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PACIFIC PERSPECTIVES:

WHY MARXISM IS GETTING

A SECOND LOOK, HOWEVER SKEPTICALLY

BY TOM PLATE

Los Angeles - To be sure, China President Xi Jinping's recent reassertion of ideology was calculated to counter any flirtation inside his Communist the Party with pure neo-liberal market economics, not to mention Western-style democratic governance. Just check out his revivalist line, delivered in the Great Hall of the People on Beijing: "The whole Party should remember - what we are building is socialism with Chinese characteristics, not some other -ism." Xi's address, televised nationally, was no discourse in economic theory, but an emphatic effort at legitimization of the Party's continuance in power on the march toward the nation's "great rejuvenation": "... Marxism must be the basic fundamental, guiding principle, or the Party would lose its soul and direction."

President Xi failed to mention it, however, but outside of China, arguably, no Marxism in continual practice has ever proven exemplary as a method of managing a nation's economy. For China to have added those many touches of "Chinese characteristics" (i.e., a kind of entrepreneurial capitalism), as the country's own leaders admit, is not proof of the validity of pure Marxist orthodoxy but rather of the innate genius of Han improvisation. What's more, skeptics and critics will be quick to note that without the inherent Marxist need for control, the Party might have lost power by now. So they will view Xi's declaration as no more than an effort to rally ideological belief. For as China's growth rates slow (though still among the world's highest), the view is that without some secular religion for inspiration and justification, Han society might come to seem no more than one big Chinese casino in which some gamblers lose, some gamblers win – but CCP house management never loses.

Even so, while Xi's primary target for the revivalist speech was the party elite (speaking of obvious inequality!), the message might well offer a touch of appeal to a broader, non-Communist audience. Even in the most intelligent and best-performing Asian economies (say, Singapore and Hong Kong) the gap between rich and poor is widening, seemingly beyond immediate amelioration. Xi's pitch echoes growing global doubts about the equity utility of neo-liberal capitalist economics, which, though a proven wealth-producer, seems incapable of yielding broad-based fairness.

And so in the West, where capitalism has dominated, a neo-Marxist or post-modern Marxism now gets a second long look. If the richest 1% hold more wealth than ever before, and the other 99% are struggling as never before, and the physical globe overall looks to need a massive urgent injection of ecological protectionism, consideration of alternative approaches to running economies and setting priorities will be necessary. In American academic and foundation circles, for example, one detects the slow surfacing of a ‘postmodern Marxism’ that does not foolishly propose to stamp out wealth-creating market forces (clearly a cure worse than the disease) but insists on a humanitarian neo-socialism that requires a governance system which stifles corruption and obscene profit taking, and curbs the power of wealthy elites to shape social and economic policy so as to line their offshore pockets while pocketing relevant politicians.

Prof. Philip D. Clayton, a California colleague who teaches at the well-respected Claremont School of Theology, where he is its noted Ingraham Professor, has put it this way: “Most people find it counterintuitive that a system motivated exclusively by greed and cutthroat competition would bring the greatest benefits to the greatest number of people. We now see that there is a good reason people find this claim counterintuitive: it is false. Abuses are only overcome when governments, multinational agencies, labor groups, consumer advocates, and a well-organized system of checks and balances all serve as watchdogs over market competition.”

In Europe many agree with such views as that of Jacques Derrida, the late French philosopher - that the “triumph” of capitalism in the West has only served to “highlight its own failures, as human suffering continues and environmental catastrophe appears inevitable.” At the least, the relentless ecological crisis and frightening rich-poor divide require us to open our minds to alternatives ways – or at least profound modifications – of current canons of governance and economic management. This does not mean, as the saying goes, that one throws the baby out with the bathwater: capitalism, after all, does create wealth. But at what corollary costs? And for whom? The well-known Methodist theologian and Marxist theorist Joerg Rieger is fond of praising American billionaire Warren Buffett for saying “there is such a thing as class warfare and that his class is winning it.” You don't have to be a Marxist - with or without Chinese characteristics - to seriously question the continued absolute validity of status-quo liberal-democratic governance.

Professor Tom Plate is Distinguished Scholar of Asian and Pacific Studies at Loyola Marymount University and author of the series “Giants of Asia”. An earlier, more detailed version of this column, written from Los Angeles, appeared in the South China Morning Post of Hong Kong, where Plate is a regularly appearing columnist.