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Ching Lok Tse

Hong Kong Baptist University

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Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Research

Capitalism, Ecological Crisis and the End of History

Tse Ching Lok

Title: Capitalism, Ecological Crisis and the End of History

Abstract: The well-being of our environment has been on the decline and there arise a growing number of ecological crises in different parts of the globe, for instance, climate change, water pollution, global warming and loss of biodiversity. Many members of society attribute these crises to the unrestrained capitalist development and they blame that capitalists exploit the nature mercilessly and this eventually induces a multitude of ecological disasters. Owing to the emergence of these environmental catastrophes, people start to notice the failing and unpromising aspects of capitalism and they endeavour to seek measures to alter capitalist system which is fraught with flaws and problems. However, Francis Fukuyama claims in his thesis *The End of History* that capitalism will be the last remaining ideology of the human history and no other ideological systems can overthrow capitalism. Indeed, capitalism is capable of assimilating the opposing forces and crises so that it can continue to develop. In light of this, the intent of this paper is to expose the challenges of capitalism in the face of ecological crises. Despite these potential challenges, the assimilating power of capitalism reinforces its incessant development.

Key word: Capitalism, Ecological Crisis, Ideology, The End of History

Introduction

Nature and capitalism are two incompatible entities and they have always been in opposition to each other. Owing to the capitalist development, nature is exploited and sacrificed. Sociologist John Bellamy Foster argues in *Ecology Against Capitalism* that with the cultural influence of Western Civilization, nature has been dominated by humans and it exists only to satisfy their needs (Foster, 2002). John Locke, one of the most influential thinkers during the Enlightenment, suggests in *Two Treatises of Government* that

“God gave the world to mankind in common; but since He gave it to them for their benefit and the greatest convenience of life they were capable of ... It cannot be supposed He meant it should always remain common and uncultivated. He gave it to the use of the industrious and rational and labour was to be his title to it.” (Locke, 1988)

This lends support to the human's exploitation of nature since humans are the masters of nature. Nature is a gift from God and humans can put it to full use. This religious justification of human's mastery on nature opens up more than centuries of exploitation of natural resources especially with the advent of Industrial Revolution. There was a general conviction that “nature has no value other than the uses to which it can be put by human industry” (Rubinoff, 2000). Economist Harry Johnson also believes that we do not need to keep our environment intact since we humans have the right to exercise our power over nature under the concept of corporate capitalism (Johnson, 1973). Humans then develop full dependence on nature and the expansionist logic of capitalism generates the ecological scarcities and irreversible ecological degradation due to relentless economic activities (Foster, 2002).

It is not until the second half of 20th century that the public awareness over ecological issues was raised when the environmental crisis started to appear. Martin O'Connor mentions,

“The 1960s saw a growing agitation regarding the poisoning of urban and rural habitats

occasioned by economic growth and consumerism; this habitat concern was overtaken in the 1970s by the 'energy crisis' and its attendant preoccupation with natural resource depletion; and the 1990s promise to be the decade of the 'global ecology' issues.” (O'Connor, 1994, 3)

Because of the escalating ecological crisis in our society, many people began to ponder over the relationship between capitalist development and its destruction on ecology, and they have realised the unsustainable nature of capitalism which puts our lives in jeopardy with the coming of ecological disasters caused by capitalist activities. It is against this backdrop that new ideas have been introduced to challenge capitalism after the exposure of the flaws and defects of capitalist system. Nonetheless, some argue that capitalist system will remain the dominating system and capitalism will continue to be the one and only ideology in world regardless of the occurrence of ecological crisis.

Granted the above-mentioned arguments, this paper aims to explore the challenges confronting capitalism in the age of ecological catastrophes. The first part will discuss the emergence of new ideas, especially eco-socialism which can potentially challenge and alter the existing capitalist system. The second part will examine how capitalism will survive through ecological crises and the arrival of eco-socialism. There is a vision that capitalism will remain the dominant ideology in the world. It is capable of assimilating its opposing forces and finding ways to continue its development in the face of crisis. This argument will be substantiated with contemporary examples and the thesis *The End of History*.

Part I: Eco-socialism as an opportunity of change to the existing world

It has been criticised that capitalist development exerts adverse influence on our nature and causes acute ecological calamities such as climate change, global warming, extinction of species and all sorts of environmental pollutions. People have lost faith in the existing system and they are highly

concerned about the future of our nature. Carl Boggs argues,

“The global crisis reveals the extent to which the classical industrial model has run its course, even as ruling elites scramble to mobilize resources in support of the corporate-growth system over which they preside—a system giving rise to rampant material exploitation, vast inequalities of wealth and power, wasteful use of natural resources, militarism, and warfare not to mention escalating habitat destruction on the road to possible ecological collapse.” (Boggs, 2012, 153)

This suggests that capitalist model of our society has been failing and it generates public worries over the well-being of ecology under unlimited exploitation by capitalist activities. In light of this, people have resorted to finding alternatives to replace the existing system to establish a more healthy society. Boggs further states that the environmental crisis has enlightened new perspectives of viewing not only economic development but political governance, culture, nature, and social change. (Boggs, 2012) New ideas and system need to be sought in a bid to change and replace this defective capitalist model. To tackle the inherent destructiveness of the current system of unsustainable development—capitalism, the answer rests on an ecological revolution, which is a social revolution aiming to create a just and sustainable society. (Foster, Clark & York, 2010) The ecological crisis exposes the weaknesses of capitalist system and calls for an ecological revolution to bring upside-down changes to create a sustainable society.

Eco-socialism therefore emerges as a leading revolutionary concept to combat capitalist system. It is commented that eco-socialism is the only long-term, feasible solution to maintaining a harmonious relationship with the earth and it can potentially overthrow and replace capitalism since it is an entirely different socio-economic system of production and distribution which puts people and the planet before profit (Williams, 2010). In contradistinction to capitalism which emphasizes capital accumulation through endless exploitation of nature, eco-socialism stresses the importance of co-existence between humans and nature. It is an anthropocentric and humanist ideology which

unveils the significance of the non-material interaction between humans and the rest of nature (Pepper, 1993). It encourages us to live in harmony with the nature and keep our earth intact in its existing form as far as possible. It advocates that society has to concertedly determine on “what, how much and how to produce, how much energy and how many resources are to be allocated to what” (Sarkar & Kern, 2008) with a view to utilising our nature in a sustainable way. Eco-socialism has proposed a number of theories and underlying principles to establish an eco-socialist society and they have been in fact practised in reality nowadays in a hopeful attempt to resist and substitute the current capitalist system.

In the first place, sustainability is a guiding principle of eco-socialism and it is asserted that sustainable development is an answer to the question of “the accelerating deterioration of the human environment and natural resources and the consequences of the deterioration for economic and social development” and it is defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Williams, 2010). Thus, sustainable development is in opposition to capitalist expansion which suggests unlimited utilisation of nature regardless of the needs of future generations. Sustainable development puts immense emphasis on the preservation of our nature and maintains a continuous supply of natural resources for future use. Sustainability offers a perspective of viewing the earth and humans in three critical aspects, namely economics, society and environment, and we should strike a balance among these three areas (Williams, 2010).

Nowadays, the notion of sustainable development has been introduced and put into practice by many countries. Fishing moratorium is an example proving the actualization of sustainable development in reality. In China, overfishing has been an acute ecological problem since it leads to the depletion of fish stocks in the ocean and disturbs the food chain in ecosystem. Therefore, the Chinese government enforced the law of fishing suspension in South China Sea from mid-May to 1st August and no fishing activities can be carried out during the suspension period. Hence, the

marine lives can recover from the intensive fishing activities so that the fish stocks can be replenished and the supply of fish will be sustainable. Aside from this law of fishing suspension, many other measures are implemented to conserve the nature. Another instance is the rapid development of renewable energy such as solar energy, hydro-electric power and wind energy in many countries since renewable energy is more environmentally-friendly and causes less pollution to our environment. Our reliance on exhaustive energy like coal and oil can be lessened. In this regard, sustainable development is gaining more popularity and has been practiced by many countries. This new idea opposes the overexploitation of natural resources to accumulate capital as proposed by capitalism and it targets at upholding a sustainable society.

In addition to sustainable development, collective control is also an important idea under eco-socialism. Pepper mentions,

“[Eco-socialism proposes] re-appropriation of collective control over our relationship with nature, via common ownership of the means of production... We should not dominate or exploit nature in the sense of trying to transcend natural limits and laws, but we should collectively ‘dominate’ (i.e. plan and control) our relationship with it, for collective good.”

(Pepper, 1993, 233)

We should collectively control our nature and come up with rules and methods of utilizing natural resources. Common ownership is a crucial concept since nature should be commonly shared by all human beings. We should rebuild commons to confront the privatization of natural resources under capitalism since natural resources are the commons that should be accessible to all members of society and should not be privately owned. (Boiller, 2002)

Nowadays, different nations start to organize global conferences to determine how they are going to control and utilize the nature. The United Nations has been devoted to promoting international cooperation to preserve our environment and restricting the mode of production within its member

states. For example, Kyoto Protocol and Copenhagen conference are the apparent attempts that different countries collectively decide on the international regulations pertaining to environmental protection. For example, the common target has been set regarding the emission of greenhouse gases and they have also discussed the possibility of ways to reduce the use of coal and oil. More developed countries even provide advanced technology and scientific methods for the less developed countries to combat pollutions and ecological problems. The international collaboration on environmental issues is in line with the concept of collective control under eco-socialism.

In short summary, eco-socialism can be a potential challenge and substitute to capitalism. With the emergence of ecological crisis, people realize the devastating impacts of capitalist system and they turn to seek viable measures or a better model to replace this flawed existing system. Eco-socialist society then arises as an ideal option and some people come to support this idea. Many countries have already initiated some eco-socialist efforts such as the introduction of sustainable development and international collaboration to fight against capitalism. It seems that capitalism is slowly taken over and replaced by eco-socialism. However, some argue that this is just an illusion while the ecological crisis plays a vital role in perpetuating the development of capitalism. This viewpoint will be examined in the following part.

Part II: Continuous development of capitalism under ecological problems

Promising and influential as eco-socialism may seem, it is argued that capitalism can still find ways to remain the dominating ideology in this age. Eco-socialism cannot substitute capitalism to create a new system since capitalist system can assimilate its opposing forces and it can even take advantage of its crisis to continue its development. According to *The End of History* by Francis Fukuyama, he asserts that capitalism is the only remaining dominant ideology in human history. The end of Cold War marks the ultimate triumph of Western liberal democracy and “an unabashed victory of

economic and political liberalism” (Fukuyama, 1989) He argues that history is driven by the evolution of ideology. After the collapse of communist regimes like the USSR, communism was defeated, leaving capitalism to be the one and only ideology to dominate the world. Therefore, without any other major ideological struggles, the post-Cold War era is hence referred as “the end of history”. Fukuyama mentions,

“What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.” (Fukuyama, 1989)

This suggests that capitalist system is the final existing system in the world and capitalism will function as the only dominating ideology in the world. Also, Fukuyama states that “the triumph of the West, of the Western idea, is evident first of all in the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism” (Fukuyama, 1989). This claims that no alternative ideologies can possibly overthrow and replace capitalism to be the governing ideology of the world. Despite the fact that ecological crisis exposes the drawbacks of capitalism and that eco-socialism has arisen to challenge it, capitalist system is a self-improving and self-amending model and it can make use of its crises to keep itself functioning. Hence, the vision for future development is that capitalist system will perpetuate itself and maintain its primary influence in the world. The following will expound the features of capitalist system and indicate how it continues to develop in the face of ecological crisis generated by its own development.

The first significant feature is the assimilating nature of capitalist system to weaken the opposing forces and even integrate them into parts of the system. As mentioned in the previous part, eco-socialism has been a counteracting force and a potential menace to capitalism. Its means such as sustainable development has checked the rampant capitalist activities. However, it is contended that this is just an illusion and capitalist system keeps running with the aid of eco-socialism. The

concept of sustainable development has merged into the system of capitalism and it becomes an ideology that reinforces capitalism. Many countries have introduced the sustainable development as a part of their social policy but when it comes to the conflicts between economic benefits and the preservation of nature, the economic benefits always prevail. The three categories of society, environment and economy can hardly be balanced.

For example, Hong Kong government stresses the sustainable development as its core objective in policy-making. On the surface, Hong Kong is practicing sustainable development and it strives to maintain a harmonious relationship with the nature. But frankly speaking, capitalism is still influential and environment has to be sacrificed for the sake of economic development. The obvious evidence is the land reclamation from Victoria Harbour. Notwithstanding the confrontations from the public and environmentalists, Hong Kong government still decided to reclaim land from the sea for further economic development at the expense of the ecological well-being and the marine lives were put at stake by the land reclamation activities. Therefore, capitalism assimilates the concept of sustainable development and turns it into an ideology to perpetuate capitalist development. Though many countries and cities claim that they adhere to sustainable development, they still value economic factors over environmental conservation, and sustainable development is just a nominal term manipulated by the authorities to claim that their policy is sustainable.

Another distinctive feature is that the crisis of capitalism can help perpetuate and motivate its own development. By virtue of the ecological crisis, a new form of capitalism emerges, which is “green capitalism”. It refers to “a renewed strategy for profiting from planetary destruction” (Foster & Clark, 2009) and it “appeals to nature and even its crisis as a marketing tool” (Cock, 2010). This reveals that crisis of capitalism does not prohibit the capitalist development but it offers new economic opportunities to perpetuate its development. There is no lack of examples justifying how green capitalism functions to gain more profits for capitalists.

To begin with, eco-tourism is a growing business model practised in many countries. It refers to

“responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people” (The International Ecotourism Society, 1990). Through eco-tourism, one can be close to the nature and acquires a lot of knowledge regarding environmental conservation. However, this is in fact a capitalist activity that allows capitalists to make profit in the name of ecology. The concept of eco-tourism is proliferated and becomes more popular. A growing number of people participate in these eco-tours and many tourist agencies gain a handsome profit from organising them. Worse still, some destinations are even polluted by waste and excessive human activities. Therefore, eco-tourism is a capitalist development decorated with the concept of ecological sustainability.

Another popular example is the development of green technology. Genetic engineering is claimed to be environmentally-friendly. The production of genetic-modified food causes less pollution to the nature. However, this is just a capitalist activity camouflaged with ecological reason. The productivity of genetic-modified food is much higher and more efficient than the traditional agricultural method. More crops will be produced with the use of this technology and more money can be earned. Also, in the name of environmentally-friendly, genetic-modified food gets more popular and people love to purchase this kind of product. Worse still, some argue that genetic-engineering can pose potential threats to our environment such as the creation of “super pest”, which is contradictory to its original claim as an eco-friendly technology.

Last but not least, the consumption of organic products has experienced an upward trend in the recent decades since people notice the importance of environmental sustainability. Organic food is produced in a sustainably way and it creates less pollution to the soil and it abandons the use of chemical fertilisers which are detrimental to our health. Thus, organic food becomes a new capitalist opportunity. The business of organic products has expanded every year due to an escalating demand. However, it is discovered that the so-called organic products on the market are not entirely produced in an environmentally friendly way and the term “organic” has become a label

for the businessmen to earn profits from it. In this regard, ecological crisis can perpetuate capitalist development because capitalists can make a way to earn money from it by decorating themselves as “green” and “eco-friendly”.

In brief, it is foreseen that capitalist system will continue to develop and capitalism will maintain its dominating influence as the leading ideology in the world as discussed in Fukuyama's *The End of History*. Despite the rise of eco-socialism, the assimilating power of capitalist system can eliminate its oppositions and the ecological crisis gives rise to the new form of green capitalism which perpetuates its development in the name of ecological protection. Therefore, this proves that capitalism will remain its dominant position in the world.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper intends to examine the working of capitalist system under ecological crisis. Relentless capitalist development induces irreversible destruction to our nature, which allows people to acknowledge the defects of capitalist system and seek possible measures to tackle this grave problem. Eco-socialism hence appears to be a feasible system to confront this current imperfect capitalist system. However, in accordance with *The End of History*, capitalism is a tenacious ideology which assimilates and integrates the opposing forces into parts of its system so that it can remain everlasting and undefeated. Therefore, it is highly possible that capitalism will maintain its dominating position for centuries to come. However, it does not mean that there is no escape from capitalist system. At the end of *The End of History*, Fukuyama mentions “Perhaps this very prospect of centuries of boredom at the end of history will serve to get history started once again” (Fukuyama, 1989) History may start to reactivate again with a new ideology that is strong enough to wrestle with capitalism to be the dominating ideology but this may require some time to wait and see.

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