia.](#)"

¹ ↪ See the discussion of this history in John Bellamy Foster, *The Dialectics of Ecology* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2023), 161–66.

known as the Axial Age, particularly in Hellenistic civilisation and in the Warring States Period in China in the fifth through third centuries BCE. Marx himself embraced an organic-materialist vision early on, developing a notion of human beings as the self-mediating beings of nature that broke with Western mechanism and Eurocentric conceptions of modernity, through his encounter with Epicurean materialist philosophy.² However, much of this got submerged in later Marxism, and was completely extinguished in the Western Marxist philosophical tradition. In China, the continuity of civilisation from Daoism (which paralleled Epicureanism), Confucianism, and neo-Confucianism meant the perpetuation of such early organic-materialist views, making China more receptive to ecology and to Marx's ecological outlooks in particular.³

- (3) Although having ancient philosophical roots, ecological civilisation, as a transformative historical outlook, is a product of post-revolutionary society and the development of socialism. It reflects the notion of human beings as self-mediating beings of nature that was integral to Marx's entire vision of sustainable human development, embodied in his theory of metabolic rift. This approach rejects any notion that eco-civilisation is a direct product of pre-modernism or postmodernism, or that it can be explained, as some Chinese ecological theorists have proposed, by the sequence of traditional civilisation to agricultural civilisation to industrial civilisation to ecological civilisation.⁴
- (4) The concept of socialist ecological civilisation in China has carried through these ideas most fully. Socialist ecological civilisation should be regarded as a development within socialism. It is important to emphasise that there cannot be any concept of "capitalist ecological civilisation," as capitalism is inherently alien to and destructive of nature/ecology. To speak, then, of socialist ecological civilisation is to speak simply of complete socialism as the full development of sustainable human development incorporating both substantive equality and ecological sustainability. It means the reconciliation of humanity with nature.
- (5) Ecological civilisation points to what Chinese Marxists have presented as the need for "the modernisation of harmonious existence between humanity and nature." This is underpinned by the basic principles of socialism. It is thus antithetical to so-called ecological modernisation as a philosophy of mechanism and as a purely technocratic project in the West.⁵ At the same time, it adopts some of the same technologies necessary for an ecological transformation but utilised according to socialist principles, requiring different social relations. What is crucial here is the fundamentally different conception of modernisation within Chinese Marxism and ecological thought.⁶
- (6) The concept of the "community of life" developed by socialist ecological theory in China is essential in defining ecological civilisation. This has three components: (1) community of life with ecosystems; (2) "the community of life of humanity and nature"; and (3) a dialectical synthesis, constituting "the community of all life on earth" and a

² ↪ Karl Marx, *Early Writings* (London: Penguin, 1974), 356; István Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation* (London: Merlin Press, 1975), 162–65; John Bellamy Foster, *Breaking the Bonds of Fate: Epicurus and Marx* (New York: Monthly Review Press, forthcoming, 2025).

³ ↪ Joseph Needham, *Within the Four Seas: The Dialogue of East and West* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), 27, 66–68, 93–97, 212; Samir Amin, *Eurocentrism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009), 13, 22, 108–11, 212–13; Foster, *The Dialectics of Ecology*, 171–74.

⁴ ↪ See Chen Yiwen, "[Marxist Ecology in China: From Marxist Ecology to Socialist Eco-Civilization Theory](#)," *Monthly Review* 76, no. 5 (October 2024): 32–46; Zhihe Wang, Huili He, and Meijun Fan, "[The Ecological Civilization Debate in China: The Role of Ecological Marxism and Constructive Postmodernism—Beyond the Predicament of Legislation](#)," *Monthly Review* 66, no. 6 (November 2014): 37–59.

⁵ ↪ Chen Yiwen, "Marxist Ecology in China," 41–42; John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Richard York, *The Ecological Rift* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010), 41–43, 253–58.

⁶ ↪ Chen Xueming, *The Ecological Crisis and the Logic of Capital* (Boston: Brill, 2017), 467–72, 566–70.

“shared future.”⁷ As the great early twentieth-century U.S. conservationist Aldo Leopold wrote, “We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may use it with love and respect.” Leopold advanced a land ethic that enlarged “the boundary of the community... to include soils, waters, plants, animals, or collectively: the land.”⁸ Marx argued that no one owns the earth, not even all the countries and all the people on the planet own the earth, they are merely “its possessors, its beneficiaries, and have to bequeath it in an improved state to succeeding generations as *boni patres familias* [good heads of the household].”⁹

- (7) The notion of ecological sustainability embedded in the concept of the community of life is exemplified in “Xi Jinping Thought on Ecological Civilisation.” Xi has stated that if we have to choose between “mountains of gold” and “mountains of green,” we need to choose mountains of green, recognising that “lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets.” Adopting a Marxist materialist approach to ecology, Xi has argued ecology is “the most inclusive form of public well-being.” Echoing Frederick Engels on the “revenge” of nature, Xi has indicated that, “Any harm we inflict on nature will eventually return to haunt us.” The question of nature, moreover, he insists goes beyond mere material sustainability, embracing aesthetics as in his concept of “Beautiful China.”¹⁰ In this way, the notion of ecological civilisation as the community of life is expanded and given a wider social meaning for the collective worker, via the renewal of the mass line.
- (8) Marx argued that capitalism’s robbery of nature resulting in the metabolic rift meant the undermining of the eternal natural or ecological basis of civilisation. This means that the metabolic relation needed to be restored, which is only possible under socialism.¹¹ With the world engulfed in a planetary ecological crisis, such restoration is the first priority (outside of the nuclear threat) in the determination of the future of humanity. In the rich countries characterised by overshoot, this raises the issue of degrowth. For humanity as a whole, it raises the issue of sustainable human development and ultimately ecological civilisation under complete socialism.
- (9) The concept of degrowth was absent from nineteenth-century socialism, although Marx had a vision of sustainable human development. Degrowth as a process of deaccumulation attains its entire meaning from a Marxist perspective from the irrational system of monopoly capitalism/imperialism and its crises of overaccumulation. Any decisive movement toward ecology in the core capitalist countries at the center of the world system thus requires a shift away from the structures of monopoly capitalism/imperialism.¹² The dominant capitalist countries, which are also the core monopoly-capitalist and imperialist countries, are characterised ecologically by environmental overshoot, having ecological footprints beyond—sometimes as many as three or four times beyond—what the earth can support if generalised to humanity as a whole. These enormous ecological footprints reflect economic and ecological imperialism. Hence, from the standpoint of global humanity, these nations must drastically and disproportionately reduce their per capita energy use, resource use, and carbon emissions, along with their net

⁷ ↪ Chen Yiwen, “Marxist Ecology in China,” 41–43; Foster, *The Dialectics of Ecology*, 13.

⁸ ↪ Aldo Leopold, *The Sand County Almanac* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949), viii; John Bellamy Foster, *Ecology Against Capitalism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2002), 86–87.

⁹ ↪ Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3 (London: Penguin, 1981), 911.

¹⁰ ↪ Chen Yiwen, “Marxist Ecology in China,” 42–43; Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2020), 3, 6, 20, 25, 54, 417–24.

¹¹ ↪ Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1976), 637–78; John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark, *The Robbery of Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 12–13.

¹² ↪ Paul Burkett, “*Marx’s Vision of Sustainable Human Development*,” *Monthly Review* 57, no. 5 (October 2005): 34–62; Brian M. Napoletano, “*Was Karl Marx a Degrowth Communist?*,” – *The Jus Semper Global Alliance*, January 2025.

expropriation of wealth from the rest of the world. Since monopoly capitalism promotes vast economic waste as a means of accumulation/financialization, generating artificial poverty, and exhibits astronomical levels of inequality, with a handful of individuals owning more wealth than half the population, a planned degrowth strategy is consistent with dramatically improved economic and social conditions for the working-class majority.¹³

- (10) In all countries of the world, the planetary ecological crisis requires an ecological revolution, encompassing both productive forces and social relations. In all cases, this means the development of the environmental proletariat in conflict with generalised monopoly capitalism and imperialism. In China and some other postrevolutionary countries, this can be effected by an ecorevolutionary mass line and building a sustainable society rooted in already existing communal and collective structures. For most countries in the Global South, sustainable human development requires a delinking from the imperial system of value and revolutionary action by an environmental proletariat aimed at human survival and the planned creation of a society of sustainable human development. In the Global North itself, ecological revolution requires the destruction of imperialism and rejoining humanity as a whole on an egalitarian basis in a process of world solidarity. Ecological footprints need to be equalised across the globe. Labor in the rich countries cannot be ecological when in poor countries (and in the planet as a whole) the bases of ecological existence are undermined.

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¹³ ↩ John Bellamy Foster, “[Planned Degrowth: Ecosocialism and Sustainable Human Development](#),” — The Jus Semper Global Alliance, September 2023.

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