

Recent Publications

La Cina e la questione ambientale / Alessandro Gobbicchi. - Milano : F. Angeli, c2012. - 229 p. - (Società e politica ; 74). - ISBN 978-88-204-0374-4

Discussing China's approach to global warming is not an easy task. Beijing's attitude to this sensitive issue has often appeared confusing. Alessandro Gobbicchi's book, which tries to retrace what the People's Republic has been thinking, doing and achieving in this context over the last three decades, is therefore a welcome tool.

The book argues that China systematically approached the environmental issue for the first time when its historical "modernisation" started in the late 1970s. He writes, however, that the Party was aware of the fact that economic growth and development could have a dangerous impact on the environment as of the late 1950s, even if it never designed a consistent and effective environmental policy. Although it is particularly difficult and risky to forecast Beijing's political and economic intentions, the author seems convinced that things might change in a long-term perspective.

The author emphasizes the connections between economic growth, environmental problems and social stability. While fast economic growth is crucial for maintaining social stability in the People's Republic of

China, China's economic prosperity has already had a deep and negative impact on the environment. In turn, the recent increase in social protests triggered by environmental disasters has transformed ecological problems into sources of instability, pushing the author to conclude that this dangerous chain reaction can be broken only by reorienting economic growth in a more 'ecological' direction – a choice that, according to Gobbicchi, could have other positive spillovers in terms of people's health and the preservation of primary sources and ecological and geological equilibria.

The author clarifies that at the time of Zhou Enlai (considered the leader with the strongest environmental consciousness in China), China's Communist Party was convinced that environmental problems were an inevitable consequence of capitalist society and that such problems would never become the source of trouble under Chinese socialism. He also reminds us that the then premier elaborated the principle of the 'Three Simultaneities', according to which anti-pollution policies and devices should be implemented and installed 'simultaneously' to the realization of industrial policies and plants to control their environmental impact, implying that it was already clear in the 1970s that boosting economic growth without taking its

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environmental implications into consideration might have a destabilizing political, social and cultural impact.

The first part of the book investigates the evolution of China's environmental policy since Deng Xiaoping's reforms, highlighting the way in which each Five Year Plan approached the issue, overviewing the (limited) improvements achieved by the measures implemented, and pointing out the reasons for failures. The second part retraces the background to the policy and the circumstances that influenced its subsequent evolution, stressing the impact of China's legislative, executive and judicial systems, as well as its fiscal and financial constraints.

The author emphasizes the huge contradiction in contemporary China: the idea that there can be any kind of environment protection if the strategy for maintaining high growth rate is to stimulate internal consumption. The book suggests that while most Chinese efforts have until now been focused on reducing (or, better, trying to limit) the impact of industrial waste on the environment, Beijing should rather consider the long-term effects of a rapid increase in internal consumption.

In conclusion, the author reiterates that what China has been doing over the last three decades to limit pollution and boost energy saving has not been enough to achieve remarkable results. Furthermore, he emphasizes that no matter how urgent it is to address the environmental issue in a consistent way, the Beijing government seems to continue to consider economic growth its main priority, thereby reducing, albeit indirectly, the effectiveness of any environmental policy. (*Claudia Astarita*)