

Foster's Marxist Theory of Ecology and Its Implications

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Abstract— Ecological Marxism is one of the most influential currents of contemporary foreign Marxism, which has always been committed to exploring a new way to solve the ecological crisis and a new concept to guide ecological construction, and John Bellamy Foster is an outstanding representative of this school. Foster has always emphasized returning to Marxism and digging deep into its theoretical roots, on the basis of which he explores the sources and solutions of the ecological crisis of capitalism. Through the in-depth interpretation of Foster's ecological Marxism and absorbing the valuable theories of his thought, it helps to provide theoretical and practical guidance for getting out of the current ecological dilemma and transforming the ecological logic.

Keywords— Forster; ecological crisis; ecological civilization building.

I. THE FORMATIVE BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL SOURCES OF FOSTER'S ECOLOGICAL MARXISM

(i) Formative background

First of all, the formation of Foster's ecological Marxist theory has a unique social and historical background. Foster lived in the era of deepening capitalist crisis, the two world wars brought huge losses to mankind, and after the war, all countries were busy with economic development, and the arrival of the third industrial revolution led to the unprecedented development of social productive forces, and the people's standard of living has been significantly improved. However, "although industrial civilization has greatly improved the material life and medical and health conditions of human beings, doubled the production capacity of agriculture, and multiplied the per capita life expectancy and the number of population within a few centuries, it has also caused all the corners of the earth suitable for human survival to be occupied, and the pressure on the living space of human beings has been intensified as never before" [Wang Wei. Contemporary Western Marxist Thought and Socialist Schools [M]. Changsha: Zhongnan University Press, 2009.]. As we all know, the nature of capitalism is to pursue profits and economic growth at all costs, and "the short-term considerations that prevail among capitalists when deciding to invest have become a key factor in affecting the environment as a whole", and this kind of short-sightedness will inevitably lead to devastating blows to the ecology, and there have been major ecological catastrophes in history, such as the Chernobyl nuclear accident, the Persian Gulf oil spill, and the Chernobyl disaster. Major ecological disasters in history, such as the Chernobyl nuclear accident, the Persian Gulf oil spill, and the Ralph Lauren Canal incident in the United States, have repeatedly sounded the alarm for mankind. Environmental problems have begun to receive global concern and attention, and people are forced to think about how to solve ecological problems, and for this reason, Foster's ecological Marxist doctrine has come into being.

Secondly, the green movement that emerged in the late 1960s and swept through the developed capitalist countries has

also become another important motive for Foster to put forward ecological Marxism. The aggravation of the ecological crisis has seriously threatened people's survival and aroused widespread concern. In order to cope with the ever-accentuated ecological problems, people no longer turn a deaf ear to them, but set up various green organizations, or form political parties or environmental protection groups. They strongly demanded the restoration of ecological balance and condemned the serious persecution of the Third World by the hegemonic practices of the capitalist industrialized countries. Ecological Marxism is the most representative of the many schools of this ecological movement. They have been committed to exploring a way out of the current ecological dilemma on the basis of the combination of Marxist theory and present-day ecological problems, and their contribution of a large number of programs and wisdom to solve ecological problems has played a role that cannot be ignored, and has provided an important reference for the formation of Foster's ecological Marxism.

(ii) Theoretical sources

1. The ecological thought of Marx and Engels.

Marx and Engels had begun to pay close attention to nature as early as the 1840s, and the materialist view of nature embedded in their thought system was the main theoretical source of Foster's ecological Marxism. As a staunch defender of Marx's theory, Foster firmly criticizes those who deny the existence of ecological thought in Marx and his theoretical system, and has written a book, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature*, which details his compilation and reconstruction of Marx's ecological thought. He pointed out that "Marx's worldview is a profound and truly systematic ecological worldview, and it is derived from his materialism" [Foster, J.B.. *Marx's ecology: materialism and nature*[M]. Liu Rensheng, Xiao Feng, Translation. Beijing: Higher Education Press, 2006.]. Through the systematic study of the important writings of Marx and Engels, Foster realized that the cause of the ecological crisis is mainly due to the alienation of the interrelationship between nature, man and society, and the root cause of the alienation of the three is attributed to the capitalist mode of production and the private ownership of large lands.

Foster also emphasized that the ecological theories of Marx and Engels showed that only by touching the capitalist system could the ecological crisis be guaranteed to be completely eliminated.

2. Western Marxist theory of ecological crisis

The deteriorating ecological environment of capitalist society and the successive outbreaks of large-scale ecological crises are the social and historical background for the emergence of the Marxist theory of ecological crisis in the West, and some Western scholars have taken the Marxist theory of ecological crisis as the core of their research in an attempt to find out the roots of the crises and the ways to solve them, and to expose the anti-ecological nature of capitalism on this basis. These ecological Marxists rejected the attribution of the crisis to science and technology, arguing that the irrational use of technology was responsible for the destruction of the natural environment. Going back further, it is easy to see that the use of technology in capitalist societies is usually dominated by the ruling class capitalists, who only consider the economic benefits of the technology and whether it can consolidate their domination, which results in the "alienation" of technology, which is supposed to benefit mankind. The original purpose of technological research and development should be to benefit mankind, but now it has become a tool for the rulers because of irrational use. Undoubtedly, these technologies can maximize the production of profits, but their destructive effects on the ecological environment should not be ignored.

II. BASIC IDEAS OF FOSTER'S ECOLOGICAL MARXIST THEORY

In 2000, Foster published *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature*, a book devoted to Marx's ecological thought. The book reflects on the problems of man, nature and society, outlines Marx's ecological materialist view of nature and history, and uniquely unearths the "metabolic rupture theory" of Marx's ecology and criticizes the capitalist system from an ecological point of view.

(i) *The three latitudes of Foster's ecological Marxism*

Foster's work on the systematic reconstruction of Marxian ecology proceeds in three main dimensions: man and nature, nature and society, and science, technology, and ecology.

First, man and nature. It can be said that the birth of Foster's ecological Marxism began with the sorting out of the Marxist view of nature, that is, the relationship between human beings and nature. According to Marx, the relationship between man and nature is not a one-way adaptation to the environment, but a "relationship of mutual adaptation and mutual influence" mediated by labor. That is, as a rational animal, man can regulate the relationship between man and nature with his own activities, man cannot survive without nature, nature is man's "inorganic body", in turn, the environment will have an impact on man. However, under the capitalist system, the alienation of labor causes the alienation of the relationship between man and nature. In this way, Foster makes a profound critique of the alienation between man and nature caused by capitalist private ownership on the basis of Marxian materialism.

Second, nature and society. The dialectical relationship between the two is key to influencing our attitudes towards the

capitalist system. According to Foster, influenced by the German agricultural chemist Liebig, Marx studied the problem of soil fertility deficiency in capitalist countries and revealed the social roots of the metabolic rupture, arguing that the crops grown on the land are sold to the cities so that the material energy lost in the land is not replenished; and that the labor workers create a great deal of social wealth, but are not compensated for the physical and mental energy they expend. The resulting metabolic rupture between nature and society, as well as within societies, has led to the emergence of global ecological problems, the root cause of which is capitalist private ownership.

Finally, science and technology and ecology. Since the environmental problems came into people's view, many green ecological movements have broken out, and many people attribute the "culprit" of the current ecological problems to science and technology. Foster, on the other hand, reorganizes the relationship between science and technology and ecology from a historical point of view, and subversively argues that science and technology is not the root cause of the crisis, and that the so-called solution to the ecological and environmental problems through the development of new science and technology is merely a bourgeois trick, an initiative taken for the purpose of stabilizing the social system. As a matter of fact, technology plays an important role in solving the current ecological problems and building people's ecological thinking. However, if the ecological crisis is to be completely eradicated, the social system itself must be touched, that is, to change the capitalist private system.

(ii) *Foster's mining and interpretation of metabolic theory*

According to Foster, the "theory of metabolic rupture" is embedded in Marx's ecology, and Marx used this theoretical connotation at both ecological and social levels: one in nature, as Marx said; "Machines disintegrate due to the destructive action of the transformation of matter in nature. Iron rusts, wood rots"; [*The Complete Works of Marx and Engels* (Volume 23) [M]. Beijing: People's Publishing House, 1971:207.] The other is in capitalist society, which is also the subject of Marx's ecology - the interactive dialectical relationship between nature and society. That is to say, in Foster's view, whether in nature or in human society, inorganic or organic, the law of conversion of matter, energy and information is objective and not subject to human will; people can make use of the law, but if they arbitrarily change this law, it will surely lead to bad consequences. Foster saw that Marx applied the concept of metabolism to his own theory, arguing that there is a similar metabolic problem between man and nature, and between nature and society, in a biological sense, and that it is precisely because of the neglect of this problem that capitalist society has triggered a serious ecological crisis. Modern capitalism is based on the pursuit of surplus value, and the capitalist system of private ownership of the means of production has created a dichotomy between urban and rural areas and between regions, leading to a serious metabolic rupture in society. For example, food grown from the land absorbs a large amount of nutrients from the soil, which is transported to the cities, but the pollutants emitted by the cities

cannot be returned to the land, resulting in serious urban pollution, and the loss of nutrients from the soil cannot be compensated for. In other words, human productive work takes nutrients away from the land but fails to return them on time, resulting in the alienation of the soil and the violation of the laws of nature, thus creating a metabolic rupture between human beings and nature, between nature and society, and within society.

(iii) *Forster's ecological critique of the capitalist system*

Foster analyzes and examines the root causes of the modern ecological crisis from four levels, namely, population, technology, growth, and human nature, and reveals the incompatibility between ecological development and capitalist society, arguing that the history of capitalist development is a history of environmental destruction, and thus making an ecological critique of the capitalist system. In Foster's view, the capitalist system and the development model of capitalism have anti-ecological characteristics, and the capitalist society is a rich soil for inducing ecological crises, causing a metabolic rupture between nature and society. Under the system of capitalism, which is characterized by profiteering, people put profit before everything else, treating resources as a free gift from nature and plundering them without restraint, subordinating them to the needs of capital development. This makes resources seem to be a "scourge", a cause of various diseases, and a raw material for capitalists' bloodthirsty workers. The reason for this concept lies in the development of eco-imperialism, such as the war for the plundering of resources, which not only puts the people in deep water, but also causes serious ecological and social problems. Of course, some ecological theorists attribute the root cause of the current ecological crisis to science and technology, believing that it is the development of technological alienation that destabilizes the ecosystem, and therefore they seek to solve the crisis within the framework of capitalism, solving the environmental problems through technological innovation and policy change, hoping that by increasing scientific and technological research and raising the level of science and technology they will be able to solve the environmental problems such as warming and to build a green capitalism. In Foster's view, as long as there is a capitalist system, it is impossible to eradicate the ecological crisis. For this reason, through the examination of the history of capitalism's environmental development and the global expansion of eco-imperialism, Foster argues that it is difficult for green capitalism to reverse the general trend of the ecological crisis, proving the utopian nature of its conception. In other words, the existence of capitalist private ownership and the nature of capital's pursuit of profit, the uncontrolled exploitation of nature as a free gift, and the willingness to harm the interests of others and other things for the sake of personal interests determine that it is impossible to realize a virtuous cycle of the ecosystem within the capitalist system. In order to realize the alleviation of the ecological crisis, it is necessary to promote institutional reform, but once the reform touches on the institutional problems, it will inevitably jeopardize the interests of the ruling class, and thus be hindered and stifled by interest

groups. It can be seen that the solution to the ecological crisis cannot be achieved overnight.

III. IMPLICATIONS OF FORSTER'S MARXIST THEORY OF ECOLOGY

(i) *The idea of metabolic rupture is capable of realizing the harmonious coexistence of society and nature.*

In his study of ecological and environmental issues, Foster explains the intrinsic significance of sustainable development, analyses the serious ecological crises that have occurred around the globe, and stresses the importance of adhering to a people-centred approach to strengthening the construction of an ecological civilization. Its theoretical ideas have a greater reference value, which is conducive to the realization of symbiosis between nature and society and the harmonious and unified development. Foster believes that in a capitalist society, people-oriented development should be adhered to in order to realize the goal of economic interests. Socialist society tends to pay attention to people's personal interests, effectively implement people-oriented, put the realization of the goal of the interests of the secondary position, in the process of economic and social development will take into account the people's personal interests, unlike capitalism to chase unlimited profits as the goal. Therefore, Foster proposed that in order to solve environmental problems, people-oriented as the fundamental principle, in order to enable man and nature to achieve common development. General Secretary Xi Jinping mentioned that the construction of ecological civilization is of great merit for the present generation and benefits for the future. We should firmly establish the socialist concept of ecological civilization, promote the formation of a new pattern of modernization and construction of harmonious development between human beings and nature, and make our generation's efforts to protect the ecological environment. [Xi Jinping. Deciding to build a moderately prosperous society in all respects and seize the great victory of socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era - Report at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China [M]. Beijing: People's Publishing House,2017:30.] Increasing ecological environmental protection requires us to set up a correct concept of environmental protection, start from ourselves and fully realize the importance of environmental protection. It is not only the responsibility of our generation, but also for future generations. Great benefit. As General Secretary Xi said, improving the ecological environment and respecting the laws of natural development will contribute to the sustainable development of the nation, help human beings and the natural world to realize harmonious coexistence and mutually beneficial coexistence, and will be more conducive to the construction of a community of human destiny. The metabolic fracture theory, on the other hand, emphasizes the concept of symbiosis, insisting on the harmonious development of mankind and nature, and the formation of a virtuous cycle and exchange between nature and mankind. In strengthening the construction of ecological civilization, the above theoretical foundations can be applied to update the concept of treating the relationship between man and nature, which will help to achieve social development, protect the ecology and preserve

the environment, and improve the relationship between nature and society on a strategic level.

(ii) *The ecological dialectic contributes to the reshaping of ecological values.*

Foster put forward the ecological dialectical view in his thought theory, taking the harmonious and unified development of nature and society as the premise, and the view is particularly prominent in his thought theory system. The ecological dialectical view provides a profound theoretical foundation for strengthening the construction of ecological civilization. Based on Marx's critical thought of alienated labor, Foster's theory criticizes the view of science and technology, consumption and values formed under the capitalist system, and provides conditions for the effective implementation of ecological values through the identification of needs, consumption and happiness. With respect for the laws of natural development as a prerequisite, changing the traditional ecological values and adhering to sustainable development can achieve long-lasting operation. In life, it is necessary to enhance the awareness of environmental protection, do CD-ROM action, rational consumption, and avoid wasting resources.

In addition, the concept of social consumption should be scientific. Influenced by the capitalist system, its consumerist philosophy wastes resources and destroys the environment to a great extent, and distorts the essence of human nature. Entering the new century, it is necessary to reflect positively on such consumption concepts, change consumption concepts according to the actual needs of the people, and advocate environmental protection awareness, so that people can consume rationally, greenly and moderately in their daily lives, and so that they can protect resources and realize symbiotic development. In improving ecological civilization, it is necessary to establish scientific ecological values. Its ecological dialectic explains the connotation of symbiotic development from a theoretical point of view, and by applying this theoretical foundation, our country can deal with the environmental problems while developing the economy, protect the ecological resources, change the public's concept of consumption, set up a good concept of labor, and provide endogenous impetus for accelerating the realization of the ecological civilization society.

(iii) *Ecocritical thinking inspires China's thinking on the way of development*

Foster used the "critical and reflective" way of thinking to study the problem of ecological crisis. In the capitalist society, the mode of production determines that the ecological and environmental problems cannot be solved fundamentally. Only by changing it can the ecological problems be solved. In order to pursue economic benefits, some capitalist countries focus only on immediate interests and recklessly demand from nature, thus making the ecological environment unbalanced. As China's development continues to accelerate, it must learn from the previous experience of western capitalist countries that did not pay attention to environmental protection in the process of development, strengthen its efforts in ecological environmental protection, and avoid destroying resources. As a modern, latecomer country, we must abandon the principle of polluting

first and treating later and pay attention to environmental protection in the process of development.

In the process of development, China should see the experience and lessons of the development of western countries, avoid the mistakes made by western countries, not copy the development path taken by western countries, and deal with high-energy-consuming and high-polluting industries with caution, especially in the process of developing manufacturing industry should pay attention to ecological protection. Western ecological theory has made a greater contribution to the research of domestic scholars, among which Foster's research in the study of Marxist thought, its innovative research perspectives, the study of ecological civilization content, and achieved effective results. Therefore, Foster's idea of ecological revolution helps our country to realize a resource-saving society and sustainable development. In recent years, China's government has attached great importance to ecological environmental protection, and has also introduced relevant governance and protection policies. Comrade Xi Jinping proposed at the 19th National Congress to accelerate the reform of the ecological civilization system and build a beautiful China.

Taking the ecological critical thought as the theoretical basis, it can accelerate the construction of ecological civilization, realize the economical development and create a good ecological environment. China has accelerated its ecological revolution and is constantly moving closer to the goal of achieving an ecological civilization.

According to Foster, the ecological revolution, as a fundamental way for capitalist countries to solve ecological problems, has the same goal as the socialist revolution, though different in nature, which also reflects our institutional advantages, based on which we can create a good environment for sustainable development, rationally resolve ecological crises, protect our homeland, and enhance our confidence in building an ecological civilization.

IV. CONCLUSION

John Bellamy Foster, as one of the famous contemporary ecological Marxist scholars, has witnessed the serious environmental damage in the world since the twentieth century, and deeply realized the great threat of ecological crisis to the survival of human beings. So he started to find the ecological flashpoints in the classical discourses of Marx and Engels, and systematically sorted out the connotation of materialism in Marxist theory, combined with the theories of the Frankfurt School and the discourses of other Western scholars of ecological Marxism, expounded Marx's ecological materialism, and revealed the harms caused by metabolic rupture under the capitalist mode of production, and pointed out that the capitalist system is the root cause of the ecological crisis. It also points out that the capitalist system is the root cause of the ecological crisis, and finally points out that only an ecological revolution can solve the ecological crisis. His ideas have opened up a new way of thinking in Marxist theoretical research, and at the same time, they fit in with the current hot issues and have good theoretical value and reference significance. However, we

should also see that there are some limitations in Foster's thought, and we should look at them dialectically and rationally.

Nowadays, China's economy has turned to the stage of high-quality development, and how to realize comprehensive and sustainable development is an important issue in front of us. We should be based on the national conditions of our country, and extract the part that can be used by us from Foster's ideas to provide inspiration for the construction of ecological civilization in our country.

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