The Marxian versus ‘Marxism’

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Associated Mode of Production, exclaimed (almost stupefied) a senior professor of department of political science, University of North Bengal, at a coffee house in southern fringe of Kolkata, as if A–M–P isn’t in Karl Marx’s or Friedrich Engels’ writings, looking at the cover page of *Marx’s Associated Mode of Production: A Critique of Marxism* authored by Paresh Chattopadhyay. Overwhelming proportion of card-carrying communists in India, are unaware of A–M–P as the diagonally opposite of the humani–malistic Capitalist Mode of Production in Marx who envisioned A–M–P as the production system in a Communist (fully synonymous with Socialist) society, a ‘noble and humane society’ or in other words ‘cooperative society (not to be confused with the corruption–attracting cooperatives around) based on commodity ownership in the means of production (so that) producers do not exchange their products just as little does the labour employed on the products as the value of these products’ (Gotha Kritik), which is why A–M–P is ‘infinitely nobler and more humane’ than the existing capitalist society. Marx envisioned a society comprising labouring people, ‘free and equal individuals’, entrusted with the task of building a future society through ‘collective self–activity’.

Amusingly enough, like the aforestated political science professor, most of the academics at least in India in the post–Marx era dumped A–M–P. However, for defenders of the Twentieth Century Socialism or Official Marxism (approximately Leninism) AMP is Asiatic Mode of Production, the acronym, AMP, enunciated by Marx in the introduction to Zur Kritik der Politischen Oekonomie in 1853.

In a review paper of papers (mostly or all in Italian), presented at an international conference in Naples on an update about the state of MEGA, critique of philosophy and politics, Capital—an incomplete critique and Marx today, Marx scholars (who distanced themselves from ideology–fetishism smearing Marxists and Marxism) around in April 2004, Chattopadhyay stated candidly, ‘Marx is a disregarded author. The systematization of his critical theory, the impoverishment which has accompanied its divulgation and diffusion, the manipulation and censorship of his writings and their instrumental utilization for political ends have rendered Marx incomprehensible’.

Distortion and misinterpretation of Marxian thoughts are manifest in the writings of Georgi Plekhanov who in an article, Neue Zeit in 1891 used the term ‘Dialectical Marxism’ (Inversion of Marx’s ‘materialistic dialectic’. In fact, even before Plekhanov, it was coined by Joseph Dietzgen who developed Dialectical Marxism independent of Marx and Engels. Vladimir Lenin used and argued for adopted DM in his ‘What the Friends of the People Are’ in 1894. Lenin’s followers and official Marxist (OM) parties, built in consonance of rules, laid down by the Communist International (Comint–tern), set up under the initiative of Lenin, in 1919, adhered to DM, often mechanistically. Unabated vulgarisation, manifest during Lenin years, and for nearly a century thereafter devastated everything Marxian. For instance, Marx’s ‘materialist conception of History’ was turned upside down into ‘historical materialism’ after demise of Marx.

There is no denying that for those (albeit very few in number to date, at least in this subcontinent) who repose optimism on the on–going Marxian renaissance, an imperative is to wage a theoretical battle for insulating themselves and fellow-travellers around from the century long distortion of Marxian theories and thoughts. Chattopadhyay’s book will inspire those—maybe a minority—who are dispassionately committed to combat the protracted misinterpretation and arbitrary distortion under the garb of ‘Marxism’. However, Marx disapproved of the very concept ‘Marxist’ in the morrow of 1880s after a meeting of the First International, not attended by him. Addressing two participants Lafargue and Jules Guesde, top French socialist leaders, for their silent endorsement of the prefix ‘Marxist’ with a chagrin, Marx stated : ‘Ce qu’il y a de certain c’est que moi, je ne suis pas Marxiste.’ (If anything is certain, it is that I myself am not a Marxist). After all, Marx was vehemently against the very word ideology (or, obviously ‘ism’) or ideologue, very clearly German Ideology. If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside–down as in a camera obscura, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical–type life–process as the aversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life–process. So use of ‘Marxism’ and ‘Marxist’ even as prefix or suffix is a deviation from the Marxian.

The treatise is part of a new series of titles under ‘The Marx Revival’ as a part of a project of Palgrave Macmillan. The author in the beginning of preface sets out his objective which is to share with the readers and the concerned the ’liberating idea, drawing on Marx’s original texts, finished and unfinished’, that is A–M–P. Introduction aside, Chattopadhyay, has split the book into 11 chapters: Marx’s First Critique of Political Economy (1844–1994), Marx’s Notebooks of 1844–1847, Post–capitalist Society: A Marxian Portrait, On the Dialectic of Labour in the Critique of Political Economy, Women’s Labour and Capital Accumulation, Marx on the Global Reach of Capital, Crisis Theory in Marx’s Economic Manuscripts of Early 1860s, On Market Socialism, Marx on Dialectical Progression Towards Socialism, The Early Roots of Marx’s Capital and Illusion of the Epoch: Twentieth–Century Socialism.

The sequential arrangement of chapters in the book is significant. For instance, in the first chapter, the author crisply narrates the essence of Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844 (or Paris Manuscripts) where Marx categorically states, Chattopadhyay points out, ‘humanity exists outside political economy’ which Marx always termed as ‘bourgeois science’. He remained steadfastly opposed to any brand of political economy. Unfortunately, many so–called ‘Marxist’ scholars, dish out a vulgarised concept, ‘Marxist Political Economy’. 
Even Ajit Chaudhuri, a fairly known economist in India and abroad, shockingly discovered ‘orthodox Marxian political economy’ (see Supplement from Rama to Marx in ‘Margin of Margin—Profile of an Unrepentant Postcolonial Collaborator’ by Ajit Chaudhuri et al, Kolkata 2011. Pp 248-50), reflecting his strange unawareness that Marx’s works are based on ‘a conscientious critical analysis of political economy’, not caring to note Marx’s lifelong critique of ‘political economy’ of any strain. To put it bluntly, Marxian political economy being alien to Marx, the eminent economist doesn’t stop in vulgarisation there. He conceitedly distorts that the Asiatic Mode of Production “is repressed in Marxian Political Economy”. For Marx, Chattopadhyay rightly notes, political economy was useful in understanding capitalism. Concepts like ‘Marxist economies’ and ‘Marxian political economy’ are ‘a contradiction in terms’. The last one, Illusion of the Epoch : Twentieth-Century Socialism, a slightly revised version of his paper, ‘Myth of Twentieth Century Socialism’, appeared in December 2010 issue of ‘Socialism and Democracy’. It is a theoretical demolition of Leninist vulgarisation of Marxian socialism. The socialism of last century was a falsification of Marx.

It is not possible in this discourse to focus on all the chapters although each of them deserves a critical appreciation (by criticism, one accepts the popular Croce’s suggestion that it is the ‘art of teaching to read’, this writer trying rather to add, this might be acrobatics of discovering potholes instead of critiquing benignly). For many, chapters such as Marx’s Notebooks of 1844-47, Post-Capitalist Society, On the Dialectics of Labour in the Critique of Political Economy, Marx on Dialectical Progression Towards Socialism and Illusion of the Twentieth Century Socialism are a re-read with altered caption and minor—rather routine editorial changes (although with a feel of reading anew), while for those who read them for the first time it may be an inspiring experience to encourage reading Marx independently rid of partyycraft. This reviewer lays special emphasis on two papers—Women’s Labour and Capital Accumulation and On Market Socialism. The first one is relevant at a time when there is a slanderous campaign from feminist critics like Peter Custers accusing Marx of ‘deep bias against women’ and disregard of sexual division of labour. To him, “classical Marxian theory fails to adequately problematise gender issues in capitalist production and how a feminist lens can uncover the real picture of capital accumulation both at the national and global level”. Such accusations suffer from careless reading of Marx. Chattopadhyay quotes from the French edition of Capital Vol I rendered into English by him. “Capital for its self-valorisation, confiscated the mother of the family’ and “usurped the labour that was necessary for consumption within the family”. He firmly refutes Custers’ statement—“Marx grants the label ‘social labour’ only to commodity production”, referring to texts in original and quips, “it constitutes a non sequitur” or logically asymmetrical, pointing out that the very idea that “only commodity-producing labour is the only labour social labour would imply that labour cannot have a social character outside the commodity-capitalist world, in any other social formation—a proposition patently absurd in Marx.” He quotes Marx reductively, “The conditions of labour and the determinants of social labour, but in general (scholastically), have a particular (besonderer) way. This is a specific kind of sociality.” In Paris Manuscripts, Marx terms ‘marriage’ in capitalist society as a form of exclusive private property; and the status of women under CMP as “the prey and servant of social lust.”

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Italian economist Vilfred Pareto perceived a society that would employ its material and human resources “through determination of simple commodity production from capitalism. The Lange–Lerner model (with Abba Lerner) of public ownership of means of exchange, that is, money’. He considered ‘socialist community’, ‘organised society’ and ‘state’ mutually synonymous, almost in sync with Lenin’s ‘commune state’ or ‘socialist state’. In contrast, Marx in a letter to Dr Kugelmann in early April 1871 reasserted his unequivocal opposition to any type of state to replace the existing one or what he wrote in the Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (1852).

Research on works of Marx and Engels has acquired new dimensions with Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe (MEGA), the new historical-critical edition of the Complete Works of Marx and Engels under the International Marx-Engels Foundation (IMES), founded in 1990 conjointly by the Institute of Social History under the University of Amsterdam. It is for a comprehensive restitutio of writings of the two authors, originally left incomplete and, mostly unpublished to date. But for the IMES, a substantial treasure of Marx and Engels would have remained unknown, such as the ‘notebook’ (1844-47)—the first of a set of twenty ‘notebooks’ stretching up to 1881 covering jurisprudence, history, philosophy, belles lettres and last, but not the least, political economy, in Paris and Brussels. The book under review has a previous chapter on these notebooks—two from Paris days and six from Brussels years—plus 200 ‘excerpt copy books’. Studies of those notebooks (Nottzubuch) plus Engels’ Outlines Of A Critique of Political Economy (1843) helped Marx begin economic studies leading towards future investigation. The Theses on Feuerbach—e leven (1845)—was drafted by Marx during this period, leading
to formulation of 'new materialism', Marx and Engels wrote Holy Family, German Ideology and EPW of 1844 in those years. Sadly enough, 'ideolo-gues' (not synonymous with theorists) of OM parties (such as CPI, CPI-M and variants of CPI-ML) never even mentioned these notebooks. It's as futile as trying to teach a new word to a parrot as suggesting them that these notebooks are a key to understand how Marx prepared himself to write his magnum opus, Das Kapital, although these are mostly in German and French. Those like this writer who do not know these languages are handicapped. For instance, Marx underlined limitations of 'minimum wage' in the unpublished sixth chapter of Capital (in German), the author quotes in English translation in the chapter, The Early Roots of Marx's Capital: 'The minimum wage of the slave appears as a constant magnitude, independent of his labour. For the free labourer this value of his labour power and the corresponding average wage are not predestined by the limits determined by his sheer physical needs, independently of his own labour. It is here like the value of all commodities, a more or less constant average for the class; but it does not exist in this immediate reality for the individual labourer whose wage may stay above or below this minimum.'

The chapters in the book are a guide to understand A-M-P in the 150th year of publication of Das Kapital, Kritik der politischen Ökonomie (14 September 1867). It has to be read critically following the Cartesian logic of doubting everything, the basis of foundationalism. Lastly, the author dedicates the book to Anatoly Lamanov, hero of the great Kronstad revolt of 1921 against the anti-libertarian Bolshevik power. Victor Serge in his memoirs wrote that even when the Kronstad revolutionaries were mercilessly killed under orders from Lenin and Trotsky they raised the slogan—'Long Live Communist International'.