



**Gareth Stedman Jones.** *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion.* Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2016. Illustrations, maps. 768 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-97161-5.

**Reviewed by** Terence Renaud

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Last year the city of Hamburg celebrated the 150th anniversary of *Capital* (1867), whose first volume was originally published there. An inflated bust of Karl Marx, modeled on the forty-ton monument in Chemnitz, greets visitors to a special exhibit in the city's Museum of Work. Called *Karl Marx light* by its creator Hannes Langeder, this inflated sculpture symbolizes a new, buoyant version of Marx, whose legacy has finally shed the monumental burden of the Cold War. Today we can ostensibly read Marx afresh and decide which of his ideas still apply to our world. The Hamburg exhibit features a playful staging of scenes from *Capital*, including faux supermarket aisles stocked with "commodities." Visitors can even access digital content through WhatsApp. By presenting *Capital* as a pop-cultural phenomenon, the museum has undertaken "an easily accessible (re)popularization of Marx." [1]

If the museum exhibit seems trivial, then consider the conference series MARX IS' MUSS (Marx Is a Must)—a play on the German word for Marxism—that has been held annually in Germany since 2007. Participants range from scholars to activists, and speakers have included Slavoj Žižek, Tariq Ali, Elmar Altvater, Terry Eagleton, Robert Brenner, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, and Stathis Kouvelakis. The quality of the panels matches and probably surpasses many academic conferences. In

2018, the series will celebrate the two hundredth anniversary of Marx's birth as well as the fiftieth anniversary of May 1968. While attendees will hear from the faction of the leftist German party, Die Linke, which sponsors the event, their main task is to deploy Marxist ideas in today's fight against neoliberalism and far-right populism. Their Karl Marx may have more substance than the Hamburg inflatable, but he is just as free from the weight of the past.

These recent, uplifting engagements with Marxism stand in contrast to Gareth Stedman Jones's new biography of Marx. While it too aims to shatter the "monumental mythology" that has surrounded the German philosopher since the late nineteenth century, the book hardly uplifts the reader. Reading *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion* is a deflationary experience. Its author commits himself absolutely to reconstructing Marx's life and work according to their original, nineteenth-century context. According to him, all later iterations of Marxism overinflated Marx's legacy. So this is an anti-Marxist biography of Marx, or "Karl," as the author whimsically calls him. In his wide-ranging and impressive attempt to restore the original Marx, Stedman Jones hopes also to politically neutralize him.

The book is divided into twelve chapters, framed by a prologue and epilogue, and fortified

by maps, illustrations, and copious notes. “Tome” might accurately describe a 750-page volume, but this one does not feel too long as far as biographies go. Many of those pages satisfy Stedman Jones’s desire to place Marx and his contemporaries “in a landscape larger than themselves” (p. xv). Every major public figure, and plenty of minor ones too, get their potted histories: no need to consult Wikipedia. The author’s erudition is evident in his descriptions of Rhineland radicalism in the 1830s and ’40s, debates over religion in Berlin, and mass democratic politics across Europe in the mid- to late nineteenth century.

Appropriately enough, the book starts with a chapter about the impact of the French Revolution on the adjacent German lands as well as the post-Napoleonic Restoration that began in 1815. Three years later, Karl Marx was born into an assimilated Jewish family in Trier. He had a normal bourgeois childhood and eventually attended university in Bonn and Berlin. Despite initially studying law at his father’s behest, the young Marx inclined toward poetry and philosophy. Stedman Jones devotes several pages to the love poems that Marx wrote for his fiancée, Jenny von Westphalen. The portrait we get is of a romantic young man who spurned convention, ignored his parents’ wishes, drank too much, and rushed headlong into radical politics.

In the book’s detailed description of European politics circa 1848, Marx emerges as a typical German radical who vacillated between republicanism and socialism. Stedman Jones masterfully explains the evolution of Marx’s critique of religion and bourgeois life out of his engagement with German idealism (especially the philosophies of Immanuel Kant, J. G. Fichte, F. W. J. Schelling, and G. W. F. Hegel). Given the author’s association with the Cambridge school, it comes as no surprise that he should highlight the classical republican elements in Marx’s political philosophy. The chapter “Rebuilding the *Polis*” recounts Marx’s treatment of the ancient Greek city-state and its

Jacobin revival as models for overcoming social alienation. A rational state based on freedom and composed of active citizens might counteract Christianity and capitalism alike. Marx learned to appreciate the polis from his reading of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* (1820) and his affiliation with Young Hegelians like Bruno Bauer and Ludwig Feuerbach. Compared to studies of Marx’s political thought by Shlomo Avineri and others, however, there is nothing particularly new in Stedman Jones’s analysis except for its level of detail.

The book’s survey of Marx’s political journalism in Cologne, Paris, Brussels, and London (including his and Friedrich Engels’s work as correspondents for the *New-York Daily Tribune*) likewise shines in detail if not in novelty. Jonathan Sperber’s *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life* (2013) already covered that ground. Even Stedman Jones’s expert comparison of Marx’s radicalism to the utopian socialist currents coming out of France and England follows the standard interpretations by Isaiah Berlin, George Lichtheim, and Leszek Kołakowski, among others. His synoptic effort to contextualize every aspect of Marx’s work was bound to rely on past scholarship. But the book’s coverage of so much territory sometimes gives the reader a dizzying sense of jumping all over the place.

The more focused sections unpack Marx’s main theoretical works and expose their limitations. For example, Stedman Jones convincingly shows how spotty Marx’s reading of the French and English political economists really was. Apparently he only read David Ricardo’s *On the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* (1817), and thus never acknowledged Ricardo’s later reservations about the labor theory of value. Nor did he seriously examine James Mill’s *Elements of Political Economy* (1821), a major work in its day. From his historical subjects, Stedman Jones demands originality above all else. So he eagerly points out whenever Marx elaborated on somebody else’s idea, expressed a commonplace no-

tion, or claimed to invent a theory that already existed. One cannot help but feel sorry for Marx when his biographer chastises him for not knowing about the now obscure work of Pellegrino Rossi or Eugène Buret.

The two long chapters on *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) and *Capital* are perhaps the strongest in the book. The author reconstructs Marx's attempt to replace classical political economy with his own systematic critique of capitalism. The *Grundrisse* (Outlines) of 1857-58 reveal the grandeur of Marx's ambition, of which he accomplished only a small part in his lifetime: volume 1 of *Capital*. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx introduced all of the economic ideas that would later make him famous. But the biographer claims that he always grounded those economic ideas in philosophy. For Stedman Jones, Marx was principally a German philosopher rather than an economist or sociologist. The book convincingly demonstrates the similarity between Marx's *Grundrisse* and Hegel's *Science of Logic* (1816), both of which featured "a spiral of concepts of increasing universality" (p. 389). Stedman Jones belongs to the camp of interpreters who insist on the philosophical continuity between the young, humanist Marx and the mature Marx of *Capital*.

The book's reconstruction of Marx's theory of capitalist development keeps faith with the texts, but Stedman Jones cannot hold back his criticism. Among other things, he claims that Marx never adequately explained how capitalism interacts with noncapitalist societies. The theory of primitive accumulation, which accounted for the original theft of land and property that preceded the capitalist mode of production, did not account for the survival of many noncapitalist forms within capitalist society (for example, an aristocracy in industrial Britain). Nor did it foresee the actual process by which developing countries—usually former colonies—would modernize their economies by "skipping" certain stages of development prescribed by historical materialism. Fi-

nally, Marx's theory failed the empirical test for Britain because it attributed the destruction of primitive communities (for example, enclosures) to the force of capital instead of the "conscious action on the part of royal authorities" (p. 424). Things Marx attributed to economics Stedman Jones invariably attributes to politics.

To finish deflating Marx, the biographer concludes that *Capital* just was not a very good book. It made some important contributions to our understanding of modern society, but it failed to displace classical political economy or prove the necessary connection between capitalism and the misery of the working class. Stedman Jones debunks the usual claim that Marx's chronic illness prevented him from completing more volumes in his lifetime. Instead we read about how Marx knew that he faced insoluble theoretical problems and expressed that doubt in letters to friends. So he stalled and eventually abandoned his grand project. According to Stedman Jones, the only novel thing that Marx did was to invent the method of social and economic history. That is an impressive accomplishment, but it pales in comparison with the philosopher's totalizing and emancipatory vision.

In one of the few places where he explicitly critiques twentieth-century Marxism, Stedman Jones claims that Marx's politics changed in the 1860s. His years in British exile turned him into a social democrat and trade union supporter who rejected violent means. He abandoned the Jacobin or Blanquist model of insurrection for a new model of slow, gradual change. Contrary to what many communists would later believe, Marx thought of revolution as a long process rather than a single dramatic event. The greatest achievement of the International Workingmen's Association, which Marx aspired to lead, was to spread "a new and lasting language of social democracy" (p. 462). With this moderate Marx, Stedman Jones has more sympathy. But the drama of the Paris Commune in 1871 and the waning

militancy of the British labor movement over the next decade reignited Marx's radicalism. The biographer does not explain why the reformism of the 1860s represents the real Marx, nor why his subsequent calls for a revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat must be interpreted as a deviation from that norm.

Marx's political judgment was wholly out of touch with actual developments on the Continent, we are told. While Stedman Jones does poke holes in Marx's logic, it seems that Marx the revolutionary socialist gets shunted in favor of Marx the social democrat because of the biographer's own preference for non-Marxian brands of socialism and radical democracy such as Chartism. He reserves his greatest praise for Giuseppe Mazzini and other "transnational republicans," radical reformers, and trade union activists. Such movements treated workers as citizens aspiring for equal rights, and not just as producers wanting to expropriate the expropriators.

The book ends with Marx's death in 1883. Aside from a brief epilogue, the biographer refrains from looking beyond the bounded life of his nineteenth-century subject. His conclusions about Marx's intellectual legacy are odd. Having devoted the penultimate section of the last chapter to Marx's musings on the premodern village community, Stedman Jones compares him to a generation of anthropologists that included Henry Maine, J. J. Bachofen, and Lewis H. Morgan. Surely that is not the sort of company that a revolutionary critic of bourgeois society would wish to keep. The book's final lines repeat the by now tired thesis that "the Marx constructed in the twentieth century bore only an incidental resemblance to the Marx who lived in the nineteenth" (p. 595).

Earlier the reader had learned that the chief distorter of Marx's legacy was his best friend and benefactor, Friedrich Engels. The latter's crime was to transform Marx into a natural scientist. "Just as Darwin discovered the law of development of organic nature," Engels famously said in

his graveside eulogy, "so Marx discovered the law of development of human history."<sup>[2]</sup> Engels understood Marx's theory as a purely materialist alternative to all forms of metaphysical idealism. Stedman Jones explains that Marx himself had not aimed "to develop a 'materialist conception', but rather to construct a philosophical system that reconciled materialism and idealism, and incorporated nature and mind without assigning primacy to one or the other" (p. 193). Marx did not reject idealism as such but only idealistic abstraction: he grounded his theory of history in concrete social relations.

While Stedman Jones is right that Engels promoted a more crudely materialistic reading of Marx—and that this reading inspired orthodox Marxism's reduction of political and cultural phenomena to their economic base—sometimes it feels like he is beating a dead horse. Readers should already know that many self-proclaimed Marxists distorted Marx's life and work to suit their own political agendas. Even respected scholars like David Riazanov, who founded the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow and launched the Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe (MEGA), took liberties with certain documents. Stedman Jones's decision to emphasize Marx's failings in order to correct for such distortions seems belated and redundant. Ever since the 1920s, in fact, such leftist intellectuals as Georg Lukács and Karl Korsch have subjected orthodox Marxism to a thoroughgoing critique. They returned to the sources and helped uncover the philosophical humanism of the young Marx, which the crude materialists and economic determinists had forgotten.

Further evidence of Stedman Jones's impatience with twentieth-century interpretations of Marx is the limited space that he devotes to the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (1932), the key text for Western Marxists from Lukács to Jean-Paul Sartre. He also subscribes to Terrell Carver's theory that *The German Ideology* (1932) was an invented text that never existed as

such in Marx's and Engels's lifetimes. Therefore he devotes zero space to discussing one of the most important works in the history of socialist thought.

If people have long known that Marx does not equal Marxism, then why does Stedman Jones belabor that point? The answer lies in his own journey from the New Left, through French structuralism, to a contextualist practice of intellectual history that leaves Marxism behind. His current position ironically contrasts with his earliest critiques of academic history. In a 1967 essay for *New Left Review*, he took English historians to task for not thinking more seriously about Marxism, psychoanalysis, and sociology. It was not enough simply to acknowledge that the "economy" mattered and then go about one's usual business, he claimed. Historians had to get with the times, which then meant confronting the methodological challenges posed by Continental theory. He encouraged his fellow historians to "advance into the structure and history of the ruling class, into the interpretation of the historical morphology of whole cultures." Only such an "intellectual imperialism and collective assault" on the bourgeois establishment would open up new vistas of historical understanding. "Otherwise," the young Stedman Jones warned, "the limp ghosts of long departed liberal mandarins will forever 'weigh like a nightmare on the brain of the living.'" [3]

However, he soon exorcised a different ghost. Not liberal mandarins but Western Marxists became Stedman Jones's next target. In his 1971 review of the first English translation of Georg Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), he threw down the gauntlet before Marxist humanists. Lukács's concepts of reification, alienation, and totality had inspired "the attitudes and activities of radicals and revolutionaries who ... act under the banner of a Marx seen through the eyes of [Herbert] Marcuse, the Frankfurt School, [Lucien] Goldmann, [Henri] Lefebvre or [Guy] Debord." But that version of Marx involved a Ro-

mantic aversion to science and technology that Marx himself never shared. Historical materialism, rightly understood, did not abstractly oppose "nature" to science or industry. Such veneration of nature and organic communities "is no less assimilable to right-wing extremism and variants of fascism than it is to socialism." What became increasingly clear in his critique of Lukács was Stedman Jones's admiration for the structural Marxism of Louis Althusser. The latter had famously claimed that an epistemological break existed in Marx's thought between the philosophical humanism of his youth and the objective science of his mature years. From that perspective, which privileged *Capital* as the paradigmatic Marxian work, Lukács had totally missed the mark: he failed to analyze the contradiction between forces of production and social relations of production, the future shape of advanced industrial society, and "the whole institutional superstructure of bourgeois class power." Stedman Jones upheld "real history" and "authentic Marxism" against Lukács's humanism, which made sense only from a Hegelian point of view. Moreover, he criticized the book's "remove from concrete politics." [4]

The seeds of Stedman Jones's later break with Marx were planted by his Althusserian break with Western Marxism. By the mid-1970s, he was calling for a new synthesis of history and sociology based on French linguistics and structural anthropology. Continental theorists like Ferdinand de Saussure, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Roland Barthes conceived of society as a structural arrangement mediated by language. For them, the human was a linguistic or cultural construct rather than an essential species-being, as Marxist humanists assumed. [5]

Having maneuvered away from humanism, Stedman Jones proceeded to abandon Marxism altogether. The big turn in his intellectual biography came in 1983 with the publication of *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832-1982*. In that important book, he fo-

cused attention on the overlapping ways that people talked about class in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain. The book doubled down on the French structuralist principle that no social reality exists prior to language or discourse. For him, discursive reality was social reality. This ontological stance led him to privilege politics and the public sphere as the proper subjects of history. Not social being but political languages determined consciousness.

In a 1996 essay, Stedman Jones acknowledged the rapid decline of Marxist historiography since the late 1970s. He made clear that both Althusser's attempt "to re-theorise Marxism on the basis of structuralism and psychoanalysis" and the analytical Marxist G. A. Cohen's attempt "to reconstruct a coherent theory of history" had failed. Not only did Marx's theory involve insoluble problems, it repeatedly failed to stand up to empirical scrutiny. The demise of Marxism was compensated for by the linguistic turn in historical scholarship. Because linguistics denied the existence of any social reality prior to language, it posed a serious challenge to historical materialism, for which social being determined consciousness. A linguistically attuned history allowed for a new focus on civil society and political culture. Finally, Stedman Jones laid out the present political stakes of embracing the linguistic turn: after 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet bloc, he thought, we ought to accept that there is no alternative to commercial society except for totalitarianism.[6] Or, as he said more recently, "Whatever is wrong with capitalism, the alternatives were worse." [7]

Marxism had thus transformed from a revolutionary event into an object of historical analysis. It no longer applied to the present reality. Instead, Stedman Jones saw it as "the product of a more specific nineteenth century conjuncture." This new understanding enabled us "to de-construct Marxism itself, to take apart the strange assemblage of conceptual insight [i.e., greatness] and surreal expectation [i.e., illusion]." We must

do this so that "historical scholarship like politics can clear away, assess and move on from the unsorted debris left by the death of Marxism." [8] Marx could then take his place in the intellectual pantheon alongside Aristotle, Machiavelli, and the many other past thinkers whom we admire but no longer emulate.

Like many of his generation, Stedman Jones grew tired of the revolutionary strivings of the New Left. He had no love for the sectarian and often violent far-left politics of the post-1968 era. His romance with Althusser ended on account of the latter's alternation between "a crude agitprop Leninism and a rudderless liberalism." By the 1990s, he had given up on structuralism and linguistics, too. He criticized himself for having exhibited "the devotee's fetishisation of theory." So, he decided to adopt the Cambridge school approach to the history of political thought. Politically, he hoped to uncover "new starting points in the criticism of global commercial society, unburdened by fantasies about the total abolition of markets, delusions about class, utopian aversion to pluralism or socialist predilections for the authoritarian state." Now he advocates a revival of Enlightenment-style progress and social reform. [9] We do still live in the capitalist world analyzed by Marx, Stedman Jones will freely admit. But we need to find a different way of living in it (or a different way out) than he proposed.

Having followed every theoretical turn taken by social and intellectual historians since the 1960s, Stedman Jones is done with theory. Now his only commitment is to the primacy of politics. In *Karl Marx*, for example, his description of the revolutions of 1848 dwells almost entirely on the various factions that vied for political power: little about class interests, and less about objective economic conditions. He rejects the Marxist presumption "that it was possible to anticipate events solely on the basis of 'social development', regardless of political forces and institutions" (p. 281). According to him, democratic politics is empirical-

ly “inter-class” and requires broad popular coalitions.

Furthermore, language is supposedly what has defined the parameters of revolutionary conflict. Marx’s mistake was to adopt a language of class in the 1840s and ’50s that properly belonged to French republicans and socialists of an earlier generation. He missed the nineteenth century’s innovations in mass democracy, downplayed the importance of universal manhood suffrage, and generally disregarded political and legal forms. As a result, Stedman Jones argues, Marx totally misunderstood Europe’s revolutionary era. Class consciousness was actually the product of political exclusion: when certain groups realized that they were barred from democratic participation, they banded together and demanded inclusion. “Far from being ahead of his times in his conception of class,” the biographer claims, “Karl shared the general perception of the propertied classes in Western Europe who, while they purported to sympathize with them, failed to listen to the discourse of workers themselves” (pp. 311-312). Throughout his career, Stedman Jones has sought to honor what workers actually thought and said. He implies that Marx, the arch-theorist of socialism, had an elitist opinion of the working masses and thus ignored their real demands: suffrage, representation, freedom of association, etc. Marx’s entire theory rested on the illusion of an antagonistic society, while class struggle was actually a discursive construct that lacked any objective or empirical reality.

The death of Marxism has been proclaimed many times, and yet it doggedly lives on. The strident tone of Stedman Jones’s book offers proof of that. In his version of Marx’s life, there is far more illusion than greatness. Marx comes off like an ordinary man of his times, subject to the full range of human weaknesses and then some. The mature Marx even appears as a man behind his times. Very few subjects of historical biography could withstand such deflationary treatment. Originally

published by Penguin in the UK, this book was picked up in the US by Harvard University Press and seems to have sold well. Several translations already exist, and the Penguin paperback came out last spring. The success of the book both draws on and enhances the power of Karl Marx’s name, which ironically contradicts the author’s intention. One wonders whether he objected to the use of “Marx” in the title. He might very well have preferred “Karl: The Great Illusion.”

The reader of this biography will learn about many of Marx’s illusions: his disdain for liberal individualism, the incongruence of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie with any actually existing historical groups, his deficient theory of the state, his misplaced faith in the revolutionary potential of the working class, his self-contradictory politics that unfairly dismissed parliamentary democracy, his reduction of the political to the social, his “outdated fantasy” of revolutionary insurrection, and his “unreal premise” that religious sectarianism would disappear from human affairs. Subjected to Stedman Jones’s empirical test, Marx is weighed on the scales and found wanting. Maybe he was full of hot air all along.

#### Notes

[1]. Andreas Möllenkamp, review of the exhibit *Das Kapital* at the Hamburg Museum der Arbeit, curated by Joachim Baur, *H-Soz-Kult* (January 13, 2018): <https://www.hsozkult.de/exhibition-review/id/rezausstellungen-303>. The 2017 film *The Young Karl Marx* (dir. Raoul Peck) is in the same pop-cultural vein.

[2]. Friedrich Engels, “Speech at the Grave of Karl Marx,” March 17, 1883, transcribed by Mike Lepore, 1993, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1883/death/burial.htm> (accessed January 2016).

[3]. Gareth Stedman Jones, “The Pathology of English History,” *New Left Review*, no. 46 (November-December 1967): 29-43, quotations on 43.

[4]. Gareth Stedman Jones, "The Marxism of the Early Lukács: An Evaluation," *New Left Review*, no. 70 (November-December 1971): 27-60, quotations on 33, 36, 49, 51, 54.

[5]. Gareth Stedman Jones, "From Historical Sociology to Theoretical History," *British Journal of Sociology* 27, no. 3 (September 1976): 295-305.

[6]. Gareth Stedman Jones, "The Determinist Fix: Some Obstacles to the Further Development of the Linguistic Approach to History in the 1990s," *History Workshop Journal*, no. 42 (Autumn 1996): 19-35, quotations on 19.

[7]. David Hitchcock, "Gareth Stedman Jones' Plenary on Marxism," *History after Hobsbawm* (May 7, 2014), <https://historyafterhobsbawm.wordpress.com/2014/05/07/gareth-stedman-jones-plenary-on-marxism/>. Stedman Jones's remark was in response to a question by Geoff Eley.

[8]. Stedman Jones, "Determinist Fix," 32-33.

[9]. Gareth Stedman Jones, "History and Theory: An English Story," *Historiein* 3 (2001): 103-24, quotations on 117, 119, 122.

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