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Ecological Civilization: What is it and Why it Should be the Goal of Humanity

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Abstract

In 2007 the Chinese government embraced ‘ecological civilization’ as a central policy objective of the government. In 2012, the goal of achieving ecological civilization was incorporated into its constitution as a framework for China’s environmental policies, laws and education, and was included as a goal in its five-year plans. In 2017, the 19th Congress of the Communist Party called for acceleration in achieving this goal. Expenditure on technology to ameliorate environmental damage, reduce pollution and reduce greenhouse gas emissions has been massively increased. It is also presented and promoted as a vision for our global future, in Cornelius Castoriadis’ terminology, a new social imaginary.

Keywords: Ecological civilization, China, Joseph Needham, Alfred North Whitehead, philosophy of organism.

Riassunto

Nel 2007 il governo cinese ha ritenuto che la "civiltà ecologica" dovesse diventare un obiettivo politico centrale. Nel 2012, l'obiettivo di raggiungere la civiltà ecologica è stato incorporato nella sua costituzione come quadro di riferimento per le politiche ambientali, le leggi e l'educazione della Cina, ed è stato incluso come obiettivo nei suoi piani quinquennali. Nel 2017, il 19° Congresso del Partito Comunista ha chiesto di accelerare il raggiungimento di questo obiettivo. Gli investimenti in tecnologia, necessari a ridurre i danni ambientali, ridurre l'inquinamento e ridurre le emissioni di gas serra sono stati massicciamente aumentati. È stato anche introdotto e promosso, come visione per il nostro futuro globale, e nella terminologia di Cornelius Castoriadis, un nuovo immaginario sociale.

Parole chiave: Civilizzazione economica, Cina, Joseph Needham, Alfred North Whitehead, filosofia dell'organismo.

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In 2007 the Chinese government embraced ‘ecological civilization’ as a central policy objective of the government. In 2012, the goal of achieving ecological civilization was incorporated into its constitution as a framework for China’s environmental policies, laws and education, and was included as a goal in its five-year plans. In 2017, the 19th Congress of the Communist Party called for acceleration in achieving this goal. Expenditure on technology to ameliorate environmental damage, reduce pollution and reduce greenhouse gas emissions has been massively increased. It is also presented and promoted as a vision for our global future, in Cornelius Castoriadis’ terminology, a new social imaginary (Hansen, Li and Svarverud 2018).

The practical implications are relatively straightforward. Ecological civilization is associated with quests for such things as a circular economy ‘where one facility’s waste, including energy, water, materials – as well as information – is another facility’s input’ (Geall and Ely 2018, p.1189), the conditions for ecological sustainability. However, ecological civilization is often taken to mean far more than this, and sometimes, less. Since the dynamics of capitalism are seen by Marxists as the main driving force for ecological destruction on a global scale and for paralysis in efforts to avert such destruction (Kovel 2007), the more radical environmentalists in China explicitly link the quest for ecological civilization with the struggle for eco-socialism. They see the goal for the whole of humanity the creation of a global eco-socialist civilization. This is the view of Pan Yue, until 2016, the vice-minister of China’s State Environmental Protection Administration and the leading exponent of ecological civilization at the governmental level. He argued that ‘we must use Marxist theoretical weapons to “fight against any forms of production and lifestyle that deviate from ecological civilization”’ and claimed that ‘socialism is more likely to provide system motivation and system security for ecological civilization’ (Wang 2014, p.10). He also argued that this should be the goal for the whole of humanity, and because China would be so badly affected by ecological destruction, particularly climate change, and the Chinese have nowhere to escape, China should lead the world in realizing this goal (Pan 2005; Gare 2012; Gare 2020). This, he argued, should be facilitated by Chinese traditional culture having featured a strong concern for nature. Pan Yue has been strongly supported by among others, Huan Qingzhi (2016) from the Research Institute of Marxism, Peking University, a major proponent of eco-socialism (2010). For Huan Qingzhi (2010, p.11), building ecological civilization should be understood as ‘a new pattern of ecosocialism, which may function as a greener and more fruitful political ecology.’ Also aligned with Pan Yue, Pan Jiahua, Director of the Institute for Urban and Environmental Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, argued that ecological civilization requires institutions to subordinate markets and empower people at local levels (Pan Jiahua 2016; Martinelli 2018, p.380ff.). Lu Feng from Tsinghua University argued that ecological civilization and its practice will negate and transcend modern and urban civilization, being connected to new kinds of economic, social and cultural institutional frameworks through which people will be able to live