

Green Capitalism and Social-Ecological Transformation: Prospects for China

**Lecture series organized by the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Beijing Office and partners**

By Prof Ulrich Brand, Prof Huan Qingzhi, Ms. Camila Moreno and Ms. Sun Wei

China is at crossroads. The country experienced years of strong economic growth and increasing well-being for hundreds of millions of people, an opening to the world with enormous political, economic and cultural implications. However, problems become more and more visible: the ecological impacts of the resource intensive economic model, social polarization and strong spatial divides, especially between different regions and between the urban and the rural.

The current government announced the ambitious aim to establish a “socialist eco-civilization”. This term caused intense public and scholarly debates; it already seems to start re-orienting at least partially the government’s and Party’s policies.

The Beijing Office of Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung (RLS) follows these developments closely and supports those actors which try to counterbalance the negative socio-economic and ecological effects of the current development. And it engages in the difficult, albeit necessary search for alternatives.

For some years now the RLS Beijing has been successfully co-organizing the “China EU Social-Ecological Legal Forum”<sup>1</sup>. It recently decided to focus more consistently in many of its projects in China on issues around “social-ecological transformation”.

This was the reason, why the RLS invited Professor Ulrich Brand, Chair of International Relations at the University of Vienna, in April 2015 to China to give a series of lectures under the title “Green capitalism and social-ecological transformation”. Brand teaches and does research on international environmental and resource politics, critical social and state theory, political ecology and social-ecological transformation. From 2011-2013 he was expert member of the Study Commission “Growth, Well-being and Quality of Life” of the German Parliament and he is a Permanent Fellow of the Institute for Social Analysis of Rosa Luxemburg Foundation Berlin.

This invitation was also supported by Professor Huan Qingzhi from Peking University, who has been an important partner of the RLS for some years. He works at the Research Institute of Marxism and the Peking Centre for Environmental Politics Research. Huan and Brand met for the first time in September 2013 at the “3<sup>rd</sup> China EU Social-Ecological Legal Forum”<sup>2</sup> in China’s Shanxi Province.

In close cooperation with the Andean Office of the RLS, Camila Moreno, PhD candidate for Sociology from the Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro was also invited to share her perspectives on recent developments and discussions in Latin America and to talk about the role of China in Latin America.

Beside their role as scholars, Moreno and Brand are also active in the Permanent Working Group on Alternatives to Development which is coordinated by the Andean office of the RLS in Quito (Ecuador). This group meets since 2011 on an annual basis, discusses issues around the resource extractivist

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.rosalux.de/news/40887/concepts-alternative-path-of-sustainable-development-in-china.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.rosalux.de/news/39920/grenzen-wachstumsgetriebener-entwicklungmodelle-internationale-tagung-der-rls-in-der-chinesischen.html>

development model in Latin America and has published a number of books, studies<sup>3</sup>, education materials and articles.

The seven talks and discussions took place in the first two weeks of April at Peking University and Renmin University in Beijing, at Zhongnan University of Economics & Law and Wuhan University in Wuhan and at Fudan University and Tongji University in Shanghai. There was an additional workshop with those partners of RLS in China which work on environmental issues.

At Peking University Brand's talks covered a broad range of the issues at stake and his arguments moved constantly between, on the one hand, the big picture of current developments in China, Europe and the world and, on the other hand, concrete analyses. He addressed several times recent debates on a Green Economy. Similar to the term sustainable development over twenty years ago, he argued, the proposals for a Green Economy are also an attempt to deal with the economic, financial and ecological crisis. However, those proposals won't work when the structural barriers like capitalist property and class relations, the growth imperative and the capitalist-imperial world market are not considered. The "imperial mode of living" is a concept invented by Brand and his colleague Markus Wissen which points at the fact the people reproduce their everyday lives – mainly unconsciously - through the consumption of many commodities produced by cheap labour and at the cost of nature.

What critical analyses and emancipatory politics should consider carefully is the possibility that capitalism is going to deal with some aspects of the ecological crisis – but in a highly selective manner and without questioning the imperatives of capitalism which are at the same time productive and destructive, inclusive and exclusive. Brand proposes the concept of a Green Capitalism to understand such an emerging constellation.

Camila Moreno insisted on her critique of green economy, green capitalism, its mechanisms, concepts like natural capital and payment for ecosystem services and main narrative, as formulated in Brazil and Latin America. This topic has been contested by many Latin American social movements since at least 2009, especially because it has served (due to its abundant natural resources, like the Amazon Rainforest) as a laboratory of the new "green" policies and measures, with large impacts felt over territories, indigenous peoples and livelihoods.

She added that understanding, demystifying and opposition to green economy was turned into a growing force of resistance in the region, galvanized by the preparation process for the Rio+20 Conference (which took place in Rio de Janeiro in 2012). What the "development" discourse as the hegemonic narrative of the post WWII world order has brought to the world was the deep set idea that there is "one" form of organizing societies. Some countries have "developed" this form, some others are still behind, "developing", trying hard to "catch up". Instead of colonies under imperial rule, the development ideology created the idea of a Third World, and with it the justification for the need of "technology transfer", aid, loans, debt, investment, so countries were able to reproduce

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<sup>3</sup> E.g. Lang, Miriam/ Mokrani, Dunia (eds., 2013): *Beyond Development. Alternative visions from Latin America*. Amsterdam/ Quito: Transnational Institute/ Rosa Luxemburg Foundation; Lang, Miriam/ López, Claudia/ Santillana, Alejandra (eds.) (2013): *Alternativas al Capitalismo/Colonialismo del Siglo XXI*, Quito: Abya Yala, Rosa Luxemburg Foundation; Lander, Edgardo/Arze, Carlos/ Gómez, Javier/ Ospina, Pablo/ Álvarez, Víctor (2013): *Promesas en su laberinto. Cambios y continuidades en los gobiernos progresistas de América Latina*. Quito/ La Paz/ Caracas: Instituto de Estudios Ecuatorianos IEE, Centro de Estudios para el Desarrollo Laboral y Agrario CEDLA, Centro Internacional Miranda CIM. E-copy available on web site of RLS in Andean Region <http://www.rosalux.org.ec/attachments/article/754/BeyondDevelopment.pdf> More available on <http://www.rosalux.org.ec/es/ique-es-el-grupo-permanente-de-alternativas-al-desarrollo-128.html>

western patterns (in housing, education, health, city planning, etc.), and to be measured and compared by global abstractions, as GDP terms, goals, targets, indicators, etc.

Moreno hoped to talk about an Ecological Civilization not just as a slogan but beyond “recycling” or “circular economy” and with the ambition and high political status that it seems to have acquired in China – this civilization in the future may not at all be mostly urban and dependent on high technological solutions or devices. Maybe the “way forward” is, instead, to recover traditional ways of medicine, agriculture (agro ecological systems), local building and construction techniques which are resilient and adapted to locally sourced materials; weaving and clothing and other goods are made in artisanal scale, made to last (and not with built-in obsolescence), giving meaningful work for the people who produce them. Maybe in the future we all downsize and live with less.

Huan Qingzhi argued that, “socialist ecological civilization” is a combination of socialism (social justice) and ecology (sustainability). It is a historical alternative to the capitalist system and its ideology and values. The historical experience in the pre-capitalist era remains that the economy is placed within and not above traditional society. Then, the logic of capital, if capital exists, has to adapt itself to traditional social forms and ecological rationality, and at least it would not be monopolized or hegemonic. This, of course, does not mean that we should regress to a pre-modern society. Instead, it indicates that we should focus on the green future and the first consensus we must reach is that the hegemony of the logic of capital can be challenged.

The premise for the realization of socialist ecological civilization is the design of a new set of social and ecological systems to contain capital and its operational logic. Combating ecological problems, Huan argued, requires a new type of “social relations” or “socio-natural relations,” which is the fundamental implication of socialist ecological civilization. As for the ecological meaning of a socialist ecological civilization, the domestic academic circle has already made sufficient elaboration. By contrast, the socialist nature of the socialist ecological civilization has been inadequately discussed so far.

The appearance and spread of green capitalism in the European countries and the US can be a double-edged sword to the construction of ecological civilization in China. Many Chinese scholars are still devout believers in the results, models and ideas of environmental management in the European countries and the US, which is exactly the reason why the idea of “pollute first, clean up later” is so entrenched. What’s more important, Huan insisted, is that Marxist scholars should be committed to enriching the ecological meaning of the socialist system in line with the practice of ecological civilization construction in China, which in turn will further promote the practice.

At Zhongnan University of Economics & Law, Prof. Liu Sihua suggested that Chinese scholars should think of the concepts such as “green growth” or “green economy” from their own institutional and cultural context. In other words, with the precondition of socialist institutional framework and the goal of constructing socialist eco-civilization, “Green growth” or “green economy” might have a very different interpretation and practice. If successful, we will avoid the structural problems in developing a green economy in the capitalist countries on the one hand, and by doing so create a new kind of society-nature and human-nature relation.

At Wuhan University, Brand focused most explicitly on recent debates about eco-Marxism, a field of research where the host, Huan Qingzhi, plays a prominent role in China. He underlined that a good and useful theory, which Marxism undoubtedly is, needs to be developed in light of recent developments and of empirics. The proposal is to take eco-Marxism as a starting point which should be enhanced by critical state and hegemony theory as well as neo-Marxist regulation theory.

Prof. He Ping is one partner of the Foundation by translating the work of Rosa Luxemburg into Chinese. She argued that Marxism gained more attention after the crisis since 2008. By

complementing this observation, Prof. Huan criticized Chinese debates for considering eco-Marxism as a Western school of thought which is rarely applied to China. Marxism deals mainly with the “classics” and does not cope adequately with a rapidly changing (world) society, e.g. with debates and practices around eco-civilization.

In this brief report it is not possible to cover all the aspects of the talks, comments and discussions. One fascinating experience in many discussions was the interests of the participants to promote a real and far-reaching eco-civilization. Brand compared this concept with that of social-ecological transformation and highlighted that the latter might contribute to a sharpening of the concept of eco-civilization and related practices. Discussions dealt with issues like the role of a Green Economy, the relationship between radical and reformist strategies (Dr. Lui Rensheng at Beida), the prospects of transformative politics in China, the role of the Communist Party and the state as well as possible entry points like the growing uneasiness of many people with air pollution. Prof. Guo Honggui from Zhongnan University, for instance, saw a crucial role for the emerging Chinese middle-class, Prof. Wang Yuchen from the same university made a plea for environmental justice. RLS partners which include academia and activist NGOs highlighted the importance of NGOs in China and value of dialogue and exchange between NGOs, governments and academia.

Prof Brand’s lectures have been published on such academic web sites, newspapers and journals as opinion.china.com ([http://news.china.com.cn/txt/2015-04/24/content\\_35406738.htm](http://news.china.com.cn/txt/2015-04/24/content_35406738.htm), [http://www.china.com.cn/node\\_7064072/content\\_35635942.htm](http://www.china.com.cn/node_7064072/content_35635942.htm) and [http://www.china.cn/opinion/jingying/node\\_7225031.htm](http://www.china.cn/opinion/jingying/node_7225031.htm) ), *China Social Science Newspaper* ([http://www.cssn.cn/zhx/zx\\_zxrd/201504/t20150417\\_1590464.shtml](http://www.cssn.cn/zhx/zx_zxrd/201504/t20150417_1590464.shtml), [http://orig.cssn.cn/sf/bwsf\\_bjtj/201505/t20150513\\_1790373.shtml](http://orig.cssn.cn/sf/bwsf_bjtj/201505/t20150513_1790373.shtml) ) , *Fudan Journal of The Humanities and Social Sciences* and web sites of the universities he has paid visit to during the tour (such as [http://pkunews.pku.edu.cn/xwzh/2015-04/02/content\\_288043.htm](http://pkunews.pku.edu.cn/xwzh/2015-04/02/content_288043.htm) ) .