Marxism, Ecological Civilization, and China  
by John Bellamy Foster

China's leadership has called in recent years for the creation of a new "ecological civilization." Some have viewed this as a departure from Marxism and a concession to Western-style "ecological modernization." However, embedded in classical Marxism, as represented by the work of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, was a powerful ecological critique. Marx explicitly defined socialism in terms consistent with the development of an ecological society or civilization -- or, in his words, the "rational" regulation of "the human metabolism with nature."

In recent decades there has been an enormous growth of interest in Marx's ecological ideas, first in the West, and more recently in China. This has generated a tradition of thought known as "ecological Marxism."

This raises three questions: (1) What was the nature of Marx's ecological critique? (2) How is this related to the idea of ecological civilization now promoted in China? (3) Is China actually moving in the direction of ecological civilization, and what are the difficulties standing in its path in this respect?

Marx's Ecological Critique

In the late 1840s the German biologist Matthias Schleiden observed in his book *The Plant: A Biography:* "Those countries which are now treeless and arid deserts, part of Egypt, Syria, Persia, and so forth, were formerly thickly wooded, traversed by streams." He attributed this to human-generated regional climate change. At the same time as Schleiden was developing these views, the German agronomist Carl Fraas was making similar observations in his *Climate and the Plant World,* arguing that "the developing culture of people leaves a veritable desert behind it." Marx and Engels, who were becoming increasingly interested in ecological degradation and regional climate change were influenced by these ideas. In 1858, Marx, following Fraas, wrote: "Cultivation -- when it proceeds in natural growth and is not consciously controlled . . . leaves deserts behind it."

By the 1860s, when he was writing *Capital,* Marx's ecological concerns had intensified. Much of this was under the influence of the great German chemist, Justus von Liebig. In the 1862 edition of his *Agricultural Chemistry* Liebig argued that industrial agriculture in England was a "robbery" system. The main soil nutrients (nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium) were being removed from the soil and sent hundreds and thousands of miles to the city in the form of food and fiber where they contributed to pollution and were lost to the soil. Britain and other countries attempted to make up for this by *digging up the Napoleonic battlefields and robbing the catacombs in Europe to obtain bones to fertilize English fields.* They extracted mountains of *guano* from the islands off of Peru, shipping it to Britain to enrich the soil.

"Instead of a conscious and rational treatment of the land as permanent communal property, as the inalienable condition for the existence and reproduction of the chain of human generations," Marx declared, capitalism led to "the exploitation and squandering of the powers of the earth." The result was an "irreparable rift in the interdependent process of social metabolism"
between humanity and nature, requiring the "restoration" of this essential metabolism. In the higher society of socialism, he contended, "the associated producers" would "govern the human metabolism of nature in a rational way . . . accomplishing it with the least expenditure of energy and in conditions most worthy and appropriate for their human nature."

On this basis, Marx developed in *Capital* what is perhaps the most radical conception of ecological sustainability yet propounded: "From the standpoint of a higher socio-economic formation, the private property of particular individuals in the earth will appear just as absurd as the private property of one man in other men. Even an entire society, a nation, or all simultaneously existing societies taken together, are not the owners of the earth. They are simply 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]."

Marx and Engels addressed in their writings most of the ecological problems of modern times: climate change (then seen as a regional phenomenon); soil degradation; air and water pollution; overexploitation of natural resources; overpopulation; deforestation; desertification; industrial poisons or toxins; and the destruction of species. In *The Dialectics of Nature* Engels observed: "Let us not, however, flatter ourselves overmuch on account of our human victories over nature. For each such victory nature takes its revenge on us. . . . Thus at every step we are reminded that we by no means rule over nature like a conqueror over a foreign people, like someone standing outside nature -- but that we, with flesh, blood and brain, belong to nature, and exist in its midst, and that all of our mastery of it consists in the fact that we have the advantage over all other creatures of being able to learn its laws and apply them correctly."

**China's Ecological Civilization and Marxism**

What is clear about the present Chinese emphasis on ecological civilization is that it has emerged out of a broad socialist perspective, influenced by both Marxian analysis and China's own distinct history, culture, and vernacular. In China, as opposed to the West, the land remains social or collective property and cannot be sold. I believe it is wrong therefore to see China's initiative in the construction of ecological civilization to be a direct outgrowth of Western-style ecological modernism, as some have supposed. At the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), in 2007 it was officially proposed that China should build an "ecological civilization," creating more sustainable relations between production, consumption, distribution, and economic growth. At the 18th National Congress of the CPC in 2012, "ecological civilization construction" was written into the CPC Constitution. These principles were built into the latest five-year plan (2011-2015). Although many have questioned the seriousness of the CPC's commitment to the construction of an ecological civilization, it is evident that this: (1) arose out of real needs in China, where there has been enormous ecological devastation; (2) was a response to the growth of massive environmental protests throughout China; and (3) has been followed up by massive government efforts in area of planning, production, and technological development.

Behind all of this of course is the fact that China's environmental problems are massive and growing. This is the inevitable result of extremely rapid economic growth which has not sufficiently protected the environment, coupled with other factors such as climate
change. China's environmental concerns include: air pollution in major cities amongst the world's most severe; deforestation; desertification, sandstorms contributing massively to air pollution; loss of arable land; seizures of farmland for urban development; water shortages, water pollution; unsafe drinking water; toxic waste dumping; urban congestion and overcrowding; overpopulation; over-reliance on coal-fired plants, rising carbon dioxide emissions, potential energy shortages; and issues of food security.

Is China Moving in the Direction of Ecological Civilization?

There is no doubt that Chinese leadership has made significant steps toward a more sustainable development. Due to the large role of planning China has been able to make rapid changes in a number of areas, going at times against the logic of economic growth. Examples of such efforts are: (1) targeted reductions in economic growth justified in terms of more environmentally balanced growth; (2) the massive promotion of solar and wind technology; (3) a growing share of non-fossil-fuel energy consumption; (4) creation of a red line to protect a minimum of 120 million hectares of farmland; (5) reduction of major air pollutants by 8-10 percent in the 12th Five Year Plan (2011-2015); (6) removal of six million high-pollution vehicles from the roads in 2014; (7) a 700 percent increase in the output of electric passenger cars (non-plug ins) in 2014; (8) initiation of a government campaign for frugal lifestyles and against extravagance (conspicuous consumption) by officials; (9) growing official criticism of GDP worship; and (10) a pledge to reduce the carbon intensity of GDP by 40-45 percent by 2020 from 2005 level, coupled with a pledge to reach peak carbon dioxide emissions by 2030, if not sooner; and (11) the imposition of a new resource tax on coal.

From the critical standpoint of ecological Marxism, however, such developments are still overwhelmed by China's 7 percent economic growth rate, in which the GDP will double in size in a decade, massively increasing environmental demands. Going along with these growth projections is a plan to increase the number of permanent urban dwellers in the next five years to 60 percent from the present 54 percent. This is to be accompanied by larger, more mechanized family farms in rural areas, with the eventual disappearance of 60 percent of the country's villages, to be merged into small towns and large cities. Chinese environmental laws have hitherto been characterized by weak enforcement, suggesting the dominance of profits over environmental protection. Such an overall development path is, if it should indeed continue on this same basis, is clearly non-sustainable, threatening to replicate some of the worst aspects of Western capitalism. In the age of planetary climate change alternative models must be found. This cannot be accomplished simply by technology but requires new ways of living. If China is truly to succeed in creating a new ecological civilization it will have to go in an even more radical direction, further removed from the regime of capital that has characterized the West and that is responsible for today's planetary ecological emergency.

(with Robert W. McChesney), and \textit{The Theory of Monopoly Capitalism: An Elaboration of Marxian Political Economy} (New Edition, 2014), among many others. A version of this article was first published in \textit{People's Daily Online}, (which titled it "China's Unique Way to Build Ecological Civilization"), on 11 June 2015.
Louis Proyect: The Unrepentant Marxist

June 22, 2015

Is China going Green? A reply to John Bellamy Foster

Filed under: China, Ecology — louisproyect @ 7:06 pm

On June 15th an article by John Bellamy Foster titled “Marxism, Ecological Civilization, and China” appeared on MRZine. It was the fourth in a series of exchanges that date back to a February 2012 Monthly Review article by Zhihe Wang titled “Ecological Marxism in China”.

Wang, who is the director of the Center for Constructive Postmodern Studies and professor of philosophy at Harbin Institute of Technology in China, discusses the penetration of Marxist ecological theories in China including those that should be familiar to those of you who keep abreast of such matters: 1. James O’Connor’s theory of the “Second Contradiction” 2. Joel Kovel’s Frankfurt Marxist analysis 3. Foster/Paul Burkett, which Wang implies is the only one that is strictly Marxist.

For the most part, Wang is enthusiastic about the arrival of a Green-Red synthesis and gives equal credit to academicians like Foster and Chinese officials such as Yi Junqing, who Wang describes as:

the Minister of Central Bureau of Compilation and Translation (a top government institution on Marxism Studies in China), believes that “Marxism will lose its vitality” if it does not address the ecological crisis in the twenty-first century.

Wow. That’s pretty good news, ain’t it? A top government official is not only a Marxist but someone who emphatically believes that ecosocialism should become official government policy. I must have dozed off somewhere along the line not to have noticed this.

Wang admits that many Chinese Marxists are enamored of development for the sake of development, something that Kovel once likened to metastasizing tumors, but is confident that the Red-Greens will have the day because “China itself is officially a socialist country which regards Marxism as its theoretical base and guideline”.

We hear again from Zhihe Wang and three other Chinese Marxists (Meijun Fan, Hui Dong, Dezhong Sun and Lichun Li) in February 2013 when they write an MR article titled “What Does Ecological Marxism Mean For China? Questions and Challenges for John Bellamy Foster” that pays tribute to Foster.
It is interesting to note that the same complaint that Christian Parenti had about dualism in Foster’s theorizing is echoed in China:

Starting from a practical Marxist stance, Pu Xiangji argues that Foster has not eliminated dualism because he still understands “metabolism,” “production,” and “practice” in terms of the old materialism. Accordingly he is still stuck in the dichotomy of humans and nature, subject and object, which already had been subverted by Marx in The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 by proposing the concept of practice and practical materialism.

Wang and his co-authors defend Foster against such charges but urge him to consider a synthesis of his own views and their own, which they define as a “postmodernism” that posits the environmental devastation in China and the USSR as a function of “modernism”. Frankly, this makes them sound much more amenable to Joel Kovel’s Frankfurt approach but I simply lack the time and the motivation to delve into anybody’s postmodernism at this point. Maybe it is a sign of the heavy weight of dogmatism in China that some scholars are ready to dust off theories that fell into disfavor in Europe and the USA long ago for the obvious reasons. In a country where vulgar Marxism is pretty much the official dogma, no wonder postmodernism has a second life.

In replying to their article immediately below it, Foster reprises his views on the metabolic rift and other mainstays of his writings while including this pithy rejoinder on the “postmodernism” question:

This raises extremely complex historical and theoretical questions. In my own view, modernity, insofar as it is separate from the distinctive development of bourgeois civilization, is too abstract a concept to carry the full burden of ecological critique. Minus historical specificity it becomes prone to Whitehead’s famous “fallacy of misplaced concreteness.”

He ends on a Kovelian note:

China today must confront not simply capitalism as such, but the peculiar ecological and social rifts of a modern Chinese system, which, whatever its defining socioeconomic characteristics, is clearly threatened, both from within and without, by the cancerous spread of capitalist methods and mores.

This brings us to the last in the series of articles that appeared on MRZine just a week ago in an article titled “Marxism, Ecological Civilization, and China”. Written once again by Foster, it has nary a word about cancerous tumors but is practically breathless in its enthusiasm for new directions in China:

What is clear about the present Chinese emphasis on ecological civilization is that it has emerged out of a broad socialist perspective, influenced by both Marxian analysis and China’s own distinct history, culture, and vernacular. In China, as opposed to the West, the land remains social or collective property and cannot be sold. I believe it is wrong therefore to see China’s initiative in the construction of ecological civilization to be a direct outgrowth of Western-style ecological modernism, as some have supposed. At the 17th National Congress of the
Communist Party of China (CPC), in 2007 it was officially proposed that China should build an “ecological civilization,” creating more sustainable relations between production, consumption, distribution, and economic growth. At the 18th National Congress of the CPC in 2012, “ecological civilization construction” was written into the CPC Constitution. These principles were built into the latest five-year plan (2011-2015). Although many have questioned the seriousness of the CPC’s commitment to the construction of an ecological civilization, it is evident that this: (1) arose out of real needs in China, where there has been enormous ecological devastation; (2) was a response to the growth of massive environmental protests throughout China; and (3) has been followed up by massive government efforts in area of planning, production, and technological development.

Foster goes on to document many of the progressive changes taking place such as 1) targeted reductions in economic growth justified in terms of more environmentally balanced growth; (2) the massive promotion of solar and wind technology; (3) a growing share of non-fossil-fuel energy consumption; (4) creation of a red line to protect a minimum of 120 million hectares of farmland; (5) reduction of major air pollutants by 8-10 percent in the 12th Five Year Plan (2011-2015); (6) removal of six million high-pollution vehicles from the roads in 2014; (7) a 700 percent increase in the output of electric passenger cars (non-plug ins) in 2014; (8) initiation of a government campaign for frugal lifestyles and against extravagance (conspicuous consumption) by officials; (9) growing official criticism of GDP worship; and (10) a pledge to reduce the carbon intensity of GDP by 40-45 percent by 2020 from 2005 level, coupled with a pledge to reach peak carbon dioxide emissions by 2030, if not sooner; and (11) the imposition of a new resource tax on coal.

Fundamental to these changes has been China’s use of “planning” and its commitment to a “socialist perspective”. I don’t want to sound too harsh but this is the most ridiculous bullshit I have read outside of Roland Boer’s blog. In this day and age for a leading Marxist to give left cover to the gang running China is scandalous. The only explanation for this perhaps is that Foster, like Woody Allen or Saul Bellow, has become such a lauded celebrity in his own field that he cannot recognize that he has committed a gross ideological gaffe. Who would have the nerve to tell him that he was full of beans? If he ever descended from Mount Olympus and spoke at a Left Forum, some impudent member of the audience might have told him that he was being ridiculous if he ever gave a talk along these lines. That would be for his own good but I don’t expect to see him waste his time among the proles.

Not a single word in his article about the real reason why reforms are happening now: the Chinese workers and farmers have been raising hell for decades about the filthy air and water that their rulers impose on them. LexisNexis only returns 1000 articles at a time but this snippet off the top should give you an idea why the ruling class in China finally budged.
You’ll note above that Wikileaks revealed “US hopes” for environmental activism in China. Given MRZine’s sorry state, that will surely encourage a series of tweets by Yoshie Furuhashi calling for more coal-burning plants.

Just how far China’s rulers have budged is an open question. Foster stated that a goal exists to reduce air pollution by 8-10 percent by 2015. Considering the state of China’s air, this might leave it just ahead of New Delhi on an average day. With one year left in this plan, things look decidedly Brown rather than Green according to a Greenpeace report. Things have improved in Beijing, where officialdom lives, but everywhere else is filthy:

While Beijing still ranks in the top five worst polluted provinces in China, the capital’s PM2.5 concentration improved more than 13% compared to the first quarter of 2014, and industry-heavy Hebei province, just outside of Beijing, also improved 31%.

However the overall situation in China is still dire. Data show that 90% of the cities that Greenpeace East Asia ranked are exceeding China’s own limit on yearly average level for particulates (PM2.5) in the air. The provinces of Henan, Hubei, Hunan and Sichuan, all located in either central or western China where strict pollution controls have not been enacted, were among the 10 worst polluted provinces in the first quarter of 2015.

Now this does not even address the policies adopted for those not fortunate enough to be part of the dominant nationality. The China Environment Forum reports that desertification, air and water pollution continue apace in Xinjiang province, a virtual colony of the dominant Han nationality. Will the Uighurs benefit from environmental reforms? I would not bet on it.
Nor would these reforms benefit those who live outside of China, particularly in Africa where China has arrived with some fanfare. If you read Businessweek, it is not too hard to figure out how things are picking up in Hebei:

China’s Airpocalypse, the lung-choking pollution that regularly blankets the country’s north, including Beijing and the port city of Tianjin, has an obvious source: emissions from the belching smokestacks of neighboring regions, in particular Hebei province. Now authorities say they have come up with a way to address the industrial pollution that accounts for as much as three-quarters of dangerous particulates in the air: Move polluting factories overseas.

Hebei authorities have announced plans to relocate some of the province’s steel, cement, and glass production to Africa, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and other parts of Asia. Capacity for 20 million tons of steel and 30 million tons of cement will be moved overseas by 2023, the official Xinhua News Agency reported on Nov. 19.

Hebei Iron & Steel, China’s largest producer, has already started the move. In September the company, which is based in Tangshan, 92 miles east of Beijing, said it will build a plant capable of making 5 million tons annually in South Africa. Hebei Iron plans to start operating there in 2017 and is likely to shut mills in Hebei. “The West outsourced its pollution to China, mainly light manufacturing,” says Tom Miller, senior Asia analyst at researcher Gavekal Dragonomics in Beijing. “Now China has got to the point in development where it wants to start exporting pollution, too, by building steel and other factories in poorer countries.”

Exporting pollution? That might ring a bell if you recall what Larry Summers urged in 1991. For all I know, the Chinese government might have been inspired by this:

DATE: December 12, 1991
TO: Distribution
FR: Lawrence H. Summers
Subject: GEP

‘Dirty’ Industries: Just between you and me, shouldn’t the World Bank be encouraging MORE migration of the dirty industries to the LDCs (Least Developed Countries)? I can think of three reasons:

1) The measurements of the costs of health impairing pollution depends on the foregone earnings from increased morbidity and mortality. From this point of view a given amount of health impairing pollution should be done in the country with the lowest cost, which will be the country with the lowest wages. I think the economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest wage country is impeccable and we should face up to that.

2) The costs of pollution are likely to be non-linear as the initial increments of pollution probably have very low cost. I’ve always thought that under-populated countries in Africa are vastly UNDER-polluted, their air quality is probably vastly inefficiently low compared to Los Angeles or Mexico City. Only the lamentable facts that so much pollution is generated by non-tradable industries (transport, electrical generation) and that the unit transport costs of solid waste are so high prevent world welfare enhancing trade in air pollution and waste.

For an alternative to Foster’s nonsense, I urge you to look at Richard Smith’s article in today’s Truthout that appeared just by coincidence and that does not target Foster. Smith has been covering Chinese development and its consequences to the environment for decades now and I find him much more reliable than Foster who someone should wake up from his Stalinist slumber.
A pedestrian wearing a protective mask in Beijing, January 17, 2012. Decades of coal-powered industrialization combined with the government-promoted car craze have brought China the worst air pollution in the world. (Photo: Gilles Sabrie/The New York Times)

The first time Li Gengxuan saw the dump trucks from the nearby factory pull into his village, he could not believe his eyes. Stopping between the cornfields and the primary school playground, the workers dumped buckets of bubbling white liquid onto the ground. Then they turned around and drove right back through the gates of their factory compound without a word.

In March 2008, Li and other farmers in Gaolong, a village in the central plains of Henan Province near the Yellow River, told a Washington Post reporter that workers from the nearby Luoyang Zhonggui High-Technology Company had been dumping this industrial waste in fields around their village every day for nine months. The liquid, silicon tetrachloride, was the byproduct of polysilicon production and it is a highly toxic substance. When exposed to humid air, silicon tetrachloride turns into acids and poisonous hydrogen chloride gas, which can make people dizzy and cause breathing difficulties.
Ren Bingyan, a professor of material sciences at Hebei Industrial University, contacted by the Post, told the paper that “the land where you dump or bury it will be infertile. No grass or trees will grow in its place … It is … poisonous, it is polluting. Human beings can never touch it.”

When the dumping began, crops wilted from the white dust, which sometimes rose in clouds several feet off the ground and spread over the fields as the liquid dried. Village farmers began to faint and became ill. And at night, villagers said “the factory’s chimneys released a loud whoosh of acrid air that stung their eyes and made it hard to breath.”

“It’s poison air. Sometimes it gets so bad you can’t sit outside. You have to close all the doors and windows,” said Qiao Shi Peng, 28, a truck driver who worried about the health of his 1-year-old.

China’s rise has come at a horrific social and environmental cost.

Reckless dumping of industrial waste is everywhere in China. But what caught the attention of The Washington Post was that the Luoyang Zhonggui High-Technology Company was a “green energy” company producing polysilicon destined for solar energy panels sold around the world. Indeed, it was a major supplier to Suntech Power Holdings, then the world’s leading producer of solar panels, and Suntech’s founder, Shi Zhengrong, topped the Hunrun list of the richest people in China in 2008. (1)

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1. Delusions about China aside, John Bellamy Foster is the most boring speaker I’ve ever heard in my life. One year he was on the closing plenary at the Left Forum and while he was talking I just could not keep my eyes open.

Points for linking to Richard Smith.

Comment by ischulman — June 23, 2015 @ 4:52 am
2. Richard Smith’s article first appeared in Real-World Economics Review no. 71 on May 29th. Truthout reprinted it but they left out all the photos I had included and put in one he did not include. The pictures are, in this particular case, very important and hugely illustrative of China’s crisis. As they say “pictures tell a thousand words.” Truthout is going to add the original source to their online article; it was an edit slip-up.

Comment by louisproyect — June 23, 2015 @ 12:09 pm

3. He stated at the Left Forum 2 years ago that the majority of energy in the world is for the production of things for the Rich. At that point I tuned out.

More importantly, the issues raised in this essay are very important and what is actually going on in China is smack full of contradictions. It requires a far larger discussion. I know Louis was focusing here on two people involved in this debate but an actual survey and discussions of the environmental disaster known as China and what the Chinese are doing…or not doing…is very important. To big for this space I suspect.

Comment by David Walters — June 23, 2015 @ 1:56 pm

4. I guess it depends on what you mean by going green.

Are China investing in green technology? Yes, absolutely, they have moved into many high value production areas, such as use of wind turbines etc.

But does this actually constitute ‘going green’, in other words, have they looked at the science, and said, “Oh my god!!! We must save the planet!”

No!! They are a fundamental part of the imperialist system, a system that is based on the capitalist organisation of production and therefore it is impossible for them or any nation caught up in capitalist production to ‘go green’.

This is why much of the green movement is reactionary, it at least recognises that one prerequisite for being green is being anti capitalist. If you are not anti capitalist you are not green.

And China is NOT anti capitalist, whatever else it may be.

Comment by Simon Provertier — June 23, 2015 @ 4:08 pm

5. i don’t know about Smith’s credibility concerning environmental issues, but his history of China’s revolution is garbage. Classic 50’s anti-communism- stuff that would even embarrass a Bircher.

Comment by Georges — June 24, 2015 @ 12:00 am
6. The only thing that is garbage is your stupid comment. Back it up with some documentation or shove it up your ass.

Comment by louisproyect — June 24, 2015 @ 1:35 am


Comment by Georges — June 24, 2015 @ 11:33 am

8. Georges, yes I am a foul-mouthed jerk but at least I know how to back up an argument with documentation.

Comment by louisproyect — June 24, 2015 @ 12:02 pm

9. Smith’s article overwhelmingly relies on uncritically accepting western sources like the New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, NPR etc… He can’t even get his story straight; he asserts that the Communist Party is like a mafia organization, but lists numerous party members executed and imprisoned for mafia-type activities. But then again, Smith is probably a guy who thinks that all North Korean males were forced by law to wear their just like Kim Jong-un.

Comment by Georges — June 24, 2015 @ 1:43 pm

10. The last sentence of should finish with “… were forced by law to wear their hair just like Kim Jong-un “.

Comment by Georges — June 24, 2015 @ 2:05 pm

11. So you think the Washington Post was lying when Smith cited it at the beginning of his article:

   Ren Bingyan, a professor of material sciences at Hebei Industrial University, contacted by the Post, told the paper that “the land where you dump or bury it will be infertile. No grass or trees will grow in its place … It is … poisonous, it is polluting. Human beings can never touch it.”

   Now do you think that it constructed a fictional character named Ren Bingyan just to make China look bad? Or maybe he exists, but they put words in his mouth? Or maybe—more likely—the case is that the land has been irretrievably damaged by unregulated capitalist development. Like most imbeciles on the dogmatic left, you put a plus where the bourgeois media puts a minus. Fortunately, most people nowadays are capable of distinguishing fact from fiction and right from wrong. How a schmuck like you turned into an apologist for the Chinese ruling class is anybody’s guess.

Comment by louisproyect — June 24, 2015 @ 2:23 pm
12. To accept the idea that capitalist development has produced massive environmental damage has nothing in common with accepting western media interpretations of China, no matter how accurate they may be in reporting isolated “facts”. I’m intensely interested in finding out about what’s going on in China, but Smith’s hyperbolic anti-communist rantings add nothing. I’d rather find and read Marxists who as a starting point understand the incredible importance of the Chinese revolution and are making a serious effort to understand the changes in China since the introduction of market forces into the economy.

Comment by Georges — June 24, 2015 @ 2:45 pm

13. Very nice evasion of my reference to what I pointed out. Unless you can establish that the “western interpretations” of China’s environmental degradation is “propaganda”, I have no idea what point you are trying to make. You probably have no idea either.

Comment by louisproyect — June 24, 2015 @ 3:31 pm

14. In western media accounts of China’s economy, the Communist Party is responsible for any and all evil, while capitalist development itself is considered essentially as very positive and liberating. The fact that the drive for profits is the root of the problem is downplayed, obscured or ignored, lest it reflect badly on the market model. That capitalism cannot seem to function without vast amounts of corruption is made to seem as mostly a Chinese phenomena, while it is a mere aberration in the west. Furthermore, state control and/or presence in the economy are denigrated and looked upon as obsolete and a hindrance to progress. This is essentially the ideological tightrope that western journalists walk when reporting on China: capitalism is very good, but communists following the logic of capitalism are very bad. In addition, the Chinese concern with national sovereignty, because of the colonial past, is explained away as some sort of dysfunction—only western countries are allowed sovereign rights. I find that keeping these elements in mind when reading about China essential if I hope to get something out of reading corrupt corporate media.

Comment by Georges — June 24, 2015 @ 4:50 pm

15. You don’t seem to get that Richard Smith is a Marxist. It doesn’t matter that he cites the Washington Post or the NY Times. So does Noam Chomsky and so did Karl Marx cite the bourgeois press in his day. In fact he wrote for a rightwing pro-slavery newspaper called the Herald.

Comment by louisproyect — June 24, 2015 @ 4:57 pm

16. Well, I figured he was some sort of leftist, but that does not change my mind about his article. It certainly is essential to read western media; you can cite them all you want, but if you don’t weed out their biases, well that’s another story.

Comment by Georges — June 24, 2015 @ 5:18 pm
Of course I cited the western books and press extensively because much of the best reporting on China has come from such sources — the investigative reports by Bloomberg and the New York Times on the corruption of top party figures and their families, for example, which needless to say is not going to appear in the party press. Or many investigative reports on pollution. But all these are based on Chinese sources, many of whom are quoted. I also extensively cited Chinese sources directly such as Caixin, Xinhua, South China Morning Post, China Dialogue, the People’s Daily, China Daily, State Council documents and so on. None of the Chinese sources, official or otherwise, contradict my argument. They all back it up. On the horrific pollution and the government’s callous disregard, for example, I invite you to look for yourself at Caixin or China Dialogue. They’re in both english and chinese. Or look at China Digital Press. Or watch Chai Jing’s video “Under the Dome” on Youtube. You don’t need hyperbole to explain what’s happening in China today. The facts are far worse than I could ever imagine — and I didn’t even get into the CCP’s mass torture and “just in time” execution of hapless Falun Gong practitioners and other political prisoners, or

As to my interpretation of the nature of the revolution itself, I invite you to read my articles published in the 1990s in New Left Review: “The Chinese Road to capitalism,” and “Creative destruction: capitalist development and China’s environment,” or “The necessity of gangster capitalism in Russia and China” in Monthly Review in 2000, or my long two-part article on the Chinese revolution and the Cultural Revolution in Against the Current back in 1981. In that article I explained the crucial importance of the Chinese revolution, of Mao’s revolution, not as a socialist revolution, but as the first of a worldwide wave of party-army-bureaucratic “substitutionist” and mostly Stalinist from the get, revolutions made not by the working class but by a substitutions party-army — and photo-bureaucratizing ruling class — beginning with China, Korea, Vietnam, then Africa and Latin America. These revolutions were all led by petty-bourgeois party-substitutionist elements — ex-students, intellectuals, ex-military, guerrilla armies — all based on non-socialist peasant social bases. In those revolutions, since the working class — the only social class with an interest in industrialization, planning, internationalism and so on, was not involved — the revolutionary party’s substituted for the working class. But since their peasant base were not interested in socialism but wanted to just get rid of the landlords and divide everything down to the last chopstick, the revolutionary party found that it had to become itself the reservoir and monopoly of “correct ideas” and could not trust the peasants, could not allow democracy, but had to mobilize but also restrain them by means of the “mass line” and such. What I showed was that this experience of party substitutionism forged the party-army-proto bureaucracy into a potential ruling class, which it became after the victory of the revolution, and then metamorphosed into a new bureaucratic class “for itself.” Corruption, bureaucratism, and totalitarianism followed directly and inevitably from the nature of the revolution itself. So yes, the CCP led the revolution, kicked out the imperialists, united the country, industrialized. But this was a Stalinist revolution not a socialist revolution. The CCP substituted not for the working class but for the national bourgeoisie. Indeed, to this day, the CCP still asserts its insistence that only the Party, not the working class, must rule China. This is the reality,
the history. I’m afraid that in simply taking the CCP’s self-description as “socialist” or “communist” uncritically, you seem to be doing exactly what you accuse me of doing with my supposedly “uncritical” citations of western sources. You will get a more accurate explanation of current trends if you look at the evidence, the history, then build your theory on that rather than trying to force a fictional model on facts that don’t support it. So yes I’m a Marxist of sorts but I’m not a Stalinist.

Richard Smith

Comment by Richarc — June 25, 2015 @ 1:35 am

18. “They all back it up. On the horrific pollution and the government’s callous disregard,”

Statements like this do not help your case one little bit. China, like most other nations hasn’t really had any choice, it has had to address pollution issues. To say they are disregarding the issue is to be polite, being economical with the truth.

Comment by Simon Provertier — June 25, 2015 @ 4:50 pm

19. Simon, you’re an idiot. You simply do not know what you are talking about. Why don’t you read the Chinese sources I cited for yourself. Watch Chai Jing’s video. Read the People’s Daily, the China Daily (published daily in English). Every single day, those official government organs complain bitterly that party and government officials all over the country “callously disregard the people and the environment. They prosecute them every day but the problems just grow worse and worse. None of this is “necessary,” “unavoidable.” Don’t give me your ignorant Stalinist apologetic bullshit. Read the evidence for yourself,

Comment by Richard — June 26, 2015 @ 12:47 am

20. Richard – I am not a Stalinist, I come from a tradition that supports co-operatives, smashing the state and not one of Statist solutions. My Western sensibilities are no doubt horrified at many things the Chinese get up to, but that shouldn’t stop me trying to be objective.

And one cannot let bullshit just pass by without comment. And you are a bullshitter.

Comment by Simon Provertier — June 28, 2015 @ 9:52 am

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