

Ecological Civilization¹

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Abstract: This article argues that what humans have historically called “civilization” has been deeply anti-ecological, marked by exploitation and alienation from nature. “Ecological civilization” therefore requires not minor reform but a radical rethinking of civilization itself. Although history offers no fully ecological civilization, Chinese traditions and Whiteheadian constructive postmodernism provide important resources for reimagining civilization in ecological terms.

Keywords: *Ecological civilization; constructive postmodernism; China; alienation from nature; Whitehead*

Some people regard “ecological civilization” as an “oxymoron.” An oxymoron is a combination of terms that contradict each other. “Ecological civilization” is an oxymoron if civilization is inherently non-ecological. I am not quite ready to say that, but those who do think this to be true have most of history on their side.

I usually try to speak in encouraging ways of the possibility of achieving a sustainable civilization by changing the way we farm, our forestry practices, the way we construct habitat, the way we organize our economy, and the way we transport goods and people. I am deeply appreciative of the openness of the Chinese to consider postmodern alternatives to modern, unsustainable practices.

¹ Editor’s Note: This essay by the late Dr. Cobb appears to have been previously unpublished in English. The manuscript was found in the Center for Process Studies archives. A version of this essay was translated into Chinese by Li Yitian and published in *Marxism and Reality (Bimonthly)*, Issue 6, 2007. We are grateful to include Dr. Cobb’s voice in the first installment of this Journal of Ecological Civilization Studies. While some of the remarks are dated—references to the world as it was 20 years ago—the core of his argument about the nature of ecological civilization remains insightful.

But we all know that there is enormous resistance to making the changes needed for a sustainable society. This resistance comes, of course, strongly from those who have a vested interest, economic and political, in destructive modern practices. But it also comes from ordinary people who, in fact, do not benefit from the present patterns and are the first to suffer from their negative social and ecological impact. Even when the need for dramatic change is rationally acknowledged, often the resistance remains. Even though they may know that riding bicycles is far better for their health and for the environment than driving a car, they have internalized a "civilized" value system that makes them want to join the car drivers. One approach to understanding this is through reflection on the character of the civilization that almost all of us prize.

One meaning of "civilization" is identical with "culture." When used in this sense, to be civilized is to be human. Every human group has a culture that shapes its shared life. One can even find such cultures among other social animals. We call it "culture" when behavior patterns are not simply instinctive but are, instead, transmitted from generation to generation by teaching.

Nevertheless, the term "civilization" favors some cultures over others. Hunting and gathering people are normally not considered "civilized." Indeed, the usual meaning of "civilization" is bound up with the rise of cities. Where we find cities we almost necessarily speak of civilizations. For practical purposes, by civilization we mean the culture of cities.

The term "civilization" focuses attention on the "high" cultural attainments of cities. Even in ancient cities we expect to find some system of written language. The great architectural achievements—without which cities are not possible—impress us. There is specialization of labor, and there are great advances in technology. There are also complex structures of authority. Clearly the life in ancient cities is more like contemporary life than was that of hunting and gathering societies or even gardening ones.

We usually do not put equal weight on the negative aspects of the change. The complex structures of authority we admire subordinated and exploited the majority of people in ancient cities. Usually a large part of the population was made up of exploited workers, many of whom were slaves. It is they who built pyramids, temples, and palaces. The "great" civilizations were usually empires, brought into being by military conquest and systematic exploitation of others. Typically, in advanced civilizations, as military action became more and more important, males took control of public life, and women became their property. In short, if we judge by the quality of life of the majority of people, the great civilizations were inferior to the earlier hunting and gathering societies.

We should not rush to the judgment that in the modern world all this has changed, and that civilization has become benign. It is true that slavery has been abolished, and this is a great gain. And it is true that women have recently gained a greatly improved public status. And that is also a great gain. These changes are partly due to the industrial revolution, which has brought about the greatest differences between ancient civilizations and modern ones.

But Marx is witness, if we need one, to the terrible social consequences of the industrial revolution. Before the industrial revolution many people earned their livings by engaging in personally satisfying, creative work. The industrial revolution replaced that with the boredom and dehumanization of the assembly line. Before the industrial revolution most people lived in the countryside on individual farms or in small villages. Today there has been a massive movement to urban slums.

I am descended from a slave-holding family in the American south. The owners of these slaves argued against their northern critics that their slaves were better off than the factory workers in northern cities. I do not make this argument, but it had some truth. The owner of a slave had a financial interest in the slave's health. This set some limit to the slave's exploitation. The owner of a factory had no investment in his workers. If they sickened and died, there were others ready to take their places. Gradually, and partly thanks to Marx, industrial workers improved their lot in highly industrialized countries. But as the economy becomes global, once again capital can exploit workers in developing countries with little concern for their well being. There are always more. It is safe to say that the majority of city dwellers today have less satisfying lives than did their pre-civilized ancestors. Our deep-seated assumptions about the virtues of civilization are, at a minimum, exaggerated.

The social history of the human race is important to understand. However, our concern here is with the relation of human beings to the natural world. A fully ecological relation is one in which human beings function as a part of a larger natural ecosystem, in other words, like other species. Such a natural ecosystem tends to become richer over time. The soil becomes deeper; the plants become more varied and better able to survive temporary changes in weather; and animal life becomes more abundant. Taking the planet as a whole, until ten thousand years ago, this trend was dominant, despite many local ups and downs due especially to changes of climate sometimes resulting in desertification or prolonged ice ages. There were also huge setbacks from cataclysmic events such as huge meteors striking the earth, earthquakes and tidal waves of enormous size, and huge volcanic eruptions.

Even hunting and gathering peoples sometimes played quite negative ecological roles. It seems that they wiped out many species of larger mammals in North America, for example. They probably played a role in the extinction of the mammoth globally. They set fires that changed the nature of eco-systems, often for the worse. Nevertheless, on the whole, they felt themselves to be one species among others as children of Mother Earth. They competed with other species and took pride in their victories. But basically they adapted to the natural contexts in which they found themselves, considering themselves to be part of a larger whole, and many of them avoided exploiting that context in a way that would destroy its ability to sustain human life indefinitely.

The expansion of hunting and gathering into gardening or small scale agriculture was the beginning of a fateful process. Everywhere in the world it has led to some degree of degradation of nature. It involved domestication of plants and was accompanied by domestication of animals. This involved management of nature rather than adaptation to it. But in itself it did not change the picture dramatically. When Europeans arrived on the East Coast of the United States, they came to a land that had supported a fairly large population for thousands of years. To Europeans it appeared uncivilized, since there were no cities. Instead there were vast forests, clear lakes and rivers, and abundant wild life. In short, they found a healthy ecosystem, largely undamaged by its human inhabitants. The indigenous people understood themselves as part of the natural world and they lived ecologically within it.

Just for this reason, to the civilized Europeans of early modernity, the indigenous people appeared to be "savages" with no real claim to the land and hardly any to life itself. Accordingly, they became victims of near genocidal practices on the part of the civilized. The magnificent ecosystems that had supported their cultures were understood as "wilderness" to be "tamed" until they became "natural resources" for "economic development." This meant that the forests disappeared; the rivers became muddy; and the soil eroded.

The ancestors of these civilized, and therefore non-ecological, Europeans had once been much like the natives of what is now the Eastern United States. Let me trace very briefly the stages through which our ancestors changed from an ecological vision and lifestyle similar to that of the natives of the eastern part of what is now the United States to what we have become. I am indebted to Anand Veeraraj who wrote a dissertation studying this process. He focused on Mesopotamia and the stages of agriculture and city life there. The population of Mesopotamia and other river valleys grew as global weather changes turned previously habitable land in North Africa and the Middle East into desert.

Population density soon wiped out most animal species in the region as well as the remaining forests. Irrigation was essential to the intensive fanning that was now required for survival. Nevertheless, initially the soil was rich, the land was sufficient, and nature was viewed as the generous provider of human needs. Cities emerged, but they were not walled. The leaders of society were priests and priestesses who arranged for storing and distributing the crops. Most people were farmers, and farming was a respected occupation. Society was relatively egalitarian.

Population grew, and available land became scarcer and less fertile. Salinization became a problem. The irrigation systems became more difficult to maintain. The task was now to wrest a living from an unfriendly nature. Often there were shortages. To get more land or more labor, one city would attack another. To defend themselves, cities built walls. Warfare became important. Military leaders took power from the priests and priestesses. Much of the agricultural work was done by slaves.

A further stage of alienation from nature came with the rise of empires. Military leaders of the great cities were no longer satisfied to conquer a few neighboring cities. The resources of these cities were insufficient to meet the empire's needs. It became necessary to extract resources from distant regions that had not been so thoroughly exploited. These were easy to conquer, but hard to control once the victorious army returned home. One method of reducing resistance was to bring the leaders of the conquered people back to the imperial center. They identified with their native landscape but not with the strange world into which they were exiled. If they had any contact with the land, it was digging ditches or cleaning up the irrigation system. This relation to nature was alienating. Most of them accepted the gods of the locale to which they were moved, but their attitude toward these gods was likely to be different from that of the indigenous people.

Of particular importance for the history of much of the world was the experience of the Hebrews. Not only Jews but also Christians and Muslims trace their origins to the history of the Hebrews or Israel. For Israel, as for many minor peoples of the Middle East, one major experience was the exile of its leaders.

As with other peoples, Israel's experience of exile was an existential break with their beloved natural environment. Yet its response was unusual. For most people, the gods to worship were the gods of the location where they found themselves. Israel made an opposite move. They determined that the God of Israel is not bound to any location. They could worship the God of the temple in Jerusalem also in Babylon. This view of God as transcending every natural location has enabled Judaism to survive not only the ancient

exile but subsequently the nearly two millennia of diaspora. At the same time, it has accentuated the separation of human beings from nature.

For some who belong to the Hebraic family of religious traditions, the true home of believers is another world altogether. We are wanderers and pilgrims in this one. Jews continued to long for a return to the land God had promised them, but on the whole, Christians and Muslims, by accenting the universality of God, have cut this tie to any particular location. All three traditions over many centuries have been primarily urban in character. Jews in the diaspora rarely became farmers. Christianity and Islam have been imposed on the rural population more than they have derived from them.

My formulation could easily lead to blaming the ecological failures of the West on Christianity. It deserves its share of blame. However, as a Christian, I want to point out that in the Bible, there are many resources for countering the alienation of human beings from their natural environment. Jesus himself expressed a very different feeling for nature. Christians have made progress in recent decades in repentance for their anti-ecological attitudes and practices. This has largely been through more accurate reading of our biblical sources. But this recent gain has had little effect on Western civilization.

The alienation from nature has been driven still further, and is now maintained more strongly, by secular thinkers. Descartes successfully encouraged the replacement of traditional Christian thinking of nature in organic terms with the new view of nature as a mechanism. For economists the value of any part of nature is just what price it brings in the market place. Immanuel Kant went still further in the alienation from nature. He denied that we have any basis for affirming that nature has any reality at all in its own right. Today many philosophers encourage us to focus attention on our language rather than on any external world. It is hard to see how alienation from the natural world could be more complete.

Those who are fully alienated from nature do not want to think about it. This is one reason that so many Americans have refused to recognize the fact that our lifestyle is radically unsustainable. Even today, few are willing, or perhaps able, to think about our crisis in an inclusive way.

We have made a little progress. Even our reluctant president now acknowledges that the phenomenon of global warming is real and that human activity contributes to it.² Of course, his policies still contribute to making matters worse, but some developments at the political level are now encouraging.

² Editor's Note: Dr. Cobb wrote this essay in 2007, when George W. Bush was President of the United States.

Yet none of them express an ecological vision or spirit. The fact of global warming is viewed as a challenge to find new ways to manage both nature and the human economy. Almost exclusively we seek technological solutions. We can be grateful to Albert Gore for helping to awaken the American public to the seriousness of the problem of global warming. But he gave the impression that the needed response is technological. Very likely that is his belief.

I fully support every possible gain that new technologies make possible. They will buy us a little time. But ad hoc responses to the many problems we face: desertification, loss of forest cover, the disappearance of glaciers, the pollution of water and its growing scarcity, the loss of topsoil, the salinization of once fertile soils, the destruction of fish stocks, uncontrolled genetic changes, air pollution, new diseases, decline of species of plants and animals, the exhaustion of resources, and on and on, are not sufficient. They only slow the movement to global catastrophe. We need something more than new technologies, which sometimes create more problems than they solve. We also need a change in the way we view the world and in our deepest sensibility.

Veeraraj notes that although Egypt became densely populated and urbanized for reasons similar to those in Mesopotamia, it never became alienated from nature in the way that happened there and in Israel. He attributes this to the regular annual flooding by the Nile of the agricultural land surrounding it. Nature thus renewed the fertility of the soil. However, the religious life of the West, and its intellectual history, has been far more influenced by Mesopotamia and Israel than by Egypt.

Chinese civilization arose without the harsh circumstances that alienated Mesopotamians and Hebrews from the natural world. Hence, China's move from ecological living to civilization was less wholehearted than that in the West. The Taoists prized an untamed nature and celebrated a life that conformed itself to this nature. Their influence on Chinese art leads to depicting human beings as part of the landscape rather than focusing upon them with the landscape as background.

However, Taoists may have shared the view that "ecological civilization" is an oxymoron. The sage leaves the city and goes into the wilderness. A similar pattern can be found in Buddhism. It is true that the enlightened one returns to the city. But the limitation has been that the work of the sage or the enlightened one in the city tends to be highly personal, focusing on bringing enlightenment to others as individuals. It has little to do with the development of science or of the economic, social, and political life of the city.

Accordingly, I do not believe that Chinese civilization as a whole was truly ecological before Western influence. But I do believe that it contained an ecological dimension

present in the West only in the form of occasional protest. Accordingly, there is much in ancient Chinese wisdom that can help us, and the possibility of an ecological civilization in China is greater than in the West, whose alienation from nature is the most complete of any culture in history.

Sadly, China's massive imitation of the modern, industrialized West is in danger of destroying this possibility. Just that which is of greatest value in the Chinese tradition has led Chinese, eager to "catch up" with Western technology and industry, to reject it. This is the ecological vision that has been so largely crushed in the West.³

The problem, I think, is that the ecological vision in China was not developed into a way of thinking that led to a full development of the science and science-based technology to which Western alienation contributed. Technological advances have long been the basis of military superiority. Chinese leaders, disturbed by the relative weakness of China in military terms, have looked to the alienated West as a model for the future development of China. Here they find much that is successful for short-term development. But the imitation of the West has drawn China into unsustainable forms of development that can only hasten the global cataclysm.

It is at this point that I hope a Whiteheadian form of constructive postmodernism can help. There is much in Whitehead that connects to the more ecological dimensions of traditional Chinese culture. Perhaps most important; he found that the ecological insights of ancient China can be more fruitful for contemporary science than the heavy hand of Western mechanistic thinking. He demonstrates this in some detail. We need not choose between scientific thinking at the frontier and ecological thinking. A small, but growing group of scientists in the United States, especially those who work in quantum theory, are realizing this.

Meanwhile some of Whitehead's followers are sharing with other postmodern thinkers in envisioning additional dimensions of an ecological civilization. I am not claiming that constructive postmodernists have dealt adequately with the many social, educational, economic and political matters that would be involved in a shift to an ecological civilization. But I think that here and there we have made breakthroughs that give support to the claim that ecological civilization is possible.

For the long term solutions to our problems, the way we educate children is crucial. Young children show an interest in the nonhuman world, and perhaps especially in what is

³ Editor's Note: Again, this essay by Dr. Cobb was written roughly 20 years ago. Much has changed in China over the past two decades, and in his last few years of life, Dr. Cobb regularly celebrated China's ecological efforts.

wild. In our society we educate children to think these interests are sentimental. Indeed, in cities, even interest in plants and their growth is not encouraged. Or, if living things are studied, the emphasis is on technical analysis and control, not the wonder of life itself. The changes we need are fundamental. Only a society of people who understand themselves as part of the nature that human beings have so long abused will end this abuse.

I am making just two points. First, the deep attraction and commitment to civilization has functioned over millennia to alienate people from the natural world. To recover an ecological existence requires fundamental change rather than, or at least in addition to, technological responses to successive problems.

Second, although we have actually no good examples of ecological civilization in the past, we do have hints and promising developments that justify the quest. I believe that China is uniquely positioned to pursue this quest. I hope that Whiteheadian postmodernism can help.

John B. Cobb, Jr. (1925–2024) was a pioneering process theologian, philosopher, and ecological thinker whose work helped shape the global movement for ecological civilization. A leading interpreter of Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy, Cobb devoted his life to connecting philosophy, theology, economics, education, and ecological responsibility. Through his scholarship, institutional leadership, and cross-cultural dialogue—especially between China and the West—he inspired generations of scholars and practitioners to rethink modern civilization and work toward a more relational, compassionate, and sustainable future.