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Marxist Theory and Sustainable Development in Relation to Contemporary China.

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Marx himself may not have had too much specifically to say about “sustainable development,” explicitly, but in many respects his entire corpus of writings can be interpreted as implicitly being directed at such a goal. Certainly his oft repeated idealized comment about “socialist man working in the morning, fishing in the afternoon, and philosophizing in the evening,” can be seen as an important development in such a direction. Be that as it may, the clear suggestion seems to be that if the means of production are in the hands of the producers—that is those who are more concerned with their practical use than mere profit-making— that it is far more likely that the former would be more concerned with potential planetary ,environmental and climatic degradation than the latter. Whether or not such is true in practice may of course be debatable, but it certainly makes more sense than assuming that those more concerned primarily with short-term profits would be so occupied.

Thus, John Bellamy Foster in two recent books, *Marxist Ecology-Materialism and Nature* (2000), and *Ecology against Capitalism* (2002): both published by Monthly Review Press—has laid out in far more detail than it is necessary or possible here to elaborate the case for linking Marxist theory and sustainable development.

While largely directed towards people in “advanced” industrial countries —especially the United States—both books cannot be said to be irrelevant to developing countries—particularly China—given the breakneck speed of that nation’s economic growth over the last thirty years, perhaps among the most impressive in all human history.

It also happens that by coincidence that several other factors make it particularly timely and appropriate to connect the theme of this conference with its particular locale in China this year.

One factor is that in 2001, Tsinghua celebrated its 90th anniversary among other things with a conference whose theme was China’s development of science and technology.

A second propitious factor is that 2008 is the one hundredth and tenth anniversary of former Premier Zhou Enlai’s birth. As is well known Zhou Enlai’s emphasis on China’s

“Four Modernizations,” at the opening of the Fourth National People’s Congress in 1975, can be seen as the prelude or the foundation for the de-emphasis on “class struggle, “and stress on development and “opening to the outside” begun by Deng Xiaoping in 1978 and followed by his successors to this very day.

Finally, and most pertinent this conference coincides with the recent policy announced by China’s top leadership at their 17th. Party Congress last year and reaffirmed at the 11th. National people’s Congress just held this month of a “harmonious society,” meant to resolve some key problems that have arisen in tandem with the economic developments of the last thirty years, such as growing regional and personal income gaps, educational and gender disparities and environmental degradation among others.

Thus, on the one hand it should come as perhaps no surprise if one refers to authors such as Schumpeter and Heilbroner in their very different fashions that given the breakneck speed of China’s economic development over the last thirty years that some major issues of distribution and product and environmental safety have arisen given the major emphasis given to raising the level of the “productive forces,” i.e., production.

At the same time it seems only natural that sooner or later an intelligent leadership would make a major effort to balance the above by attempting to reduce growing inequalities and disparities in health and education that have been perhaps accentuated over the last thirty years.

Therefore, it seems that the theme and timing of this conference dovetails perfectly with China’s present needs. While this paper will not provide technical details for helping to resolve the above outlined issues, it is hoped that it may provide some helpful general comments and suggestions as to how one might try and build an even more “harmonious society,” in the People’s Republic of China than currently exists. It also seems that the Beijing government’s explicit recognition of such problems could well be a giant step toward helping to resolve them. Certainly, one hopes that such will indeed be the case.

That a truly harmonious society should be linked to sustainable development should be clear to anyone and thus one major aspect of the conference hopefully will thus try to bridge its theme and the Chinese leadership’s latest pronouncements as well.

As noted above classical Marxist theory as such does not explicitly discuss “sustainable development , “but mostly if anything criticizes many of the wasteful patterns associated with “capitalism,” especially in its “primitive accumulation stage as compared to what it sees as a hopefully more “rational” and less “exploitative,” role for “socialism” and/or “communism.” This paper will therefore not attempt a deep theoretical analysis of the relationship between Marxist theory as such and sustainable development per se. Hopefully, some of the other papers to be presented will fulfill that function. Instead I would like to bring to the attention of this conference the latest book By Muhammad Yunus –the Bangla Deshi microcredit financier’s latest book entitled: “*Creating a World Without*

Poverty: Social Business and the Future of Capitalism,” published by Public Affairs Press late last year.

While hardly a Marxist in the strict sense and having been accused by many of having not really relieved poverty nor replaced capitalism through his microcredit schemes , he does propose a socially conscious version of capitalism in this book which he feels will go a long way towards alleviating poverty , exploitation and the deteriorating global climate and environment.

Certainly, his ideas herein might be accused of not going beyond those of Jeffry Sachs on alleviating poverty of former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan’s Millennium Goals and simply suggesting a more benign form of capitalism than has hitherto existed. Still, I believe that in practice to actually realize the goals Muhammad Yunus has outlined would in fact require a complete re-evaluation of the current values, operational mechanisms and structures of capitalism as it presently exists, although the author does not say so in so many words possibly because he believes the current system can be reformed or because he does not want to explicitly state the real implications of his suggestions in this book.

He did get a Nobel Prize and even has a Grameen-style microcredit program in China as well as directly laying out serious criticism of the World Bank and the IMF and much about many multinational companies including American corporations, Yet he is also quite effusive about the Danone Corporation with which he has developed a co=operative business venture in Bangladesh for producing yogurt which may seem like an irrelevancy in a poor country like his own , although he claims the prices charged and the nutrition provided have benefited the population as well as provided jobs and incentives for a slew of local small-scale “entrepreneurs” who are selling something useful and not simply for a few middlemen. He thus suggests that this not a case of “artificially creating unnecessary creating consumer demand for a luxury product through high-pitch salesmanship by a predatory international corporation.”

More to the point throughout the book, despite some major contradictions he does imply that one can only conceive of the sort of “social business,” or type of capitalism he has in mind implicitly by direct ownership by its direct producers, i.e., socialism by any other name, although nowhere does he explicitly state such a possibility or define it as such. However, even if one is giving him too much credit and if his following goals may be seen as utopian to “dogmatic or hard-line Marxists,” a series of goals he outlines to be realized in 2050-even if they would not result in socialism-seem worthy of working towards and certainly would go a long way towards advancing this planet as a whole on the way to “sustainable development.” Some of the most significant of these goals are quoted below:

There will be no poor people, no beggars, no homeless people, no street children anywhere in the world.

There will be no passports and visas for anybody in the world.

There will be no war, no war preparations, and no military establishments to fight wars. There will be no nuclear weapons nor any other weapons of mass destruction.

There will be no more incurable diseases from cancer to aids anywhere in the world. High quality healthcare will be available to everyone.

There will be a global education system accessible to all from anywhere in the world.

The global economic system will encourage individuals, businesses and institutions to share their property and participate actively in bringing prosperity to others, making income inequality an irrelevant issue. Unemployment and welfare will be unheard of.

Social business will be a substantial part of the business world.

There will be only one global currency.

Technology will be available with which all secret bank accounts and transactions of politicians, government officials, business people, intelligence agencies, underworld organizations, and terrorist groups can be easily detected and monitored.

All people will be committed to maintaining a sustainable lifestyle based on appropriate technologies. Sun, water and wind will be the main sources of power.

Humans will be able to forecast earthquakes, cyclones tsunamis and other natural disasters precisely and in plenty of time to minimize damage and loss of life.

There will be no discrimination of any kind, whether based on race, color religion, gender, sexual orientation, political belief, language, culture or any other factor.

Basic connectivity will be wireless and nearly costless.

Everybody will read and hear everything in his own language based on technology.

Some of these goals as suggested above may certainly sound naïve and utopian, to hard-headed Western “realistic social scientists,” as well as “dogmatic Marxists.” However, none of them sound like goals that Marx himself would not have strived for and certainly every one of them seems worth aiming towards as well.

How such goals might be achieved of course is perhaps a much more practical question and one might suggest that under “capitalism,” at least as presently constituted, most, if not all, of their realization might be impossible. Whether or not “proletarian revolution,” would be the only method to achieve them of course is debatable, but in the foreseeable future may be even more “utopian” than trying to realize Yunus’s goals by 2050.

Having said this and bearing the above goals in mind, I might offer a more practical prognosis by trying to match these goals with Chinese current realities and setting priorities even if such goals as will be suggested below cannot all be implemented in practice. Still, I will attempt to suggest goals to be worked for that will perhaps most dovetail with current problems facing the People’s Republic that also might be seen as major issues under consideration by Beijing’s leadership at present.

The following is only a suggested list of some of the key problems currently facing China. No doubt others could be added. Again, attempts at resolving them should hopefully

help in China's progressing toward a more "sustainable development," than seems to be the current situation. They include:

1. Try to reduce the income disparities that have arisen over the last thirty years.
2. Try to reduce imbalances between the coastal and inland areas.
3. Try to reduce inter- and intra-provincial and even inter- and intra-county disparities.
4. Try to reduce growing rural-urban disparities.
5. Try and reduce growing educational and healthcare disparities.
6. Pay serious attention to growing environmental problems.
7. Institute a more effective equitable tax system.
8. Tighten product inspection and quality control.
9. Increase the use of renewable energy.
10. Attempt to increase mass transit as well as encourage increased automobile production.
11. Encourage the development of medium-size cities so as to more sustainably absorb surplus population leaving rural areas.
12. Raise the level of awareness at all levels of officials and party cadres in relation to dealing with all of the above.

This may seem like a tall order, but the Chinese leadership seems to be aware of all these problems. It is a question of implementation and certainly everything cannot be accomplished at once. However, it does seem that after the Olympics and before the 60th anniversary of the PRC in October, next year that perhaps a start can be made in beginning to fulfill the above goals. Such of course would perhaps even make China's 60th year celebration of the establishment of the People's Republic even more impressive than it otherwise might be.

As already noted above, both in relation to Muhammad Yunus's goals and to crucial issues currently facing China at its current stage of development, their improvement will not be easy. Better training and disciplining of officials will of course play a crucial part as will the development of a better educated population as well as the use of new technologies. Furthermore, more exemplary acts by the leadership such as Premier Wen Jiabao's personal appearance at the Guangzhou railroad station at the time of transport problems during this year's Chinese New year caused by inclement weather seem to set an important precedent.

Despite China's huge scale and enormous problems, major steps in solving the problems that have occurred in the last thirty years that help improve sustainable development can set an example for the rest of the world including both developed and developing countries. After all, China represents one-fifth of humanity and such improvements should clearly influence the rest of the world not only in a practical sense but perhaps by moral example as well.

Moreover, such developments may also help prove the relevance of Marxist theory for sustainable development, and refute in particular the position promulgated by some who

suggested after the fall of the Soviet Union, that there is “no alternative to certain kinds of capitalist development.” Finally, such developments should go some way toward realizing Marx’s prediction with which this paper began of enabling at least some people to soon become the socialist man or woman who can “work in the morning, fish in the afternoon and ruminates over profound philosophical questions in the evenings.”

NOTES

1. Yunus, Muhammad. *Creating a World Without Poverty: Social Business and the Future of Capitalism*. New York: Public Affairs (2007), pp. 224–27.