
Gareth STEDMAN JONES, *Karl Marx. Greatness and Illusion*
(London, Allen Lane, 2016)

Sociologists and historians who studied in the 1970s will be well familiar with Gareth Stedman Jones as both a prominent voice of the British New Left and an influential proponent of a closer cooperation between the two disciplines.¹ What connected the two was for him, as for many of his generation, an interest in Marxist theory. Equally natural came an interest in the English working class and the English labour movement. Thus after having published his dissertation “Outcast London. A Study in the Relationship between Classes in Victorian Society” in 1971—besides publishing on Friedrich Engels—he analysed early or utopian forms of socialism which he aimed to rescue from Engels’ critique and which he sought to understand with reference to their artisanal base and a concomitant fixation on the sphere of circulation rather than production.² Increasingly feeling dissatisfied with concepts like the formal or the real subordination of labour to capital as explanations for the demands of the early labour movements, he soon felt “obliged to redefine the problem: in short, to dissociate the ambition of a theoretically informed history from any simple prejudice about the predetermining role of the [social].”³ Accordingly his famous 1982 essay “Rethinking Chartism” no longer looked for a class base as an explanation for the demands of this early mass movement but asked instead how the political language of Chartism defined the meaning of class in mid-19th century England.⁴ While others who had followed a similar trajectory, from a materialist social history to the linguistic turn, substituted—like Patrick Joyce—Foucauldian discourse analysis and/or governmentality studies for Marxism, Gareth Stedman Jones has since concentrated on the

¹ Cf. e.g. Gareth Stedman Jones, From historical sociology to theoretical history, *British Journal of Sociology* xxvii (1976): 293-306 and id., History: the Poverty of Empiricism, reprinted from *New Left Review* in: Robin Blackburn (ed.), *Ideology in Social Science. Readings in critical social theory*, London: Fontana, 1972: 96-115.

² A rather late example is Gareth Stedman Jones, Utopian Socialism Reconsidered, in:

Raphael Samuel (ed.), *People’s History and Socialist Theory*, London: Routledge, 1981: 138-145.

³ Gareth Stedman Jones, Introduction, to id., *Languages of Class. Studies in English Working Class History 1832-1982*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983: 1-24, 7.

⁴ Reprinted *ibid.*: 90-178.

history of ideas, focussing mainly on 18th and 19th century economic and political thought.

These biographical remarks would be superfluous if they did not account for two or three features of the book under review. The first is the author's strict opposition to any class-related interpretation of the mid-19th century revolutions experienced by, participated in and—most importantly—commented upon by Marx. The second and closely related feature is Stedman Jones's hostility towards any kind of materialist determinism alien in his view to Marx's thought and imported into Marxism by Engels and others. And lastly it seems at least remarkable that someone who has invested so much energy in the project of a "theoretically informed history" now devotes himself to biography without engaging the lively debate about the pitfalls and possibilities of this most conventional of all historical genres.⁵ Nor does he feel any need to discuss his aim "to put Marx back in his nineteenth-century surroundings" [5] in relation to the last major Marx biography by Jonathan Sperber who did just that.⁶

Stedman Jones is probably right in assuming that not too much knowledge of 19th century history can be expected from the "readers outside academic circles" (xvii) he would like to address. Accordingly he fills quite a few pages with an outline of the French Revolution slowly zooming in on the post-Napoleonic Rhineland where Karl's father Heinrich hardly had a choice but to be baptized if he wanted to go on as a lawyer despite his Jewish descent. The book is informative on the family background of both Karl and that of his fiancée since 1836, Jenny von Westphalen, and captures well the self-depiction of 18-year old Karl as a poet. It was only after his change from Bonn University to Berlin that he became seriously involved in the philosophical disputes of his times. Stedman Jones does a good job introducing the intellectual context of Karl's close cooperation with Bruno Bauer whose definitive dismissal from Bonn University in March 1842 also signalled the end of any academic aspirations Karl may have entertained. In many ways he, who had submitted his dissertation on Epicurus to Jena University in 1841, was thus lucky to find a position with the *Rheinische Zeitung*, a newly founded newspaper financed mainly by Rhenish industrialists and run by young intellectuals who shared Marx's Young Hegelian leanings. He soon

⁵ This debate is accessible e.g. via Friedrich Lenger, Werner Sombart (1863-1941). *Eine Biographie*, Munich: C.H. Beck, ³.2012.

⁶ Cf. Jonathan Sperber, *Karl Marx. A Nineteenth-Century Life*, New York: Norton 2013.

joined the editorial board but could not prevent the ban of the paper becoming effective on April 1, 1843.

Marx no longer saw a future for himself in Germany. After having married in June 1843, Karl and his wife Jenny moved to Paris where he intended to work with Arnold Ruge for the *German-French Annals*. Not only did the success of the new yearbook prove to be rather limited and short-lived but, increasingly, the views of Ruge and Marx diverged. The latter—under the influence of Ludwig Feuerbach—now looked for a material base for revolutionary change and discovered the proletariat. Embodied in the 1844 revolt of Silesian weavers it was to be the heart energizing philosophy as the head of emancipation—an idea he was soon to impress on Friedrich Engels whom he first met in Paris in the summer of 1844. It was Engels in turn who motivated Karl to do some systematic reading on political economy, and it is one of the major strengths of this biography that its author painstakingly reconstructs the reach and limits of this reading.

As the Prussian authorities had successfully pressured the Parisian government to issue an expulsion order against Karl, the young family had to move on to Brussels into what Jenny described as “a colony of paupers” [169]. Stedman Jones takes great delight in demolishing Engels’ assertion that “Marx had already fully developed his materialist theory of history in its main features” [191] when they met again in Brussels. And, of course, recent philological research has demonstrated forcefully that the book published as *The German Ideology* in 1932, which might have bolstered Engels’ claim retrospectively, was no more than “an assortment of unedited or partly edited manuscripts” (636, fn. 80) not all of which were authored by Marx or Engels. It is something different and not equally compelling, however, to interpret Marx’s ideas on the estrangement of labour as “The Legacy of Idealism” and to argue more generally that “Karl’s ambition [...] was not 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.” [193] Neither Stedman Jones’ brief remarks on *The Poverty of Philosophy* nor those on the *Communist Manifesto* really bear this out. And while it is perfectly legitimate for a biographer to register his doubts whether the latter successfully relates “economic development [...] to politics and class struggle” [234] it may also be worthwhile to explain to the reader why some contemporaries thought it did.

The *Communist Manifesto* was, of course, completed in 1848. And, like others before him, Stedman Jones not only points out that Marx did not have much of an active involvement in the revolutions in Brussels and Paris; he is also rather critical of his activities in Cologne where he was based from April 1848 to May 1849. There, Andreas Gottschalck was the champion of the working classes whose concerns did not play a role in the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* edited by Marx. His defense of the Parisian insurrection of June 1848 in the pages of this paper is harshly criticized by Stedman Jones, who interprets Marx's zigzag course during the mid-19th century revolution as the result of "the inherent volatility of his theoretical position," i.e. to bring together "a preset notion of development" [297] with day to day politics.

Roughly the second half of the book is devoted to the almost 35 years that Marx and his family spent in London, from August 1849 onwards. Health issues and family affairs, the permanent worries about the money needed for a decent, middle-class existence—which, except for the 10 years after 1852 when he was regularly working for the New-York Daily Tribune, depended time and again on the financial support of family and friends, most importantly Friedrich Engels—are dealt with in considerable detail without going beyond the more gripping presentation in Sperber's biography. In a way, the key event of this second half of the book is Marx's securing "a ticket to use the library of the British Museum" [305] in June 1850, since his studies of political economy clearly overshadow both his work for the International Working Men's Association and his other publications. As regards the latter, his various writings on revolutions in France from 1848 to the Commune not so much receive short shrift as they are depicted rather one-sidedly. The author of the Eighteenth Brumaire, for example, is lectured because of his "refusal to accord independent space to the people's political concerns" [342f.] while his arguments about the relationship between human intentions and limiting circumstances in history are more or less passed by. More interesting and less well known are Stedman Jones' comments on Marx's favourable accord with English trade unionists in the 1860s, which he tries to combine with an argument about a processual understanding of revolution at the time of publication of volume one of *Capital*.

The work on *Capital* is clearly at the centre of the second half of Stedman Jones's biography—and rightly so. But there is a permanent tension between the careful and erudite reconstruction of Marx's reworking of various manuscripts and the refusal to take the not only

contemporary appeal of some key arguments seriously: “The idea of surplus value, however plausible it may have seemed at the time, was no more than a piece of unsupported speculation, a single paragraph in an 800-page manuscript.” [401] Why then, one wonders, follow so closely the changes from the *Grundrisse* to *Capital*? And why speculate on “theoretical difficulty” with the preparation of volume two “that brought on headache attacks, insomnia and liver disease” [537] in 1874 when, in Stedman Jones’ view, Marx had “appeared to accept the single volume as a sufficient statement of his theory as a whole” [426] two years earlier? Now, in part the argument serves to highlight how much Engels there is to be found in volumes two and three, which in as far as it can be demonstrated is certainly meritorious. (Slightly more credit might have been paid to the tedious work of those connected to the Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe.) The resulting narrative is simple enough: some time after the publication of volume one, Marx resigned to his failure “to substantiate a theory which, without the Hegelian props he had employed in the 1850s, was impossible to prove.” [537] Engels took over—and with the publication of his *Anti-Dühring* in 1878 at the latest—invented a scientific socialism that included a materialist conception of history. Marx, however, “brought up upon classical literature, ancient mythology and radical idealist philosophy” [594] was unable to share the developmental thinking fed on popularized Darwinism, and spent his last years with idealized conceptions of the Russian village commune.

The overall impression, then, is contradictory: on the one hand Stedman Jones certainly brings an extremely detailed knowledge of late 18th and early 19th century philosophy as well as of early socialist authors to the interpretation of Marx’s intellectual formation and development. This is very instructive and clearly the main merit of the book. On the other hand his repeated refutations of Marx tend to get in the way of making apprehensible both Marx’s considerable contemporary fame and why his biographer chose the word “greatness” in the subtitle. Coupled with “illusion,” this should have produced the suspense that would have carried the reader through a book of 750 pages but does not.