

China: Grabbing the emergency brake

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Richard Smith argues that a democratically planned and managed ecosocialist economy is the only way to save the planet

Empty high-speed trains, collapsing apartments and bridges, industrial explosions, tsunamis of plastic waste, and a Shanghai inevitably underwater—this is not the image the world’s newest superpower likes to present for itself. But this is precisely the reality that Richard Smith’s *China’s Engine of Environmental Collapse* unearths. In spite of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s relentless brand imaging in recent years of being the world’s progressive alternative to traditional Western hegemony, Smith shows that the only alternative that China offers is a distinctively bureaucratic and authoritarian kind of capitalism—a model that rivals other Western capitalist regimes in becoming the main driver of climate collapse.

Smith’s book is an essential one-stop shop for anyone looking to debunk China’s claims of being a global climate leader *without* positing the West as any better alternative. In this short, immensely readable text, Smith ably dismantles China’s greenwashing strategies, largely with the regime’s own statistics, figures, and other substantiated research reports. His claim is clear from the start: China’s “hybrid bureaucratic-collectivist capitalism” is completely unsustainable, despite its piecemeal green reforms. This model only exacerbates the worst excesses of Western capitalism under the strongly developmentalist direction of an authoritarian party-state. Unbridled development is not only a defining feature of capital, but specifically China’s own economic framework: Without a complete overhaul of how the Chinese system is run, any green reforms are futile in halting the country’s intensifying internal contradictions. Beneath the state propaganda peddled by the regime and its lackeys in the Western left, for example, China’s CO₂ emissions are greater than the next five countries combined (30% of global emissions). It also dumps the most plastic and produces the most toxic industrial chemicals per year in the world.

Two questions drive Smith’s argument: Why is overproduction central to China’s market economy, and how do its detrimental effects play out in Chinese society? A key mode of argumentation that Smith effectively and consistently deploys is highlighting the gap between China’s progressive climate policies and their actual effectiveness. While China is the world’s leader in developing clean, renewable energy sources, Smith points out that “it will be many decades before renewables outstrip fossil fuel power in China, if this ever happens at all.” Each chapter takes us through how government rhetoric differs from reality across different aspects of China’s economic system, from the “chaotic, underfunded, understaffed, and often effectively unregulated” waste management system to the disconnected nature of China’s clean energy grids. Local officials prefer nonrenewable sources, and there are no incentives to connect the overproduced wind and solar energy grids in north and west China to the urban energy centres along the coast.

This is not just a matter of local corruption, but a systemic problem linked to the core of China’s long-term national strategy, which is to not only preserve, but amplify, existing fossil fuel infrastructure. This is also not a problem that Xi Jinping or any party reformers can solve: China needs its “systemic growth drivers” to build economic sufficiency and decouple its economic

framework from the West. Production is still central to China's economic growth and competitiveness, and for all its commitment to developing renewable energy sources, its economic system cannot help but viciously maintain its nonrenewable energy production to compete with the West. A recent Global Energy Monitor [report](#) shows that China has increased the amount of coal plants by more than 20 percent just from 2019, despite the official state organs' recommendations to prioritize clean energy development.

China's decades of exploiting its own working class for global North supply chains and local economic gains have exposed Chinese workers to massive environmental harm. And now, the impulse to decouple its economy increasingly leads to recreating the same environmental blunders—this time directly by the regime's own hands. Even reform-minded local and national officials are powerless to stop capitalist construction projects, if the national strategy of development still takes precedence. The list of seemingly progressive environmental economic initiatives bear some scrutiny: For example, what China does not emphasize about its bold plan to reach peak emissions by 2030 before reducing them afterwards is that it depends on an increased reliance on hydropower; the construction of massive dams displace local communities, not to mention wreaking havoc on local ecosystems as well. China's emphasis on the development of electric car technology also results in even worse kinds of pollution, with large amounts of fossil fuels needed to generate electricity and propel the toxic processes in which lithium-ion batteries are made. Ambitious high-speed railways leave massive carbon footprints, yet remain largely underutilized.

Implicit in Smith's critique of China's ruthlessly developmentalist economy is critique of Third World left politics, one that prioritizes the right of poorer nations in the global South to develop their industrial economies over mass democratic politics. China's case is the Third Worldist paradigm taken to its extreme conclusion within global capitalism, in which a developing regime's national sovereignty is so paramount that some leftists cannot help but defend China's right to catch up with the West, including its every concession to neoliberalism, by all means—even if it means accelerating the climate crisis. To think outside of this model is the precondition to a transnational organizing practice that can empower the ability of everyday people to resist the ecological threat together.

Thus, Smith's argument is not just a negative one: As he puts it, "if humanity is to save itself, we have no choice but to cashier [discard] both Western capitalism and China's communist capitalism and replace them both with some form of mostly publicly owned, and democratically planned and managed ecosocialist economy." [1] This is different from various strategies to "slow capitalism down": ecosocialism's radically democratic approach, as Smith sees it, is antithetical to the basic operations of capitalism. In fact, as we well see in China, truly effective environmental policies run directly against the core tenet of capitalist regimes, which is to expand its economy.

Green capitalism or degrowth [merely strengthens](#) the contradictions in the operations of capital itself. Smith ends the book with a concrete list of recommendations for things that need to be scaled back in China—from significantly cutting back the auto industry to shutting down all non-essential polluting chemical industries. These demands are impossible under the current regime—but that is precisely Smith's point: Transparent, democratic planning and participation by everyone in the community, especially those directly harmed by environmentally destructive policies by regimes and corporations, run completely against the nature of the CCP regime.

Thus, the distance between the severe urgency of Smith's conclusions and the practical viability of his clear solutions under the CCP regime begins to outline the most important lacuna in contemporary Chinese politics: the absence of an organized, democratic mass movement able to challenge the authoritarian ecosystem under the party-state. The issue is not that there isn't a

grassroots opposition to the kinds of local misgovernance that Smith ably indexes; it is that these efforts can rarely build connections across locales and sectors before the state either co-opts or disables their most militant organizers through coercion and imprisonment. Greenwashing came from capitalist Western regimes and corporations, unwilling to sacrifice the productivist logic of capital to actually advance policies to save the planet, but the CCP has mastered its techniques. Mass movement-building, democratically self-organized by the working class, is inseparable from Smith's ecosocialism—and that is precisely the kind of politics from below that the CCP has been keen to curtail since the Mao era and now only heightened under Xi. To underscore the impossibility of Smith's demands under the current Chinese system suggests that Beijing itself is pushing its own populace into insurrectionary paradigms that it fears the most.

The most chilling aspect of Smith's book lies precisely in what it is unable to address, especially from the standpoint of activists and organizers: What can we do when, under the CCP, the political organizations needed to bring about the ecosocialist demands that Smith smartly details are systematically snuffed out before their inception? This narrowing of political possibilities does not signal total hopelessness for the Chinese people (or our planet), but it does suggest that the imminent consequences of Beijing's industrial policies are sure to plunge the Chinese working class into greater despair before avenues for radical, sudden change can arise. To recall Rosa Luxembour, the situation is once again socialism or barbarism, and ecofascism has become the latter's modern-day visage. [2]

This is not to say that the efforts of NGOs, researchers, and other local activists—from Greenpeace to the New Rural Reconstruction movement—are futile and ineffectual. But the prospects of even something as basic as a movement-driven Green New Deal remain impossible in Chinese political society. My understanding of Smith's conclusions leads me to think that, beyond providing the necessary political education and pressure to at least force the state to reckon with some of its excesses, these organizations help outline the limits of green reform under the existing regime. No matter how smaller societies are re-organized along more sustainable lines, or how new lines for clean and renewable energy can be developed, the key issue is that everyday people are only consulted about the decision-making process when it does not concern the core aspects in the regime's larger governing plan. At the same time, local officials and corporations are disincentivized to prioritize clean energy grids, and the extension of Chinese productivism through the Belt and Road Initiative continues into other countries. [3]

One basic but necessary step to advance any type of ecosocialist paradigm among Chinese workers and activists is continuing to translate, platform, and amplify local voices who tie the struggle for democracy under Chinese authoritarianism to demands for the working class to democratically take control of the means of production. In fact, there has been no shortage of bottom-up mobilizations against polluting construction projects in the [past decade](#): tens of thousands of people have marched and organized direct actions against initiatives like a coal-fired power plant in [Haimen](#) and a petrochemical plant in [Dalian](#) in 2011; copper-smelting infrastructures in [Shifang](#) in 2012; a waste-to-energy plant in [Wuhan](#) in 2019; among other instances.

Just last year, Wenlou citizens also fought the local police with fireworks to [protest](#) a polluting crematorium on what was supposed to be an ecological park. And these actions work—but are unable to sustain and develop into a cross-sector mass movement with demands on the state beyond local projects and policy changes. Even as the politically moderate Chinese columnist Tang Hao [admits](#): “China's environmental impact assessment law affirms the principle of public participation, but it does not lay out the process to achieve this, or regulate how government should handle public opinion. The public has no right to veto, leaving the oversight of major projects and the right to environmental information in something of a no man's land.” The absence of this broader political consciousness also stems from and reinforces NIMBYism, exemplified by how the successful Xiamen

protest against a petrochemical plant resulted in the planned project being [relocated](#) to a neighboring poor city. The plant subsequently exploded in 2015.

The party-state's unbridled developmentalism will continue to lead to more and more widespread ecological crises that will deepen all forms of class inequity and social discontent, signaling the need to even further deepen the operations of the police state. In other words, while these local, isolated protests demonstrate to us the kind of activism needed to force the state to transform, without deeper coordination and movement-building, the Chinese state and corporations will still cause irreversible damage to the environment before the masses can catch up with their organizing. Most local opposition movements to Chinese rule thus far have no systemic critique of its developmentalist policies that emphasizes workers and other marginalized peoples' self-activity.

As Smith suggests through his careful analysis of China's economic system, "moderate" solutions—even ones that seek to strengthen mass participation in governance without radically remaking the social structure—are ineffective not just in principle: the planet, let alone China, just does not have time for anything less than "grabbing the emergency brake" through a fully democratic, mass-driven, radical transformation of our economic structures.

Richard Smith has written in *Against the Current*, *New Left Review*, and the *Ecologist*. He is the author of *Green Capitalism: The God that Failed* (College Publications, 2016), and is a founding member of the US-based group System Change Not Climate Change.

Promise Li

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Footnotes

[1] Smith unpacks ecosocialism more in his other work, like an [article](#) critiquing both "degrowth" and "green capitalism," and a shorter, activist-oriented [pamphlet](#) for the DSA.

[2] Beijing is already showing us that its brand of barbarism can be highly polished: Shrouded under propaganda about "lifting 800 million out of extreme poverty," clean and sleek "re-education centers," and modernized, high-tech cities and urban infrastructures are the violent desertification and exploitation of the lands in West Asia, and a new biopolitics of oppression of ethnic minorities in Xinjiang.

[3] This goes unsaid in the text, but it is also reasonable to apply Smith's analysis to suggest a new perspective on the ongoing U.S.-China tensions. While rising aggression and decoupling between the two economies continue to be disastrous for everyone, U.S.-China cooperation, like the [kind](#) promoted by the incoming U.S. Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry, would

not necessarily help either without a radical transformation of both economies. As political economist Patrick Bond [points](#) out, Beijing has shown all the more readiness to ratify inept, U.S.-led climate policies at the 2015 UNFCCC—preserving carbon trading, preventing binding emission cuts and climate debt liability for countries—under the supposedly more progressive Obama administration.