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Book review

“Chinese model of (hyper) development, and its disastrous ecological consequences”

- Reviews section -

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Richard Smith, *China's Engine of Environmental Collapse*, London: Pluto Books, 2020, 320 pages.

This is an important book! It is the first Marxist attempt to describe, explain and critically analyse the Chinese model of (hyper) development, and its disastrous ecological consequences – for the Chinese people as well as for the whole planet.

Richard Smith is well known among ecosocialists for his remarkable book *Green Capitalism. The God that Failed* (2016), as well as for his articles in *Against the Current*, *New Left Review*, *Monthly Review* and *The Ecologist*. He is a founding member of System Change Not Climate Change, the broad ecosocialist wing of the Climate Justice movement. Finally, he has been for many years now doing extensive research on China. His new book is extremely well documented, each assertion being informed by reliable sources: there are some 60 pages of footnotes at the end.

China has become the second largest economy in the world, the largest manufacturer, the largest trader and the largest holder of foreign exchange reserves. But at what price ? This economic “miracle” is not just unsustainable, it is suicidal. It is based on the massive poisoning of the air, of the land, of rivers, lakes and aquifers. The air in Peking and other mega towns has become a toxic brew, while “cancer villages” multiply in the countryside, next to chemical factories.

Worst of all, this “blind growth” has made of China the greatest producer of CO₂ emissions in the planet. For instance : in spite of government promises to slow down coal, a massive cohort of hundreds of new coal-fired power plants -the “dirtiest” form of energy production – are in course of being added to the already overbuilt Chinese coal-plant fleet. Chinese gas emissions in 2018 were nearly as much as the next five large emitters – US, India, Russia, Japan and Germany – combined ! In other words : China has become the leading driver of global climate change. Of course, sooner or later China will suffer the consequences of global warming : with the rise of sea levels, its coastal towns risk being submerged by 2050. The cover of the book is an artist's view of Shanghai under water...

Richard Smith's Marxist explanation of the logic behind China's destructive “blind growth” is quite unique. He describes China's mode of production since Deng Xiaoping as a hybrid between capitalism and bureaucratic collectivism. An explanation of this last concept is missing...It was elaborated by Max Schachtmann and Hal Draper in the 1940's as an alternative theory on the social nature of the USSR, distinct from Trotsky's “bureaucratically degenerated Worker's State” (or Tony Cliff's “State capitalism”). Bureaucratic collectivism described a new class society, where the ruling bureaucracy collectively managed the State and the economy, according to political criteria distinct from the profit and market rules of capitalism. According to Smith, this is still the case of China.

Smith acknowledges that large sectors of the Chinese economy have been privatised, and the country's economy is deeply enmeshed with and dependent upon global capitalism. He does not ignore the power of mega private interests, and the massive corruption of Party officials. But he insists that the key component of the Chinese economy are the State-owned and the State-controlled enterprises : the bureaucratic-collectivist component of the hybrid Chinese system. Therefore he believes that the main driver of the Chinese “blind growth” is political, not purely economic : nationalism, the striving to win economic and military supremacy, the ruling elite's superpower ambitions.

Xi Jiping, the Chinese leader, has denounced “ meaningless development at the cost of the environment “, and has proclaimed the need for China to create an “ecological civilisation”. One need not doubt his sincerity, argues Richard

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Smith, but regardless of his intentions, he runs, with his 90 million-members Communist Party, a politico-economic system characterised by systemic growth drivers which are eco-suicidal. These drivers are not those of the market and profit accumulation, as in the Western capitalist societies, but they are not less environment-destructive.

This approach is quite innovative and stimulating. But is not Richard Smith under-estimating the role of private interests and the capitalist market in the Chinese drive for growth at any price ? I leave the question to be discussed by more economically informed readers than myself...

I'm afraid I must disagree with Smith's assumption that Trump's trade war with China can be understood as a legitimate reaction to the "Chinese government's perfidy". But I entirely agree with him that the replacement of the present "hybrid system" (and Party dictatorship) by "democratic capitalism" – an aspiration of many Chinese – is in no way a solution for China's environmental crisis.

The only way out, the only viable alternative, the only solution to avoid ecological suicide is to shutdown, phase out or at least dramatically downsize thousand of fossil-fuel based industries – not only in China but also in the US, the European Union, Canada, Japan, Australia, etc. In order to accomplish this, and at the same time create millions of low or no-carbon jobs, one needs to leave capitalism behind, and develop a rationally planned, democratically managed transition to ecosocialism. As Greta Thunberg explained, the time for half-measures is over. According to Smith the choice is between planned de-industrialisation or unplanned environmental collapse : we all need to live better by consuming less.

The book's last chapter has the promising title : "The Next Chinese Revolution". Strikes and protests have increased, not only in Hong Kong but also in the Chinese continent. In Spring 2018, university students led the formation of a student-worker coalition in support of independent unions; the initiative was soon joined by Marxist study groups and #MeToo activists. Will they succeed ? There is no way to predict, but without a social revolution, ecological collapse, in China and the whole world, will be inevitable.

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