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Assertion and Repetition: A Review of Gareth Stedman Jones, "Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion" (Harvard University Press, 2016)

Abstract

A review of Gareth Stedman Jones, "Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion" published by Harvard University Press, 2016.

Keywords

Marx, Gareth Stedman Jones, Review

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The subtitle of Gareth Stedman Jones' recent biography of Marx appears to offer a dialectical inquiry in the grand tradition of Peter Abelard, *Sic et Non*; how was Marx great and of what illusions was he guilty? Which is to say, what in Marx is to be affirmed and what denied? Given Stedman Jones' deep yet critical engagement with the Marxist tradition, one might anticipate a deeply reflective and thoughtful effort to determine what is living and what is dead in Marx's work. Unfortunately, this book, ambitious as it is, falls well short of such expectations. It is a comprehensive work of biography in that grand British tradition that encompasses life and times as well as a sophisticated account of the intellectual progress of the subject. But there are far better works of this type on Marx by McLellan (*Karl Marx: A Biography* Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) and more recently Wheen (*Karl Marx: A Life*, W.W. Norton, 2001). As for dialectical critique, Heilbroner's *Marxism: For and Against* (W.W. Norton, 1980), remains a succinct and still highly relevant standard.

Compared to Stedman Jones' previous work on Engels, Lukács, and his very notable work on the language of class in nineteenth and twentieth century England, this offering falls well short of his best standards. The flaw is not in the research, which is as thorough as ever. Nor is it stylistic. The book is quite readable, although the author for reasons unspecified decided to call Marx by his first name throughout the book and so it is that "Karl" reads Hegel, "Karl" criticizes Proudhon, "Karl" collaborates with Engels, and if Stedman Jones is to be believed, "Karl's" financial dependency on Engels inhibits the late development of his thought in unorthodox directions. The latter assertion is not supported from the primary sources, which is not to say it is impossible, simply that it is supposition and if it were true, it would not fit the rubric of "Illusion" offered in the title. Indeed, at the end of the work one is left uncertain as how Stedman Jones thinks Marx was great, nor what were his most notable illusions. Nor is there any clear statement as to how, if at all, Marx's thought remains living or not.

Stedman Jones is a scholar of Marx and Marxism and has also produced a rich body of historical class analysis, but that said it should be noted that he does not write from what some would regard as a Marxist perspective. Indeed, some reviewers reject this book and have also sharply criticized his work on labor history for its utilization of a framework drawn from semiotics and discourse theory. Stedman Jones should, however, be considered from the perspective he has. It is the very fact that he has but one foot in the Marxist tradition that seemed to offer the prospect that he could have produced a sympathetic yet critically worthwhile biography of Marx. This work does not rely in any apparent way on Stedman Jones' previous work and interest in the relationship between language and class. Indeed, one area where one might expect to find Stedman Jones working from a position of strength would be in the discussion of ideology, which is remarkably largely limited to the footnotes, where Stedman Jones summarizes recent scholarship that has demonstrated that the text of "German Ideology" as we now know it, is a pastiche of unpublished manuscripts put together by early Soviet era editors. Citations to such recent scholarship does indeed belong in the notes but the fact remains that Marx did have some intriguing things to say about language in those texts as well as elsewhere in his work.

One area where Stedman Jones does make a notable contribution is in drawing attention the influence of the German Historical School of Jurisprudence of Karl von Savigny in both the early as well as later developments of Marx's thought. According to Stedman Jones, this conservative body of scholarship provided a foil against which Hegelian, especially left-Hegelian

thinkers developed their critical views of property, religion, and the state in the 1830's and '40's. Later, Stedman Jones comes back to this body of work and traces its connection to the development of nineteenth century anthropology's investigations into ancient communal forms of land ownership. This work had inspired Marx to reconsider the socialist potentiality of the Russian peasant commune and, according to Stedman Jones, contributed to a gap between the later Marx and Engels, the latter of whom was in Stedman Jones' view concerned by then to codify an orthodox Marxism that featured a linear view of historical progression of modes of production. The problem here, however, is that Stedman Jones does not discuss the extent to which this same body of anthropological literature influences Engels' own *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* which quite notably discusses pre-capitalist forms of communal ownership.

Throughout much of the middle to later portions of the work, Stedman Jones emphasizes and re-emphasizes Marx's failure to complete *Capital*, which he clearly regards as a flawed work but does not quite identify how or why. Marx's medical problems that certainly affected the productivity of his middle to later years are discussed in detail, although the psychological impact of exile and poverty are only hinted at by Stedman Jones. He reads Marx's opus as following a Hegelian logic, an interpretation with which this reviewer does not quarrel, with which the sources and materials Marx was working would finally not conform. One has the sense though that Stedman Jones is not putting all his cards on the table here and so we are left untold as to just what is the "illusion" from which Marx suffered? The inevitable collapse of capitalism? The falling rate of profit? The labor theory of value? Or, was the original sin of illusion in the Hegelian method? Of course, all of the above have been put forth by many commentators and critics as flaws in Marx's theoretical framework and one might consider so long as Marx remains a relevant thinker. Indeed, in today's world that is hard to deny, so that even well-known critical debates may well be worth returning to again, but here at least it seems Stedman Jones could have said more.