
REFLECTIONS ON THE GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS FROM CONFUCIAN AND ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

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The global environmental crisis is one of the symptoms of modernity. The whole modern civilization is anti-ecological, and the global ecological crisis is caused by the global expanding of modern civilization. From an ecological point of view, we can definitely judge that modern civilization with 'mass production, mass consumption, and mass wastes' is unsustainable. Since ancient Chinese civilization remained agricultural civilization, a kind of eco-civilization, it was sustainable for a long time. Confucianism made a special contribution to ancient Chinese civilization. We cannot, of course, go back to ancient eco-civilization, but we can learn a lot from our ancestors when we try to construct a new eco-civilization in the future. We can benefit from valuable suggestions from Confucianism while correcting the mistakes of modernity. A new eco-civilization will also need to inherit good elements from modern Western civilization.

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The global environmental crisis or ecological crisis is one of the symptoms of modernity. In other words, it is the crisis caused by modern Western civilization. Modernity and modern Western civilization cannot be separated from the whole Western cultural tradition and its civilization.

I take *culture* and *civilization* as roughly synonymous. I would like to use John C. Mowen and Michael S. Minor's definition of culture. They said, '...culture is a way of life. It includes the material objects of a society, such as guns, footballs, autos, religious texts, forks, and chopsticks. It is also composed of ideas and values; for example, most Americans endorse the belief that people have a right to choose between different brands of products. Culture consists of a mix of institutions that include legal, political, religious, and even business organizations' (Mowen and Minor 2001: 264). While agreeing with these two authors, I think a culture or a civilization basically has three dimensions: (1) material objects, (2) institutions, (3) ideas and values.

To use the method of analysis of culture (or cultural analysis), we might clearly know why modern Western civilization has caused the global ecological crisis. We can describe modern Western civilization as the following:

Modern Western Civilization	Material objects	Industrial products produced by machine using mineral fuel
	Institutions	Capitalism and democracy
	Ideas and values	Physicalism, scientism, liberalism, utilitarianism or economism, materialism

From the dimension of material objects, we can find the direct cause of the global ecological crisis. Since more and more mineral fuel (*i.e.*, coal, oil, gas, *etc.*) are used in the

production and consumption all over the world, the environment is getting polluted, the biosphere of the earth – damaged, and the earth is becoming increasingly warmer. And only with the rapid development of modern industry, ‘mass production and mass consumption’ is possible. With ‘mass production and mass consumption’, human beings have not only polluted the natural environment but also have occupied more and more habitat of the wilds. Comparing to traditional agricultural products, which are mainly gained by photosynthesis of plants with the help of the human being and domestic animals, almost all modern industrial products are anti-ecological. Cars are typical modern industrial products, and both its production and consumption are processes of pollution. It is impossible to avoid environmental pollution and ecological damage with ‘mass production and mass consumption’ excessively using mineral fuel.

Now let us analyze the second dimension of modern Western civilization: institutions. We can consider them as the institutions of capitalism and democracy. Reviewing the past historically, we can generally state that all social institutions in traditional societies refrain the greed of peoples, and especially the greed of the ruled and the majority, though those belonging to the ruling class are usually greedy. But the institutions of capitalism encourage unprecedentedly all people (both the ruled and the ruling) to be legally greedy. Many economists try to show that the institution of capitalism is a kind of neutral framework of society, but it is not. It presupposes such a belief: the better the greedier, if you always make money or material wealth legally. The institution of capitalism is the institutional condition of ‘mass production and mass consumption’. Since the end of the Cold War, the institution of capitalism has been copied globally. And producing and living under the form of ‘mass production, mass consumption, and mass wastes’ are imitated globally. The global ‘mass production, mass consumption, and mass wastes’ are polluting the earth at much greater speed and scope, and pushing the human being deeper and deeper into the global ecological crisis. Then we can assert that the institution of capitalism is also the cause of the global ecological crisis.¹

Democracy is not a bad institution, but so far it also supports ‘mass production, mass consumption and mass wastes’. Whether we can make democracy not to support ‘mass production, mass consumption and mass wastes’ any more is, perhaps, a very important question for the future political philosophy.

Lastly, let us examine the dimension of ideas and values of modern Western civilization. We can summarize them as modernity. One often links the rise of modernity to Enlightenment in Europe in the eighteenth century, and it may also be traced further back to Renaissance in the fourteenth century. But from a point of non-western view, we can find that modernity is rooted deeply in the whole Western cultural and thinking tradition, including ancient Hellenic culture and Christian culture in the Middle Ages.

We cannot take modernity as a logically consistent system, but it is an ideology strongly supporting ‘mass production, mass consumption, and mass wastes’ and the institution of capitalism. And it is widely accepted as truth by people across the globe, including modern Chinese people.

According to modern sciences, especially Physics, the whole world consists of physical entities, such as atoms, electrons, protons, neutron, or basic particles in general, and fields, and the human being is ultimately an aggregation of genes which are made of basic particles.

Scientism asserts that all knowledge should be integrated in a unified system of science, which takes modern physics as the firm foundation, and there is an internal logic or mathe-

mathematical structure within the unified science. With the progress of science according to its internal logic, human knowledge will further exhaust all the secrets in the world or get closer to the last secrets of the Creation by God. To use Steven Weinberg's words, Physics will establish a final theory about the final laws of nature. When we know the final laws of nature, we will grasp the rules to dominate the stars, stones and everything in the world (Weinberg 2003: 194).

Physicalism and scientism presuppose that there is nothing mystic in any sense in the nature, the human being can conquer nature more easily using the system of machines with the progress of science and technology. Today, people believing in physicalism and scientism tell us that the human being can only make progress and overcome all sorts of difficulties with the spirit of Prometheus. All difficulties or crises are temporary. There is no need to worry about the pollution, ecological damage, shortage of resources, extinction of species, and the global warming; we can solve all these problems by the innovation of science and technology. Never try to stop 'mass production, mass consumption, and mass wastes', or human civilization will lose its deepest motive of development. Some of them think that digital technology will bring us a much better man-made world, in which all wilds will be erased (Slouka 1999: 95).

Liberalism is an ideology directly supporting the institution of capitalism. It claims that liberty of individuals is the most important social condition for progress of knowledge, wisdom, and morality, or progress of civilization in general. Let people be engaged in free competitions, the society will be prosperous and peaceful naturally. Everybody is selfish and does his best to gain the maximum of his benefits or profits, but the system of markets will change individuals' immoral actions to good for the whole society. Liberals try to prove that a way of living motivated by greed is much better than any ways of moderate living, including that of Christianity (Doti and Lee 2000: 12). They assert that the way of 'mass production, mass consumption, and mass wastes' is the one conforming to human nature perfectly. They think that all human beings should cooperate peacefully to conquer nature in order to improve the conditions of human life, and only in this way the wars among peoples can be avoided. That means human beings should conquer nature rather than each other; and if their power of conquering must be abreacted, nature is the proper object for this. Liberalism prominently emphasizes rights of individuals, but pays less attention to duties of individuals.

Utilitarianism and economism presuppose that human preferences or values can be measured uniformly, and all values can be weighed by money or reduced to money. Many contemporary economists think that we can protect environment well only when we realize that environmental issue is an economical one. Make a price for pollution, we will control pollution effectively. That is the prescription to cure the symptom of global ecological crisis given by economists. They do not think any species, even the whole biosphere, have an infinite marginal cost (*Ibid.*: 175). They usually believe that money can push scientists and engineers to solve all problems, including environmental and ecological ones.

Materialism confirmed by physicalism, scientism and economism is an understanding about meanings or values of human life. It claims that the ultimate meaning of human life is to possess more and more money and material wealth, or to improve the material conditions of human life. It is also presented as consumerism today. It is absurd and vulgar. But it has the strongest influence on today's world. That is a unique paradox of modern civilization. Someone may argue against me, saying that so many people are

religious and all religions seem to be anti-materialistic. But I would like to say that almost all religions have been eroded by money with the aggression of capital. For many people, religions are only the tools to get some psychological comfort after the long hard working or fierce competition.

When the majority in a society believes in materialism to a variable degree, the institutions certainly do encourage the way of ‘mass production, mass consumption, and mass wastes’.

Generally speaking, the whole modern civilization is anti-ecological, and the global ecological crisis is a result of the global expansion of modern civilization. Today the advanced countries like the USA have protected their environments well, but they have just transferred the pollution to developing countries including China. From a point of view of ecology, we can definitely judge that modern civilization with ‘mass production, mass consumption, and mass wastes’ is unsustainable.

By comparing to ancient Chinese civilization, we can know more clearly why modern civilization is unsustainable. For many liberals including today's Chinese liberals, ancient China is backward and unenlightened, and Chinese of ancient times, including those called sages, are all stupid. But from the ecological point of view, we can find that ancient Chinese civilization is quite sustainable, it did exist for over 5000 years, and it had the population of nearly 400 million with splendid culture of its last dynasty. Why is it so sustainable? Comparing to modern civilization, you can easily find that every dimension of ancient Chinese civilization is much more in favor of protecting natural environment and ecological systems.

Scholars embracing modernity will certainly mock me, saying that people cannot live happily with mainly agricultural products, only living in the way of ‘mass production, mass consumption, and mass wastes’ they can be happy. People driving cars are much happier than those who have to walk. But I will never agree with them. Here I just want to point out that agricultural technology contributing to the photosynthesis of plants without using machines, chemical fertilizer and pesticide is quite a kind of ecological and humanistic technologies. And products produced by this kind of technologies are the very goods which nature allows the human being to consume. Since ancient Chinese civilization remained agricultural civilization, it was sustainable for a long time.

Ancient Chinese Civilization	Material objects	Mainly local agricultural products produced by plants through photosynthesis with the help of human and critters, and no chemical fertilizer and pesticide are used
	Institutions	The hierarchy with emperor in the top, but the leading class mainly consisting of the scholars, and the fundamental principle of promoting agriculture and restraining commercial business is consistently the guidance for the construction and reformation of social institutions
	Ideas and values	Mainly Confucianism, with Taoism and Buddhism as complement

The reason why it could remain agricultural for a long time is that its institutions consistently encouraged agriculture and restrained commerce. The rulers of all dynasties considered agriculture as the foundation and the most important issue of politics and economy, and took commerce as secondary. This kind of social institution never encourages peoples' greed.

According to Confucianism, man is always in nature. Nature is absolutely not the aggregate of physical entities, because nature is living, and there are a lot of things to be born and to die for every second in nature (天地之大德曰生). The most important knowledge is the knowledge about what the meaning of human life is, how to do the right things and how to play a good role in one's familial and social position. Science in modern sense is never the most important affair within the framework of ancient Chinese civilization. Elites of intellectuals in ancient China never thought that human knowledge could discover all the secrets of nature, and that human being could conquer nature. Individual's freedom can only be embodied as one's self-consciousness of the right way of living and autonomous obeying to it. The right way of living (道) is indicated by the unification of both the natural laws (天道) and the moral laws (人道). Confucians never think that human beings could become more and more autonomous or freer and freer with endless expanding power to conquer nature. Though Confucians have no clear ideas about diversity of values and pluralism, they never think that human values can be measured quantitatively, and definitely refused to measure all values by money. The ultimate concern of a Confucian is to become a sage by tireless studies and practice to cultivate his virtues and increase his spiritual state, or his state of mind. A sage always learns from Nature, a gentleman always learns from sages, and an intellectual always learns from gentlemen (圣希天, 贤希圣, 士希贤). With such ideas to guide the construction and reformation of social institutions, materialism can hardly become the most popular understanding of meaning for human life.

From the perspective of ecology, ancient Chinese civilization is progressive while the modern civilization is backward, because the latter is anti-ecological and not sustainable.

But since the failure in the Sino-British Opium Wars (1840–1842 and 1856–1860), Chinese in general, and Chinese intellectuals in particular, gradually lost their faith in their own civilization and tradition. The most distinguished intellectuals such as Chen Duxiu, Hu Shi, Lu Xun, *etc.* supposed that China had to learn thoroughly from the West, and had to change every dimension of the old civilization in order to survive. Since then modernity has gradually become the most popular ideology in China.

CPC accepts the basic goals of modernity though its guiding principle is Marxism, not Liberalism, and Marxism is an alternative of modernity. Modernization is the basic ideal to change China and CPC accepts this ideal without any doubt and hesitation.

Since 1978 modernization and in some degree westernization have been rapidly developed with the market economy growth. Today, there are increasing number of cars, trains, airplanes, and factories in China. In cities, there are TV sets, refrigerators, washing machines, air-conditioners, *etc.* in almost every family. Cities are getting larger and more new cities and towns have appeared. But the environment is polluted very heavily and the

health of eco-systems is getting worse. It is called development, and it is the development of westernization. But this kind of development is definitely unsustainable.

Fortunately, some people in China have realized that we cannot develop like this anymore, and since 2007 the leaders of CPC began to call on people to construct eco-civilization. Now more and more intellectuals realize that ancient Chinese civilization is not as bad as Chen Duxiu, Hu Shi and Lu Xun judged in the beginning of the twentieth century. Actually, ancient Chinese civilization is a kind of eco-civilization. We cannot, of course, go back to ancient eco-civilization, but we can learn a lot from our ancestors when we will try to construct a new eco-civilization in the future. A new eco-civilization will also inherit good elements from modern western civilization.

With new sciences such as ecology, new physics and recent philosophical studies, we can criticize both modernity and ancient Confucianism and try to make some ideas clear which can guide the construction of eco-civilization.

Physicalism as a view of nature is absolutely wrong, though it can be helpful for some scientists to get certain achievements in certain direction of research. Nature is not the aggregate of physical entities, as Ilya Prigogine says, 'Nature is indeed related to the creation of unpredictable novelty, where the possible is richer than the real' (Prigogine 1997: 72). I think that the view of nature in Confucianism is more correct than in physicalism. But the Confucian view of nature has its own flaws. For instance, there is no conception of nature in Prigogine's sense in thinking of Confucianism. Confucians use three categories to include all things in the world, and they are *Tian* (天), *Di* (地), and *Man* (人). In some context, the meaning of *Tian* is quite close to that of Nature as the ultimate reality. But in some context, Confucians exaggerate human agency, and debase *Tian's* transcendence. Confucianism can learn from new sciences and its view of Nature should be expressed as transcendental naturalism.

Scientism is absolutely wrong when it claims that science will get closer and closer to discover all the secrets in nature, and science is a consistent system with its internal logic. We should better listen to Prigogine to know what sciences are. Prigogine says, 'I have always considered science to be a dialogue with nature. As in a real dialogue, the answers are often unexpected and sometimes astonishing' (*Ibid.*: 57). If Nature is indeed related to the creation of unpredictable novelty and sciences are dialogues between human and Nature, then, whatever progress science makes, Nature always hides unlimited secrets from human beings. Therefore, we must revere Nature.

Liberalism makes sense in political philosophy and it can help to correct some mistakes of Confucianism. But the freedom and human rights defined by liberals should be re-surveyed. Liberals think that the limit of an individual's freedom is just the other individuals' freedom, and human being can unlimitedly expand its freedom by changing natural environments or conquering nature. It is the very idea that leads human beings to live in the way of 'mass production, mass consumption and mass wastes'. With the strong influence of liberalism in today's world, people think that the uppermost goal of ethic and politics is to expand freedom of both individuals and mankind (as a species). But I think we should keep Aldo Leopold's words in mind, 'An ethic, ecologically, is a limitation on freedom of action in the struggle for existence' (Leopold 1987: 202). I think Confucians have a more reasonable understanding of human freedom than liberals do. Human beings

have no right to covet gods' power, and cannot have more and more freedom in Nature. And I think Confucianism is right when it asserts that human freedom can only be embodied as the self-consciousness of the right way of living (道) and the autonomous following to the right way of living.

Utilitarianism as an approach to ethics has its special contribution to modernity. Its fatal mistake is its monism of values, presupposing that there is only the one intrinsic good and all other values can be reduced to the one. Classical utilitarianism claims that pleasure or happiness is the sole intrinsic good and contemporary utilitarianism presupposes that utility is a proper conception to denote the common value to which the all concrete goods can be reduced. This approach strongly supports economism. And economism affirms that all human actions are economic actions at the end, all choices of human actions can be exactly made by calculation of economics, and fatally, all values can be reduced to and measured by money. Therefore, utilitarianism and economism directly support materialism. From any transcendental philosophy and religion, we can easily find that materialism is a wrong and vulgar understanding of human life. But it affects almost everybody in today's world and it is justified by utilitarianism, economism and contemporary economics, which are believed as science. I think Confucian virtue ethics shows us a much better understanding about the good. Confucians never affirm anything as absolutely good and never think that there is anything which people get the more the better. According to Confucianism, suitability of action (中) is one of the main virtues of human beings. A gentleman should always do his job properly, not too much, and not too little. According to Confucianism, it is not the case that it is a larger economical growth, the better for people, people just need moderate material wealth to live peacefully and happily. In this point, Confucianism is quite consistent with ecology. Ecology proclaims that human economical systems are subsystems of ecosystems, and human economical actions should be limited within the bound of carrying capacity of ecosystem.

I think eco-civilization is the only choice for human kind in the future. The future eco-civilization might be as follows.

It is impossible to unify the faiths of all people, because nobody can prove that there is only one system of truth and any beliefs conflicting with it are false. But we can prove that physicalism, scientism, and materialism are ridiculous. Only when rejecting physicalism, scientism and materialism, people can realize that modern industrial civilization with the living way of 'mass production, mass consumption and mass wastes' is unsustainable, and eco-civilization is the only way for the human kind to go in the future. I think that Christians, Buddhists, Confucians and people of other beliefs who have rejected physicalism, scientism and materialism can all agree to choose eco-civilization.

NOTE

¹ It does not mean that I believe in socialism. I think there are many alternatives between capitalism and socialism.

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