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ECOLOGICAL CIVILIZATION

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Capitalism and communism have been fighting each other for more than a century and a half, until now the fight seems to have exhausted itself. A third and highly appealing alternative is emerging, the ecological civilization, which purports to be guided not by individual or class appetites and interests but by altruism, reason, and knowledge. It comes out of the natural sciences, and clearly, we cannot go forward without help from that direction. Any plausible discussion of the state of civilization for our time must start with the preeminence of the natural sciences, especially ecology, and the problems of the earth.



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The ecological civilization challenges the economic growth and distribution of wealth, matters over which capitalism and communism have long wrangled. It emphasizes instead the ecosphere, seeks knowledge of all ecosystems and species on earth, and teaches responsibility for them. The ecological civilization calls for linking the welfare of the earth to the welfare of humankind, whatever that may imply about wealth or justice.

It is what we might call an “imaginary,” which has been defined as a vision of “scientific and technological progress” that seeks “the common good.”¹ Imaginaries may not be the prime movers of history; mostly, they are cultural responses to material events around us, in this case changes caused by human numbers and appetites that are disrupting climate and other earth systems. Neither Adam Smith nor Karl Marx experienced those changes, so how could either offer relevant guidance? Science has helped us discover the earth as a whole and to understand it as a special planet in the solar system, where life has miraculously appeared. Today’s question is whether that

planet can still be preserved as habitat. Can humans learn, by subordinating their appetites to their brains, how to live on this earth intelligently and ethically?

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Nowhere has a new ecological civilization become more discussed than in China over the past two decades. Although the eco-civilization imaginary is originally Western in origin, China claims to have its own resources in philosophy, poetry, science, and technical skills, which can produce a new imaginary that is distinctly Chinese. Among its earliest proponents was a deputy director of the Ministry of Environmental Protection, Pan Yue, who was frustrated by his country's growing list of environmental problems. Old solutions were no longer good enough, he thought; nothing less than a new social vision was needed—and thus he put forward the ecological civilization.²



Anonymous, *Emperor Ming-huang's Flight to Szechwan*, ca. 12th century. Tang dynasty hanging scroll, 55.9×81cm. [Wikimedia Commons](#). [Public domain](#).

Pan and others of his generation, though lamenting a disharmony that they blamed on the West, did not spend much time examining the non-Chinese roots of their new imaginary. Ironically, the idea was first put forward by Western philosophers and critics, most of them living in Germany and the United States. One point of beginnings was Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*,

published in 1918 and 1922. Then there were the philosophers of the Frankfurt School of Neo-Marxism, founded in 1923, including such figures as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. Also, one should include one of the twentieth century's most influential thinkers, Martin Heidegger, and his students, particularly Hans Jonas, Herbert Marcuse, and Hannah Arendt—the so-called “Heidegger’s children,” all of whom ended up living as expatriates in the United States. Then there were American-born writers such as Robert Heilbroner, Lewis Mumford, Murray Bookchin, and even the conservationists Rachel Carson and Aldo Leopold, all of them active from the 1930s on.³

Diverse they certainly were, but they were bound together by growing anxiety over where the world, and particularly modernity experienced in Europe and the US, was heading. They feared that civilization was caught up in a whirlwind of technology, which would dehumanize people and poison the earth. Two world wars, the atomic bomb, the invention of airplanes and automobiles, exploding populations, climate change, and signs of planetary, not just national, degradation made them increasingly fearful of the future. They attracted thousands of followers on both sides of the Atlantic, and by the 1960s those followers formed a “counterculture” to supersede both communism and capitalism, which were seen as part of a common “technological civilization.” The enemy was identified as “the Machine,” the technosocial apparatus built by the human brain to satisfy human urges and appetites. Germany under the Nazis exemplified the Machine. The technological civilization, however, was understood to be globalizing in scope, making all peoples and the earth alike sick. While never organized into a coherent political movement, this counterculture fought against modernity and turned instead to environmentalism and Green Party politics.⁴

Among those opposed to the Machine was Iring Fetscher, a reform-minded Marxist in Germany’s Frankfurt School. Fetscher’s book *Überlebensbedingungen der Menschheit* was published in 1976, and it was he who first coined the phrase “ecological civilization.” We must abandon our faith in machines, he urged, in economic growth, and in reductive, instrumentalized thinking about people and nature. Unlike Karl Marx, who was concerned primarily with rescuing the human proletariat, Fetscher wanted to save both humanity and nature.

But then out of modernizing China came a revival of Fetscher’s notion of an “ecological civilization.” In 2017, President Xi Jinping delivered a report and blueprint to the National Congress of the Communist Party that made the ecological civilization a major goal for the PRC. He claimed that “we have made notable progress in building the ecological civilization,” although the first duty of government, he added, was “to sustain the Chinese nation’s development.” But then he added, “we must realize that lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets . . . and [we must] cherish the environment as we cherish our own lives. We will adopt a holistic approach to conserving our mountains, rivers, forests, farmlands, lakes, and grasslands, implement the strictest possible systems for environmental protection, and develop eco-friendly growth models and ways of life.”⁵ To that end, Xi called for a civilization that aimed not at the endless accumulation of wealth but at a “moderate prosperity.” His speech was added to the Chinese constitution, making China the only nation so far to commit to a radically new form of civilization.

We have become neighbors on a common planet. This interdependency requires everyone, including China, to work toward mutual respect and coexistence on a shrinking planet.

Every nation or people has the right to define what such civilization should mean. Westerners have always felt free to do so and seldom have paid attention to nonwestern nations, simply assuming that the world should follow their lead. In the twenty-first century, however, no nation can stand as a model for all others. We have become parts of an interdependent whole, neighbors on a common planet. If we want to seek a new and better civilization, then we do so everywhere or not at all. Otherwise, we may lose more than our national sovereignty—we may lose our life support. This interdependency requires everyone, including China, to understand the origins and content of the

ideas that, along with material goods, have been imported and to work toward mutual respect and coexistence on a shrinking planet.

Nationalism was never part of that critical counterculture in the West. In fact, Marcuse, Arendt, and Jonas all abhorred violent xenophobia and regarded themselves as citizens of the planet. They were not concerned about saving what Kenneth Clark, author of the book *Civilisation*, had in mind: Western art, philosophy, and architecture. Instead, they worried about the rise of authoritarian, anti-democratic, anti-liberal, Nazi-like regimes anywhere in the world. "If we do not succeed in establishing an ecologically balanced 'alternative civilization,'" Fetscher warned, "we face not only the danger of 'nuclear destruction' but also the possibility of an authoritarian and autarkic 'ecological dictatorship'" that could spread everywhere on the earth.⁶

A similar fear of nationalism stirred the economist Robert Heilbroner, who in 1976 published *The Human Prospect*. "The rise of 'iron' governments, probably of a military-socialist cast," he warned, might emerge in response to an environmental crisis brought on by runaway technology. Heilbroner observed that "the pressure of political movement in times of war, civil commotion, or general anxiety pushes in the direction of authority, not away from it."⁷

The most provocative of the internationalist, countercultural, anti-technological thinkers was Hans Jonas. Born in Germany to a Jewish family, he taught philosophy from 1955 to 1976 at the New School for Social Research in New York City. Jonas's most important book, *The Phenomenon of Life*, is a densely argued treatise on ontology, which deals with core ideas in biology and their importance to the humanities. Jonas wanted to break down not merely social hierarchies but also the root hierarchy, as he saw it, at the heart of Western civilization—the ontological dualism of humans over nature. That dualism had made a sharp moral distinction between *Homo sapiens* and other forms of life, and from that act of separation, Jonas believed, stemmed all the environmental abuse and degradation, all the tyranny and conquest, and all of the enslavement of species and human beings. The brain had become, not an equal, counterbalancing partner within the human organism, checking the more selfish passions, but a mere subordinate instrument serving the urgencies of power and appetite.⁸



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Jonas ended *The Phenomenon of Life* with an epilogue titled "Nature and Ethics." His post-dualist ontology was meant to be the foundation for a new ethics. Bad ontology, he believed, had produced bad morals, which in turn had produced a bad civilization. He would restore humans to the rest of nature, extending human responsibility beyond our own species towards caring for and protecting life in general.

After publishing *The Phenomenon of Life*, Jonas went on to write a companion book, *The Imperative of Responsibility* (1984). "Before our time," he observes,

man's inroads into nature, as seen by himself, were essentially superficial and powerless to upset its appointed balance . . . Nature was not an object of human responsibility—she taking care of herself and, with some coaxing and worrying, also of man; not ethics, only cleverness was applied to her.⁹

But that rule by human cleverness lacked any rational moral guidance, and now we must remedy the lack and learn responsibility. “An object of an entirely new order—not less than the whole biosphere of the planet,” Jonas wrote, “has been added to what we must be responsible for because of our power over it.”¹⁰

Past civilizations, Jonas pointed out, had preached moral responsibility, but they had in mind only the “neighborly virtues”—that is, tolerance, honesty, fair treatment of other humans, good citizenship, and so forth. With the scaling up of the power represented by technology, Jonas warned, must come a scaling up of virtue, or we will end up imprisoned in the technological civilization we have made, where civilization is ruled by individual desire rather than planetary virtue. We must seek the good of our neighbors, he argued, “but also the good of things extrahuman . . . beyond the sphere of man and make the human good include the care for them.” We must do so because through the sciences, especially the science of ecology, we now know the impact of our desire. “Power conjoined with reason,” Jonas concluded, “carries responsibility with it.”¹¹

The evolution of life has been first and foremost a material process, but as knowledge of that evolution has accumulated in recent centuries, moral responsibility, say Jonas and the others, should likewise expand. But knowing evolution cannot bring only the people living in the West to a new sense of responsibility. We have arrived at the point where everyone must understand and practice a common planetary ethic.

Is it possible that China has something important to offer toward a non-dualistic outlook? Pan Yue, for example, believed that it did have useful lessons for the practice of harmony and coexistence rather than dominion. That was why he favored a return to China's traditions as a solution to his country's environmental ills. One might question whether he was right or ask whether dualism might have been common in every civilization, Western or Eastern. But this much is undeniable: China has nurtured some critical attitudes of its own toward technology and toward the abuse of nature and human nature. Such attitudes have long been part of its unique civilization, even if they have been a dissenting tradition, and those teachings may be a valuable resource for reforming modern civilization in China and elsewhere.

China has nurtured some critical attitudes of its own toward technology and toward the abuse of nature and human nature.

Wang Lihua, a historian, is among those advocating a distinctly “Chinese” ecological civilization, calling for bringing back “the fine traditions and historical achievements of the Chinese nation of respecting, conforming to, and protecting nature.” Yet he admits that those “fine traditions” may have gone unheeded in the past by the common people and their leaders. It would not be the first time that people have ignored their teachers. Are westerners not liable to make the same error?¹²

Wang believes that China, like the West, has had many good teachers who advocated a different path. Some of those long predated Hans Jonas in seeking a non-dualistic consciousness and in advocating a sense of responsibility toward life in general. They have left China with diverse, complex philosophical and moral traditions from which both the Chinese and the West can learn. During the Tang and Song dynasties (628-1279 CE), for example, China went through an efflorescence of nature-affirming poetry and painting and did so much earlier than a similar flowering in the West. Sages went into the mountains to contemplate the landscape, and artists looked for unspoiled natural environments. There were, for instance, Wang Wei and Meng Haoran, Ouyang Xiu, and Su Shi, all critical artists going out to rediscover nature. There was no dualism in

their minds, as they floated across lakes and climbed mountains, seeking a life beyond the city's dust and dirt.

Hundreds of years earlier, during the Warring States period (476-221 BCE), when China's population stood at less than a hundred million, a similar turn toward celebrating nature swept the country. It resulted in a wild and wonderful collection of fables and allegories, the *Zhuangzi* (莊子), which appeared in the fourth century BCE. Their author was Zhuang Zhou, who challenged all the power that ancient Chinese civilizers wanted to exercise over nature. The story "Zhuang Zhou Dreams of Being a Butterfly," for example, rejected the dualism implicit in the very idea of civilization. If a man can dream of being a butterfly, Zhuang wondered, can a butterfly dream of being a man? The writer would not draw a rigid line between the species.¹³



Shitao, Spring on the Min River, 1697. Hanging scroll. [Wikimedia Commons](#). Public domain.

That nature affirmation became one of the main themes of the ancient philosophy of Daoism, along with the *Dao De Qing*, one of the most important contributions China has made to human thought. Daoism has been loosely called an "ecological philosophy," as Zhuang and his fellow Daoists believed, unlike many modern scientists, that humans could never acquire full and certain knowledge of anything. Science, they would say, should kowtow before the essential unknowability of the earth. Science must acknowledge that we will never be able to explain everything around us, that we will never be able to achieve full mastery over nature. We humans will get along best by humbling ourselves and learning to be responsible.

Seemingly contradictory to Zhuang Zhou was the famous philosopher Confucius, who was often the butt of Zhuang's humor. Nonetheless, Confucius too has been claimed as a headmaster in a new ecological civilization. Perhaps Zhuang Zhou would not have agreed; clearly, there have been deep fractures within China's intellectual traditions and many sharp differences in philosophy. Zhuang and his disciples looked with contempt at the overgoverned, overcivilized life that Confucius defended. Yet Confucius also taught the Chinese, especially their leaders, to practice a wider moral responsibility. Might his life and writings still offer us today some inspiration—lessons in protecting a planet that he never could grasp as a whole? Just as Confucius wanted to instill a sense of moral duty in China's leaders, might we all agree today on the need for personal responsibility for this earth over which we wield such power?

Civilization has led us to the possibility of a new ethic of coexistence, given us new knowledge to practice such an ethic, and raised new questions about the ends of human life.

We cannot lay all the blame nor give all credit to the old sages, poets, and painters for China's sometimes destructive environmental past, but the same must be said for Western sages, poets, and painters. In every nation, there have been powerful material pressures, deep biological urges, and insatiable human needs that have pushed us along, and they, more than philosophy or poetry, have usually determined history. Farmers hard-pressed to feed their large families have kept on expanding rice or millet production, the state has kept on raising taxes and armies, and battles have kept on raging. We should not ignore the power of those material forces arrayed against the earth. On the other hand, we should not dismiss all philosophies as irrelevant to the lives of ordinary people. Civilization has always pursued a dream of stability and security, but it has also led us to the possibility of a new ethic of coexistence, given us new knowledge to practice such an ethic, and raised new questions about the ends of human life.

If China's leaders truly want an ecological civilization to take root and grow, they should become more familiar with Western philosophers like Hans Jonas, who offered such penetrating diagnoses of modern technological civilization. At the same time, we who live in the West should become more familiar with China's traditions of moral responsibility and awe. All the world's civilizations need help, all the help they can get.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

¹ Sheila Jasonoff and Sang-Hyun Kim, eds., *Dreamscapes of Modernity: Sociotechnical Imaginaries and the Fabrication of Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). See also "The Sociotechnical Imaginaries Project," Harvard University, Program on Science, Technology and Society, accessed 22 November 2022, <https://sts.hks.harvard.edu/research/platforms/imaginaries/>.

² Among the many commentaries on the subject are the following in English: Jiahua Pan, "The Development Paradigm of Ecological Civilization," in Jiahua Pan, ed. *China's Environmental Governing and Ecological Civilization* (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 2016), 29-49; Martin Schönfeld and Xia Chen, "Daoism and the Project of an Ecological Civilization," *Religions* 10, no. 11 (November 2019): e630, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10110630>; and Mette Halskov Hansen, Hongtao Li, and Rune Svarverud,

"Ecological Civilization: Interpreting the Chinese Past, Projecting the Global Future," *Global Environmental Change* 53 (November 2018): 195–203, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2018.09.014>.

³ Rachel Carson may not have read those European philosophers, but she dedicated her most famous book to one of their fellow travelers, Dr. Albert Schweitzer, quoting his words, "Man has lost the capacity to foresee and to forestall. He will end by destroying the earth." See Carson, frontispiece of *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962). Similarly, the American founder of environmental ethics, Aldo Leopold, must be counted among the counterculturalists because of his influential essay "The Land Ethic," in *Sand County Almanac* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949), 201–226.

⁴ From Fetscher, the ecological civilization imaginary traveled first to Russia and China through "green socialist" channels. All along, however, the imaginary was framed in distinctly Western terms. Fetscher was steeped in German philosophy and politics. Other prominent advocates include American theologian John Cobb and Australian philosopher Arran Gare, who published *The Philosophical Foundations of Ecological Civilization* in 2017. Both define ecological civilization in strongly Western terms—Cobb as part of the legacy of Alfred North Whitehead, and Gare looking to Friedrich Schelling and postmodernist critics of science.

⁵ Xi Jinping, "Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era," delivered at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, 18 October 2017, http://subsites.chinadaily.com.cn/npc/2021-12/24/c_693899.htm. See also Eileen Crist, *Abundant Earth: Toward an Ecological Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

⁶ Iring Fetscher, *Überlebensbedingungen der Menschheit*, 3rd ed. (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1991), 7. This book is a synthesis of Marx, Engels, Ernst Bloch, the Frankfurt School, along with contemporary writers on ecology. See also Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counterculture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Useful Opposition* (New York: Doubleday, 1969).

⁷ Robert Heilbroner, *An Inquiry into the Human Prospect: Looked at Again for the 1990s* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), 30, 132–133. The very popular first edition was published in 1974 and updated twice.

⁸ Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 26, 282–284.

⁹ Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 4. See also Theresa Morris, *Hans Jonas's Ethic of Responsibility: From Ontology to Ecology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013).

¹⁰ Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, 7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 8, 138.

¹² Wang Lihua, "中国环境史研究为构建生态文明体系提供资鉴, 作者" [Chinese Environmental History Research Provides Lessons for the Construction of Ecological Civilization], 中国社会科学网-中国社会科学报 [Chinese Social Science Today], http://ex.cssn.cn/zx/bwyc/201908/t20190813_4956425.shtml.

¹³ For a good recent translation see *Zhuangzi: Basic Writings*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).



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