

# What Exactly Are Ecological Problems?

## On Ecological Crisis View of Giddens

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### Abstract

From a multidiscipline perspective concerning politics, sociology, ethnics, economics, biology, technology, and in particular, modernity and micro politics, Giddense gives a comprehensive diagnosis of ecological problems. According to him, ecological problem is about how mankind lives in modern society; in the final analysis, it is a moral and political crisis caused by the mode of thinking and practicing of modern enlightenment. The final solution lies in the rebuild of moralization and realization politics of life.

**Key words:** Ecological problem; production relations; moralization.

In light of its importance, ecological problems once became prominent attracting great concern of worldwide scholars from different fields of disciplines including ecology. They made deep studies from unique perspectives respectively and fruitfully. Despite some multidiscipline perspective, comprehensive and interdisciplinary research was insufficient for an overall and deep understanding due to academic background and other reasons.

Giddens, a notable British scholar, has always focused on ecological problems, considering it core of politics of life --a concept first put forward by him. For him, ecological issue is fundamentally linked with man's subsistence.<sup>1</sup> Especially at such a critical moment with serious ecological problems threatening man's survival, nobody should ignore this life-and-death issue. To approach its complicated internal mechanism, Giddens makes a synthetic diagnosis from multi- perspectives rather than a single one, including politics, sociology, ethnics, economics, demography, biology, and technology. Under background of modernity especially modern politics, Giddens takes it into his politics of life, taking a further step in understanding ecological issues.

### I. Ecological problem: a matter of how man lives rather than a natural crisis

Modern civilization is a process of how to control, conquer and liquidate nature. As Giddens says, "Modern civilization proceeds through the attempted imposition of human control on environments of action, including the natural environment, which were once largely external to such action."<sup>2</sup> Nowadays, humanization of nature is completely beyond our imagination and we are living in the order of man-made nature without a nature in its real sense. Just as Beck says, "Nature is not nature, but a concept, norm, memory, utopia, counter-image."<sup>3</sup> He stresses, "Socialization of nature not only refers to the fact that nature is increasingly spoiled by man. ... But all the former natural systems become products of man's decisions."<sup>4</sup> Planned, shaped and changed by man, nature is submissive to man with modern biological reproduction as a perfect example. Modern technological innovation makes natural procreation completely under man's control. In *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, traditions and Aesthetics in Modern Social Order*, he says, "Nature is losing its preset features and becoming a product, an internal

nature intrinsic and shapeable in post-industrial society, and this process begins to evolve."<sup>5</sup> "Nature has become a spot where genetic engineering is applied to solve social problems such as environmental, social and technological security."<sup>6</sup> What after all will humanization of nature result in? In Giddens's viewpoint, the process of nature's humanization is explosive road of ecological crisis caused after the elimination of nature.<sup>7</sup> Every success of man over nature is at the cost of damage to nature. Consequently, as Giddens says, the process of nature's humanization will inevitably lead to ecological crisis.

Superficially, ecological crisis only involves a series of catastrophic consequences brought in the process of deterioration of nature and thereafter.

However, Giddens states, "If they are seen simply as 'natural dangers' their real character is misinterpreted."<sup>8</sup> In the preface to *Reflexive Modernization*, Giddens, Lash and Beck all emphasize that ecological problems should not be oversimplified as environmental ones. Ecological field has been within our activity circle, which makes ecological problems no longer outside of man's social life but "thoroughly permeated and reorganized by man's life."<sup>9</sup> In other words, ecological problems arise in the place where human beings put their decisions into practice in daily life. "As a species, our subsistence is no longer guaranteed even temporarily and it is the consequence of man's collective activities."<sup>10</sup> Therefore, ecological problems is the crisis caused by mode of man's thinking and behaving, which is, in the final analysis, a question of how man shall live the future life.

### II. Ecological crisis: moral and modern politics crisis in cosmopolitanism

The issue of how we shall live the future life seems concerned only about survival capability, interests, hobbies and choices of an individual. However, it is not the truth. The following are the two reasons. One is relative scarcity of resources. As Roman Club warns in *Limit to Growth*, "With limited earth capability, the closer human activities and fate get to support capability of the earth, the more obviously insolvable the possibility of balancing all factors."<sup>11</sup> That is, there is internal conflict and tension between natural resources and human demands. The other

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.35.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.35

<sup>7</sup> Anthony Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right*, p.206.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.206.

<sup>9</sup> Ulrich Beck, Anthonyand, Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernization: politics, tradition and aesthetics in the modern social order*, Polity Pres, 1997, the preface, p. 2.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., the preface, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Dennis Meadows · *Limit to Growth*, translated by Li Hengbao et al, Si Chuang Publishing House, 1984, p.95

<sup>1</sup>Ul Rick Beck, Anthonyand, Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernization: politics, tradition and aesthetics in the modern social order*, Polity Pres, 1997, p12.

<sup>2</sup>Anthony Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right: The Future of Radical Politics*, polity press,1995, p.06.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p.206.

<sup>4</sup>Ulrick Beck,Anthonyand Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernization: politics, tradition and aesthetics in the modern social order*, Polity Pres,1997,p98.

reason is the interrelation among human beings. Especially in post-traditional times when the whole society is set in globalization and high reflection and individuals are closely connected to global problems, the influence of personal choices and decisions is far beyond individual or regional and radiates to the world at large, which, therefore, implies that a certain decision in an individual life will affect directly or indirectly the lifestyle and decisions of his or other's future generations, and the problem of how we lead our life is no longer a simple individual choice. In *Defense of Sociology*, Giddens writes on the relation with individual on one hand, others, society and ecology on the other hand, "Our individual daily behaviors nowadays come along with globalization. For example, my decision on purchasing certain clothes or food is of global influence in an all-around way. It not only affects a certain person's life in the other hemisphere, but also leads to degradation of ecological environment which has latent influences on all people."<sup>12</sup>

It can be concluded from above that choices of how we lead a life, what a life, what consumption view and moral values we cultivate are far beyond individual or personal but concerning about other people and the world as a whole. What behinds all these choices are relations of man-man, man-nature, and man-other men which can be summarized as one's attitude towards nature, fellows, himself, his body and the purpose and meaning of one's existence. As a matter of fact, it is a question of how to balance resources and human's demands.

Therefore, the choice of how we will lead our life is bound with moral values. What's more, this choice is all the more urgent in absence of morality. "Each raises the age-old question, 'how shall we live?' in new guise-in a situation where the advance of science and technology, coupled to economic growth mechanisms, force us to confront moral problems which were once hidden in the naturalness of nature and tradition."<sup>13</sup>

Thus Giddens reaches a conclusion that ecological crisis and consequences are, in the final analysis, a moral issue. "The ecological crisis, however, as I interpret it here, is in essentially a crisis of moral crisis in a world turned cosmopolitan."<sup>14</sup> "Ecological problems cannot be isolated from impacts caused of detraditionalization."<sup>15</sup> In addition, according to him, detraditionalization correlates directly to loss of traditional morality which directly leads to ecological problems. To sum up, Giddens interprets ecological crisis as a crisis and dilemma caused by man himself and a crisis in human relations. That is why he

connects the solution with renaissance and existence of morality and with the issue of aesthetics.<sup>16</sup>

Proceeding from this, Giddens is unsatisfied with environmentalists, holding "environmentalists, by and large, understand risks only in term of external risk"<sup>17</sup> and ignore internal moral significance. He states, by comparison, ecology, take a deeper understanding, for it "tries to seize hold of the practical and ethical issue that face us in terms of natural criteria or the recovery of lost natural harmony."<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, in Giddens' viewpoint, despite the ruthless predatory manifestation on man's part to nature, ecological problems also take the form of man's plunder on others because man himself is part of nature. In this sense, ecological problems become a political issue and "nature becomes politics."<sup>19</sup> For Giddens, because of direct relation to modern political crisis, ecological problems are a political crisis. Such problems are resulted from increasing separation of modern politics from issues of survival significance such as nature, morality and living environment and deteriorate by long oppressed problems of morality and survival. It is in light of inherent correlation between ecological problems and man's lifestyle and politics that Giddens brings ecological problems into his paradigm of politics of life and takes it as core of it. On this point, Martin O'Brien once says, "One of Giddens' central achievements in his recent work has been to acknowledge the crucial significance of environmental and ecological change for any sociology-political, economic, cultural or otherwise-of late modernity."<sup>20</sup>

We admit that Giddens' understandings are undeniably profound backed by many supporters. Beck, among these supporters, points out ecological problems should be discomposed in other problems such as "technology, development, manufacturing arrangement, product policy, nutrition types, lifestyle, laws and regulations, organization method and administration mode."<sup>21</sup>

### III. Way out: dashing out instrumental rational mode of thinking and encirclement of utilitarian values to return morality to social

<sup>12</sup> Anthony Giddens, *In Defence of Sociology Essays, Interpretations and Rejoinders*, Polity Press, 1996, pp. 9-10

<sup>13</sup> Anthony Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right*, p.206.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p.247.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.206.

<sup>16</sup> Martin O'Brien, Sue Penna and Colin Hay, *Theorizing Modernity: Reflexivity, Environment and Identity in Giddens' Social Theory*, Longman Press, 1999, p.101.

<sup>17</sup> Anthony Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right*, p.207.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.207.

<sup>19</sup> Ulrich Beck, Anthonyand, Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernization: politics, tradition and aesthetics in the modern social order*, Polity Pres, 1997, p.35.

<sup>20</sup> Martin O'Brien, Sue Penna and Colin Hay, *Theorising Modernity: Reflexivity, Environment and Identity in Giddens' Social Theory*, Longman Press, 1999, p.27.

<sup>21</sup> Ulrich Beck, Anthonyand, Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernization: politics, tradition and aesthetics in the modern social order*, Polity Pres, 1997, p.65.

### life and realize politics of life

The current problem is what values and lifestyle we should take. To address this, Giddens points we should develop economy and choose a lifestyle under the frame of morality so as to solve ecological problems. This requires a change in ourselves key point of which is how to dash out tight encirclement of thinking mode, values, and lifestyle of scientism, positivism and materialism since modern times.

Based on this point, Giddens suggests that we should correct productivism in a practical sense. He illustrates that productivism has always been dominant during the whole process of modernization, but moves away from productivism “are expression of the ecological crisis and at the same time a direct reaction to it.”<sup>22</sup> “Productivism as an ethos where work is autonomous and where mechanisms of economic development substitute for personal growth, for goal of living a happy life in harmony with others.”<sup>23</sup> Productivism suppresses moral development, ruins harmony in life and takes economic growth index as a sovereign goal on which all work is centered. The correlation with productivism on one hand and mechanical rational mode of thinking and utilitarian values on the other, or rather say, the direct product of the latter’s guidance, has resulted in the following double consequences. One is the infinite expansion of man’s desire that leads to social conflicts.<sup>24</sup> Violence, wars and slaughters in modern times are actually manifestations of such conflicts at different levels. On the other hand, predatory possession of nature leads to exhaustion of resources and deterioration of environment which endangers survival of man and nature. Beck says, “Invisible side effects of technological industry have become focus of global ecological crisis.”<sup>25</sup> He emphasizes repeatedly, “In society of risks, unpredictability of threats caused by technological industrial development demands self reflection based on social collection and examination based on general rules of rationality.... For risks exactly arise from triumph of mechanical rational order.”<sup>26</sup>

Therefore, Giddens stresses that ecological problems make us realize for another time various internal problems in enlightening rationality as well as modern system and scientific technologies based on this rationality. “Ecological problems disclose just how far modern civilization has come to rely on the expansion of control, and on economic progress as a

means of repressing basic existential dilemmas of life.”<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, ecological problems real to us through a negative example: Man should not exploit nature without limit, otherwise both will suffer; man could not only rely on means such as control of external world, technological progress and economic growth to counter survival dilemmas for universal happiness. As matter of fact, technology and economy is but means of life. Life is colorful and a happy one requires harmonious combination of many elements. Ecological life is just a phase of rich reality and itself alone could not guarantee happiness. Not to say, productivism builds economic growth on such a devastating lifestyle at the expense of ecological environment and moral values. Therefore, we actually push happiness away even if materially wealthy.

Hence, Giddens calls that modern men should get rid of rationalism, productivism, and scientism as early as possible, at least should reexamine rationality, footstone of modernization. Foster agrees that “Environmentally speaking, we have no other way except for resisting this way of production.”<sup>28</sup>

Certainly, Giddens is not utterly against enlightening rationality or modern system and technologies developed from this rationality. On one hand, he thinks we are not able to get rid of modern scientific and technological civilization; on the other, in total consensus with Habermas, he believes rational problems could only be solved through rationality and that the primary task is to take a critical view of rationality and scientific technology rather than discard rationality or the effectiveness of technology completely. He maintains an effective administration over scientific technology and environment in modern industrial society. Jaspers Karl long ago expressed similarly in *Man in the Modern Age*, “Technologization is a path we have to come along. Any attempt to back up only makes life increasingly difficult till impossible to continue. It is no use attacking technologization. What we could do is surpass it.”<sup>29</sup> Aurelio Peccei, founder of Roman Club, also maintains scientific and technological solution to disasters caused by scientific technology. Like these ideologists, Giddens acknowledges the positive rule of modern scientific technology and economic development in solving ecological and other social problem. Meanwhile, he points out explicitly they are not almighty with universal effectiveness which demands proper use to avoid opposite effects.

Under such guideline, Giddens addresses ecological problems with the indispensable help of modern scientific technology and economic development. It is better to comprehend ecological problems in the light of poverty elimination than restoring damaged natural

<sup>22</sup> Anthony Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right*, p.248.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p.247.

<sup>24</sup> Johan. Foster, *Ecological Crisis and Capitalism*, translated by Geng jianxin et al, Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2006, p.90

<sup>25</sup> Ulrich Beck, Anthonyand, Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernization: politics, tradition and aesthetics in the modern social order*, Polity Pres, 1997, p.12.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p.13.

<sup>27</sup> Anthony Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right*, p.212.

<sup>28</sup> Johan. Foster, *Ecology against Capitalism*, translated by Geng Jiaxin et al, Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2006, p.38

<sup>29</sup> Jaspers,Karl, *Man in The Modern Age*, p.173

environment. "Because of the inevitable link between global problems and gap between the rich and poor, global ecologic administration largely coincides with economic gap worldwide."<sup>30</sup> Only elimination of wealth polarization can thoroughly tackle current ecological problems. Modern scientific technology and economic development are necessary means to eliminate polarization. Therefore, we should attach importance on development of scientific technology and economy in settling ecological crisis. Because of this, Giddens combines current ecological outlook with revitalization plan for social economy. At the recent conference where the fourth climate change estimation report was submitted by IPCC, the secretary general Ban ki-moon said to all representatives present, "We can not win the war against climate change without poverty elimination."

However, Giddens stresses at the same time that we could not appeal to economic development alone to solve poverty problems and eliminate polarization. Ironically, "As a matter of fact, the outcome of capitalist production way of wheeled mill is financial support from poor countries to rich ones."<sup>31</sup> Particularly under the background of localization, globalization and severe ecological problems, it is problems such as how to live that are crucial to poverty elimination. Poverty after all is not just an economic issue but a moral problem covering value recognition, lifestyle, and social moral standard and so on. Mary•Mda points poverty in itself is not natural but intrigued by man and it is not inextricable but completely solvable. According to a 1998 UN Development Program report, he states, a sum of 40 billion US dollars in ten years is sufficient to meet the basic need for all the people, which takes up only 40% of wealth accumulated by the top 225 rich men in the world. Obviously the only problem concerned here is about morality. Poverty problems involve morality and responsibility of man-to-man, state-to-man and state-to-state. In other words, issues such as value recognition and orientation, choice of lifestyle and social moral standard all have a direct influence on poverty elimination, which partly accounts for Giddens' fierce attack on modern productivism. His politics of life strongly opposes the practice of simplifying economic development as unlimited accumulation of wealth and economic growth. He requires us to limit and oppose productivism by choosing a lifestyle positive, upward, responsible and light-spirited. He hopes we advance in the direction of productivity, "the common interests the affluent and poor have in lifestyle change concern a move away from productivism toward productivity."<sup>32</sup> Restore of social morality and a new choice in lifestyle is decisive in dismantling

productivism. "We know that nature is continuously being destroyed, and that only a change of our lifestyle can save nature and the earth from ecological disaster."<sup>33</sup> Peccei calls us to return to orbit of ethics and morality.

From above, it is of no help to check environmental deterioration only by solving worldwide problems such as production, technology, growth, development and population. What we need first and foremost is a new critical analysis on fundamental concepts which once served as our principles and also on systematic logics in social operation mechanism. We need make use of nature to survive but in a moderate way; we make profits but only in limited areas; we are devoted to development not limited in economy but referring to man's all-around development as well. We seek for progress but on the all-around harmonious improvement of relations between man-nature, man-society, man-man and man and himself. To achieve these above, there is only one way out as Foster says, that is, to build new ecological civilization and morality which requires all inhabitants on the earth to learn basic living codes once again.

The modality of the world is shaped by that of man which in turn is decided by his thinking and behaving way. In this sense, it is of equal importance to reshape and conquer the world as to rebuild man's way of thinking, living, practicing, and recognition as well as value orientation. To some extent, the latter seems more fundamental. This requires us to make great efforts to get rid of implemental rational way of thinking and utilitarian values, oppose strongly materialism and resist unlimited material desire.

As pointed out above, it is Giddens's viewpoint that modern politics contribute to ecological crisis. Modern politics not only extinguishes traditional values, but also isolates man from nature and even puts them in opposite positions. However, man's fate, just as Holderlin says, "Lies in regression to nature at a higher level."<sup>34</sup> The nature of human is not separation from nature but regression to it. Kant also calls this action of seeking harmony with external world aesthetic action and moral action. Therefore, Giddens returns ecological issue to life politics and takes it as core in an attempt to gestate desired purpose with moral care. This is a vivid portrayal of the profundity in Giddens' theory.

#### IV. Comments

According to Giddens, despite the fact that some environmentalists, economists, ecologists and socialists have listed it on agenda, they primarily

<sup>30</sup> Giddens, Comments on The Third Way and its Critic, p.159

<sup>31</sup> Johan. Foster, Ecology against Capitalism, translated by Geng Jianxin et al, Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2006, p.42

<sup>32</sup> Anthony Giddens, Beyond Left and Right, p.194.

<sup>33</sup> Lars Bo Kaspersen, Anthony Giddens: An Introduction to a Social Theorist, 1995, P.110.

<sup>34</sup> Charles Taylor, Sources of the self: The Making of the modern Identity, p.59.

explore root of ecological crisis externally. Such a conclusion has some element of untruth. As early as 1970s, William Leiss, a Canadian, pointed out ecological crisis rooted not in the scientific technology itself but in natural control thinking. Natural control thinking almost became most authoritative social awareness since modern society to be a social system. Owing to indispensable relation between the control of nature and man, people control man unconsciously in the end during the process of controlling nature. Furthermore, the ultimate object will definitely be man.<sup>35</sup> Horkheimer shares similar views considering control of nature, control of man and social conflicts are closely linked, and this control will gradually be internalized as individual psychological process. As a result, Leiss holds that the solution of ecological problems requires people should perceive natural control thinking from a new perspective which is control of irrational desire and evil human nature, and also requires that natural control should be built on harmonious relations of man-nature and man-man and attitude of taking one's due responsibilities. "Natural control thinking should be reinterpreted in such a way that it aims at ethical or moral improvement rather than scientific and technological innovation... successful efforts will result in liberation of nature, that is human nature, which implies human beings enjoy freely abundant intellectual fruits in peace."<sup>36</sup> This is a control of human-nature relation purpose of which is no oppressive needs come from social ruling structure. In addition, Leiss, like Giddens, assumes ethical progress is not contrary to scientific development and rational development of the latter constitutes an important precondition of the former. Likewise, Foster appeals repeatedly that environmental protection should be carried out under people-oriented framework. Besides, Andrew Dobson, author of *Green Political Thought* and D.A.Coleman, author of *Ecopolitics: Building a Green Society* both maintain ecopolitics is a political ideology and ecopolitical strategy is efficient in tackling ecological problems. Some thinkers mentioned above in this paper also link ecological crisis with morality and technology to reveal root of crisis.

By this token, it is not the first time that ecological problem is attributed to deviation of modern thinking and values, not is it the first time to be listed on political agenda as political ideology. Some theorists held fruitful discussions before Giddens, for instance, the claim of moral revolution with far-reaching ecological problems.<sup>37</sup>

The contribution in Giddens' theory is that he connects ecological problem with factors such as politics, economy, culture, ethics, technology and people, makes an analysis in the vision of modernization and takes it as core and token of his life politics. He states clearly, "Ecological politics is politics of loss—the loss of nature and the loss of traditions---but also a politics of recovery."<sup>38</sup> Obviously it is resumption of morality. He emphasizes that life politics, with concern of morality and survival as its own responsibility, should focus on ecological problems which is a matter of man's subsistence and development. "Facing up to it means deliberating, in an open and public way, how social and environmental repair might be connected to the pursuit of a positive life value. Life politics here unavoidably focuses on very basic ethical concerns-concerns that have featured in an important way in the history of conservatism, but which other political perspectives have left almost completely untouched."<sup>39</sup> "They pose with particular force the questions we must face when 'progress' has become sharply double-edged, when we have new responsibility to future generations, when there have ethical dilemmas that mechanisms of constant economic growth either cause us to put to one side or make us repress."<sup>39</sup> That is to say, "the ecological issues which perturb us cannot be understood as matters concerning only the environment."<sup>40</sup> One of purposes in his life politics is to rebuild morality damaged and destroyed by modernization; consequently, realization of life politics is the precondition of solving ecological problems. In this way, Giddens brings ecological problems into his field of life politics and solves them thoroughly through practice of life politics.

<sup>35</sup> William Leiss, *The Domination of Nature*, translated by Yue Changling et al, Chong Qing Publishing House, p.108

<sup>36</sup> William Leiss, *The Domination of Nature*, translated by Yue Changling et al, Chong Qing Publishing House, p.168

<sup>37</sup> Johan. Foster, *Ecological Crisis and Capitalism*, translated by Geng jianxin et al, Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2006, p.38

<sup>38</sup> Anthony Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right*, pp.26-27.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.p.92.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.p.92.